

HATE SPEECH AND EUROSCEPTICISM

IN LATVIA

NATIONAL REPORT

Jekaterina Tumule
Aleksandrs Milovs
2022



HATE SPEECH AND EUROSCEPTICISM IN LATVIA

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AUTHORS: © JEKATERINA TUMULE, LATVIAN CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
© ALEKSANDRS MILOVS, PARTICIPATION FOR ALL (LATVIA)

EDITOR: PROF., DOCTOR HONORIS CAUSA ANNA KRASTEVA

COPY EDITOR: NICHOLAS PADDISON

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The research is conducted in the framework of the project “Active European Citizens Against Hate Speech”. The aim of the project is to raise awareness of the new generation of European citizens about the impact of hate speech on democratic participation and European values. The project is implemented by the “Latvian Centre for Human Rights” (project coordinator), “Participation for All” (Latvia), “Estonian Human Rights Centre”, “Human Rights Monitoring Institute” (Lithuania), “Multi Kulti Collective” (Bulgaria), “Human Rights House Zagreb” (Croatia), “Peace Action Training and Research Institute of Romania - PATRIR”. The project is co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia.

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FOREWARD

The following national report presents, in detail, the findings of a research undertaken in six EU member states - Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania.

Hate speech is often used as a tool to target different vulnerable groups, especially minorities, immigrants and refugees. It causes their alienation and exclusion which leads to marginalisation. Such narratives weaken democracy and strengthen the positions of far right and radical right populists and Eurosceptics. Each national report aims to analyse the hate speech phenomenon in the six participating countries and looks at the links between Euroscepticism and hate speech. The authors of the reports map the levels of intolerance and hate speech among the general population and young people in particular. The reports analyse the policies and law that address hate speech, outline trends, targets, and the actors of hate speech. The reports map the presence of Euroscepticism in each country, its forms, public attitudes and actors, and outline parallels between Eurosceptic discourse and incitement to hatred. The reports also map different initiatives which can be seen as constructive practice in the fight against hate speech and different forms of intolerance. Each report ends with conclusions and recommendations on measures for combating hate speech.

All reports are based on desk research of existing data, reports and research about intolerance, hate speech and Euroscepticism, analysis of relevant political documents, programmes of political parties, and media sources. The desk research is complemented by semi-structured interviews with representatives of NGOs working with youth and vulnerable groups and a survey of young people aged 16-25 on their experiences of hate speech.

The research “Hate Speech and Euroscepticism” was conducted in the framework of the project “Active European Citizens Against Hate Speech”, co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia. The aim of the project is to raise awareness among the new generation of European citizens, about the impact of hate speech on democratic participation and European values. The project consortium comprises the following organisations:

- [Latvian Centre for Human Rights](#) (Project Coordinator, Latvia),
- [Network “Participation for All”](#) (Latvia),
- [Estonian Human Rights Centre](#) (Estonia)
- [Human Rights Monitoring Institute](#) (Lithuania),
- [Multi Kulti Collective](#) (Bulgaria),
- [Human Rights House Zagreb](#) (Croatia),
- [Peace Action Training and Research Institute of Romania - PATRIR](#) (Romania).

Jekaterina Tumule
Project Manager
Latvian Centre for Human Rights

Introduction

Hate speech in Latvia is present in public spaces and online. Due to a growing usage of the internet and social networks it has become more visible. Hate speech targets different ethnic, religious, and social groups and often correlates with political discourse and actual developments in social and political areas. Latvia is one of the youngest EU member states and the level of Euroscepticism is quite low, however not all European values and policies are welcomed by both mainstream and smaller political parties who oppose certain EU fundamental rights and principles. This report analyses the hate speech phenomenon in Latvia and looks at whether Euroscepticism and hate speech are interrelated issues.

The authors first map the levels of intolerance and hate speech among the general population and young people in particular. They analyse policies and law that address hate speech, they also outline trends, targets and the actors of hate speech. Then the authors map the presence of Euroscepticism in Latvia, its forms, public attitudes and actors, outlining parallels between Eurosceptic discourse and incitement to hatred. The third chapter maps different initiatives implemented in Latvia which can be seen as constructive practice in the fight against hate speech and different forms of intolerance. The report ends with conclusions and recommendations on measures for combating hate speech.

The report is based on desk research of existing data, reports and research about intolerance, hate speech and Euroscepticism in Latvia, analysis of relevant political documents, programmes of political parties and media sources conducted in the time period November 2020 - September 2021. The desk research is complemented by six semi-structured interviews with three representatives of youth organisations working with or representing vulnerable groups, three policy makers, including one expert on anti-Semitism. In addition, a survey of young people aged 16-25 was conducted on their experiences of hate speech. 131 respondents took part in the survey in the time period June-July 2021.

