POLICY BRIEF
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YOUTH-LED ACTIVISM COUNTERING HATE IN POST-CONFLICT SOCIETIES AND THE EU

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Who is this aimed at

Policymakers, civil society organisations, youth activists, scholars, and media professionals in post-conflict societies, interested in EU integration, developing and fostering democracy, social media activism, media governance of hate-speech and counter-narrative campaigns.

Key messages

- The rise of social media and new communication technologies has brought about new opportunities for pro-democracy activism and youth engagement in post-conflict European societies.
- By amplifying marginalised voices and raising awareness about social issues, digital activism offers new opportunities for civic engagement, fostering and sustaining democracy, youth-led participation, inclusion and advocacy.
- By promoting digital rights, especially literacy, transparency, accountability, diversity, privacy, as well as promoting knowledge generation through research, and evaluation, policymakers can create an environment that supports and enhances social media activism and promotes positive social change.
- The European Union can support these efforts by leveraging its policies and resources to promote a more inclusive and democratic society in the region.

Introduction

In the past 26 years the European Union (EU) has made many efforts to transform the post-conflict societies of South-eastern Europe. The polity has been instrumental in fostering and, in some cases, imposing important initiatives that have reformed political and social life in this entire region.

These collective efforts in the region have been crucial in advancing the democratic and economic transitions of the post-conflict areas of South-eastern Europe. Despite certain pitfalls and challenges, the prospect of EU membership has served and continues to serve as a strong driving force for domestic democratic reform in many countries. In that context, EU conditionality is seen as the strongest possible tool for the democratisation and Europeanisation of these countries (Džihić et al, 2018).

The region's relationship with the EU remains vital, and the EU's commitment to the region's European perspective is more crucial than ever in the face of emerging challenges. Parallel to the EU integration process, during the past few years, the gravity centre of internet accessibility in post-conflict Western Balkans countries tends towards online media. As the space for freedom of expression has expanded, so has the opportunity to spread the hate speech. New media has offered an ideal platform to adopt and spread hate speech because of its decentralist, anonymous and interactive structure (Londo et al, 2014).

Various actors in Western Balkans post-conflict societies use the Internet and social networks to spread hate speech, deny war crimes and glorify war criminals, misinform through politically and ethnonational biased media reporting and discredit campaigns against individuals for various reasons, which can negatively affect freedom of expression and democratic processes (Sokol and Ćolović, 2022). The content of hate narratives is similar across the region, mirroring the historically familiar negative labelling of "the other" (Hrvatin et al, 2021).

Although hate speech is rarely present in the mainstream, legacy, media content (Sokol and Alibegović, 2021), social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter and comments on online media contain hate speech and hate narratives that are most often directed against ethnonational groups, minorities, and women (Sokol and Ćolović, 2022).

Social media activism has played a significant role in political and social movements in post-conflict region of South-eastern Europe, particularly in countries with a recent history of conflict and political turmoil, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. The widespread use of social media platforms has enabled individuals and groups to connect, mobilise and respond in new ways, providing a platform for marginalised voices, counter narratives and facilitating the sharing of information and resources.
This policy brief examines the ways in which social media are transforming activism, the opportunities and challenges presented by these changes, and the extent to which social media have empowered youth to achieve political victories.

Context of and ways to counter hate-speech

Social media has become an increasingly important tool for political activism, with its ability to connect people across geographic and political boundaries. From the Arab Spring to the Black Lives Matter movement, social media has played a crucial role in mobilising activists and spreading messages around the world. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) argue that social media have enabled new forms of political participation, particularly among young people who have traditionally been excluded from mainstream political processes. However, there are also concerns about the potential limitations and risks of social media for activism, such as the spread of misinformation and the potential for surveillance and censorship.

While digital activism has enabled new forms of political participation, activism and advocacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other post-conflict countries in the region, there are also challenges and limitations to this approach. The spread of misinformation and disinformation, online harassment and bullying, and the potential for surveillance and censorship are all potential risks associated with digital activism.

Therefore, it is important for policymakers to consider the opportunities and challenges presented by digital activism in the region and to explore ways in which social media can be harnessed to empower youth and achieve political victories, while also mitigating the risks associated with these platforms.

As social media has become an integral part of our lives, it has revolutionised the way we participate in activism (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Social media has opened up new avenues for individuals to mobilise, organise and participate in collective action (Bimber et al., 2012).