1. Hate Speech

1.1 Public Attitudes

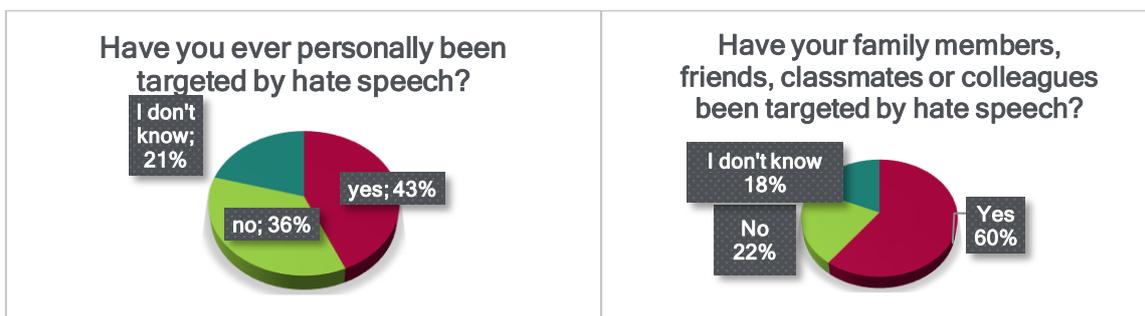
Hate speech roots itself in prejudice towards certain groups. Therefore, this section is focused on public attitudes towards different groups in society, and identifies the groups most targeted by prejudice and hate speech, its different forms, its spread and other related challenges.

Different public opinion polls indicate a consistently high level of intolerance among the Latvian population towards dark skinned people, Roma, asylum seekers and refugees, migrants, Muslims, and LGBTQIA+. A nationwide public opinion poll conducted in 2017 showed that most often people do not want to live next to, work with, or be friends with Roma, Muslims, refugees/asylums seekers, persons with mental disability and LGBTQIA+ (Safege Baltija Comperio and Prospero 2017). Similarly, an opinion poll from 2020 showed that the highest social distance is towards Muslims, Roma, LGBTQIA+, migrants from South Asian countries (e.g. India, Pakistan), and persons with mental disabilities (SKDS, Providus 2020). Opinion polls conducted among Riga residents in 2010 showed that 33% of respondents believed that LGBTQIA+ should be banned from entering the country. In 2014 the percentage went up to 39%, but in 2017 it decreased down to 17%. Regarding Roma, the number of those who would ban them from entering the country was 17% in 2010, 10% in 2014 and 2017. The same attitude towards Muslims was shared by 9% of respondents in 2010 and 2014, and 5% in 2017, and 11% towards asylum seekers / refugees in 2017 (KantarTNS 2017).

Consequently, negative public attitude mirrors experiences of discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes among the above-mentioned groups. A 2016 survey of foreign students and migrants' residing in Latvia showed that almost 2/3 of respondents or 68% had experienced hate speech, hate crimes and discrimination, most often on such grounds as skin colour or race (36%), ethnic origin and xenophobia (25%), or language (22%). 33% of respondents said they themselves were victims, while 36% were witnesses of such incidents or had heard about such incidents from the others (Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2016). Results of a survey conducted by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in 2012 showed that 35% of the respondents from the LGBTQIA+ community in Latvia considered that the hate speech towards LGBTQIA+ persons in public was very widespread and 48% thought it was fairly widespread. While, the most recent FRA survey showed that 48% of LGBTQIA+ community personally felt discriminated