In particular, youth-led activism has been at the forefront of utilising various media and non-traditional methods, including social media platforms, to reach their outcomes.

Youth-led activism have diverse objectives that they seek to impact, and this is reflected in the diverse ways they mobilise and operate. Often using a range of media to achieve their goals, some of which are specific to youth, these movements are constantly adapting to new circumstances and challenges.

The rise of youth-based activist groups in and the widespread adoption of new communication technologies have led to rapid and often unforeseen mass mobilisations, highlighting the potential of young people as catalysts for change in the region. This trend is particularly notable in Europe and other parts of the world, where young people have emerged as key participants and leaders of various progressive social movements.

In recent years, activistic social media activities have been undertaken by a range of actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, mostly by NGOs, civil society, and grassroots actors. Such activities have manifested themselves in many different forms, from 'formally' organised communication campaigns and more tailored person-to-person interventions to citizen actors 'informally' producing digital content that is critical of extremist messages (Doosje et al, 2019).

Youth activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina have taken traditional activism to social media to promote counter-speech and counter-narrative campaigns against political extremism and hate speech. Notably, three online counter-speech campaigns were mapped in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 2017 and 2020: Citizens Against Terrorism (CAT), #SJAŠITE, and "Hejt Slaveni, još ste živi".

CAT, launched in 2017, utilised specially designated social media and web portals to share anti-extremism content and mobilise youth to develop and interact with messages that challenge and provide alternatives to extremist and hate speech ideologies.

#SJAŠITE, a satirical peace-promoting campaign, utilised social media and web portals to spread satirical articles, memes, podcasts, radio shows, and videos to counter divisive rhetoric around the 2020 elections.

Finally, "Hejt Slaveni, još ste živi" is a nation-wide counter-speech campaign that aims to improve citizens' ability to discern and counter hate speech in public and political discourses through traditional and digital media platforms and offline activities.

It is worth noting that social media played a pivotal role in the 2014 protests against government corruption and political dysfunction in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the hashtag #JMBG becoming a symbol of the movement.

The protests were largely organised and coordinated through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and attracted a diverse range of participants, including students, activists, and ordinary citizens.

Furthermore, digital activism has also been instrumental in raising awareness and advocating for issues related to human rights and social justice in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as the "I Am Not Anonymous" campaign, which aimed to challenge the stigma and discrimination faced by survivors of sexual violence during the Bosnian War.

Policy implications and recommendations

Based on this, some policy implications, and recommendations that policymakers, civil society organisations, youth activists, scholars and media professionals interested in EU integration process of post-conflict societies of South-eastern Europe, social media activism, media governance of hate-speech and counter-narrative campaigns can consider for establishing, fostering and sustaining a democratic society are:

1. *Promote digital literacy and media literacy:* Policymakers and civil society organisations should invest in digital and media literacy programs for youth to enable them to navigate the digital landscape safely and responsibly. Youth should be equipped with the skills and knowledge to identify and respond to hate speech, disinformation, and propaganda on social media platforms.
2. *Encourage transparency and accountability:* Policymakers should establish regulations and standards that require social media platforms to disclose information about their algorithms, data collection, and moderation practices. Platforms should be accountable for the content that is disseminated on their platforms, and for taking action against hate speech and disinformation.
3. *Strengthen partnerships between civil society organisations, youth activists, and media professionals:* Collaboration between civil society organisations, youth activists, and media professionals is crucial for the success of social media activism. Policymakers can promote and support these partnerships through funding, capacity building, and facilitating the exchange of knowledge and best practices.
4. *Promote diversity and inclusion:* Policymakers should encourage social media platforms to adopt policies and practices that promote diversity and inclusion. This includes promoting diverse voices and perspectives on their platforms and combating hate speech, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.
5. *Protect privacy and personal data:* Policymakers should establish regulations and standards that protect the privacy and personal data of social media users. Platforms should be transparent about their data collection and use practices and should obtain explicit consent from users before collecting and using their data.
6. *Invest in research and evaluation:* Policymakers, civil society organisations, and scholars should invest in research and evaluation to understand the impact of social media on activism and to identify effective strategies for promoting social change through social media platforms.
7. *Foster dialogue and debate:* Policymakers should promote platforms for dialogue and debate that allow for the exchange of diverse perspectives and ideas. This includes promoting civil and respectful discourse on social media platforms and creating opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful dialogue with policymakers.
8. *Support the creation of alternative media:* Policymakers should encourage and support the creation of alternative media outlets that provide diverse and independent perspectives on social, political, and economic issues. This includes supporting the development of community-based media and citizen journalism initiatives.

Conclusion

Social movements have the power to shape public discourse, bring about cultural transformation by influencing values and symbols and foster the democratic integration in the family of European Union's countries.

They can also have spill-over effects, inspiring other forms of activism and mobilisation. The successes and failures of one movement may have repercussions for the strategies and demands of other movements. Consequently, social movements can have unpredictable and far-reaching consequences beyond their initial objectives.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, social media has emerged as a crucial tool for pro-democracy activism, particularly among the youth, as well as one of the strongest tools for younger generations to participate in democratic development, freedom of expression and political engagement. Counter-speech campaigns and digital activism have proven effective in promoting social justice, raising awareness of pressing issues but also for fostering and sustaining democracy. These movements are characterised by a decentralised structure, a fluid and flexible approach, and an emphasis on self-organising and mutual aid.

However, social media activism also faces numerous challenges and risks. Digital divides, censorship, disinformation, online harassment, and surveillance are among the most pressing issues. To address these challenges, policymakers, civil society organisations, youth activists, scholars, and media professionals need to promote digital literacy, transparency, accountability, diversity, privacy, research, and evaluation. These measures can help create an enabling environment for pro-democracy social media activism and support positive social change.

One of the key takeaways is that social media has empowered youth to participate in politics and achieve political victories. By amplifying marginalised voices and raising awareness about social issues, digital activism has created new opportunities for civic engagement and advocacy. However, this empowerment must be balanced with caution and awareness of the risks and challenges of social media activism.

Another takeaway is the importance of strategic communication and networking. Successful social movements require effective communication strategies, clear messaging, and a strong network of allies and supporters. Social media platforms can facilitate this communication and help build communities of activists, but they must be used strategically and judiciously.

Finally, the unpredictability and interconnectedness of social movements highlight the need for intersectional and inclusive activism. Effective social movements must recognise the interplay between different forms of oppression and work towards social justice for all marginalised communities. In this sense, social media activism has the potential to foster a more inclusive and intersectional approach to activism, provided it is guided by principles of diversity and inclusion.

In conclusion, social media has opened up new opportunities for activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly among the youth population. Counter-speech campaigns and digital activism have proven effective in promoting social justice and raising awareness of pressing issues. However, social media activism also faces numerous challenges and risks, which must be addressed through strategic policy interventions and collective action. By promoting digital literacy, transparency, accountability, diversity, privacy, research, and evaluation, policymakers can create an environment that supports and enhances social media activism and promotes positive social change.

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Other resources

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The Policy Brief is published in the framework of the FREuDe project. The project aims to intervene for positive future social change that derives from the commitment and intellectual input across disciplines, such as Sociology, Law, Education, Childhood and Youth studies, European studies and Politics, as well as Communication scholarship and Security studies. Moreover, the Centre addresses the question from the perspective of future autonomous citizens, today's children, and explore closely the ways in which information and Europe feature in their lives.

Jean Monnet Communication, Facts and Regulation for European Democracy (FREuDe) Centre of Excellence

– stimulates new forward thinking with regards the role of facts and place of regulation for securing a future democratic Europe
- generates new research and policy-oriented thinking about integration on the basis of informational rights and enabling informational environments across disciplines not traditionally involved in studying Europe:
- develops new agendas for research, policy and teaching across disciplines and across stakeholder communities
- provides an impetus for future oriented thinking, by researching the needs and perceptions of Europe's future autonomous citizens, young people and in particular children for factual information in and about Europe
- mobilises knowledges and competencies of a range of experts and especially aiming to "hear from" stakeholders which have historically been permitted least input to questions of right to accurate and comprehensive information as a civil and human right.

Senad Alibegović is an expert in promoting social cohesion, fostering inclusion, empowering youth activism, and spearheading counter-narrative campaigns, with years=long experience with international organisations, including the OSCE and the United Nations. He is a Doctoral candidate at the Department of Communication, University of Vienna and researcher at the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence FREuDe, Media Governance and Industries Research Lab.