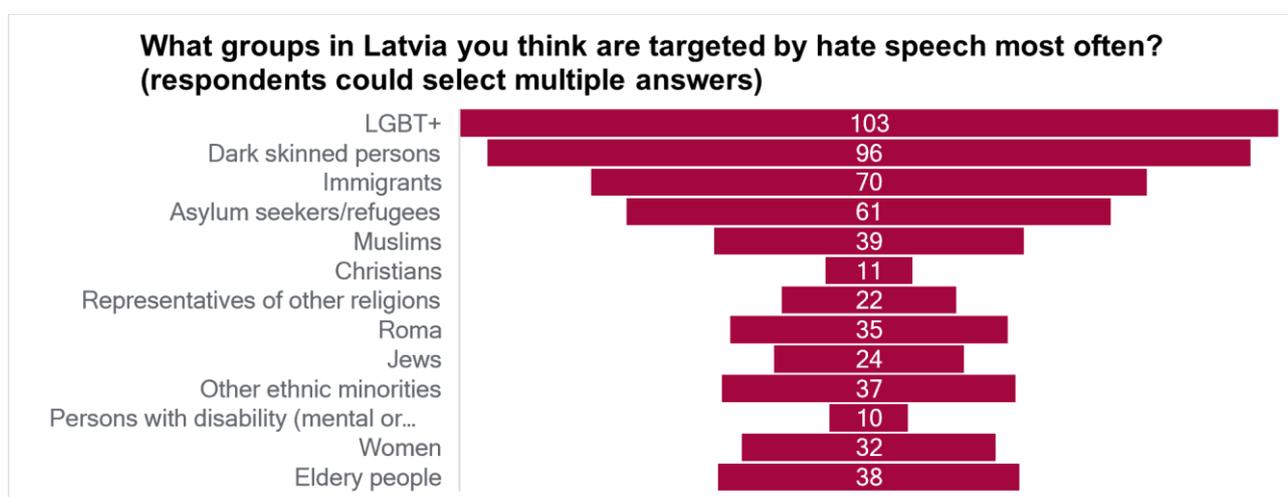
against, 13% had experienced physical or sexual attacks, 34% had been targeted by offensive or threatening comments in person at least once, and 35% had had similar experiences online at least once (FRA 2020).

Results of the survey done with young people on their experiences of hate speech, conducted for the purposes of this report, show that the majority or 81% of young people recognise hate speech as a problem. 43% of the young people surveyed said they were personally targeted by hate speech. 60% responded that they knew of family members, friends, classmates, or colleagues who were targeted by hate speech.

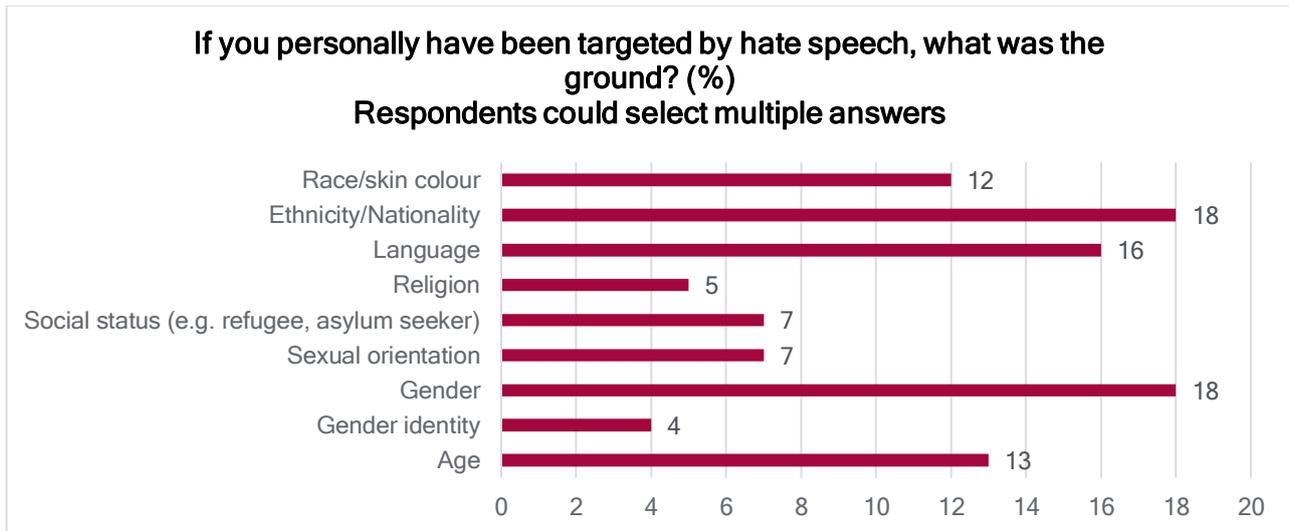


Hate speech and Euroscepticism in Latvia. National report: youth survey (2021)

Young people believe that most often hate speech targets LGBTQIA+ people, dark skinned persons, immigrants, and asylum seekers and refugees. Quite often hate speech also targets Muslims, elderly people, Roma, other ethnic minorities, women, and Jews. Among those who were personally targeted by hate speech, 18% mentioned that it was on the grounds of ethnicity or nationality and gender, 16% on the grounds of language, 13% because of age, 12% because of skin colour, 7% because of social status and sexual orientation, 5% on the grounds of religion, and 4% because of gender identity.

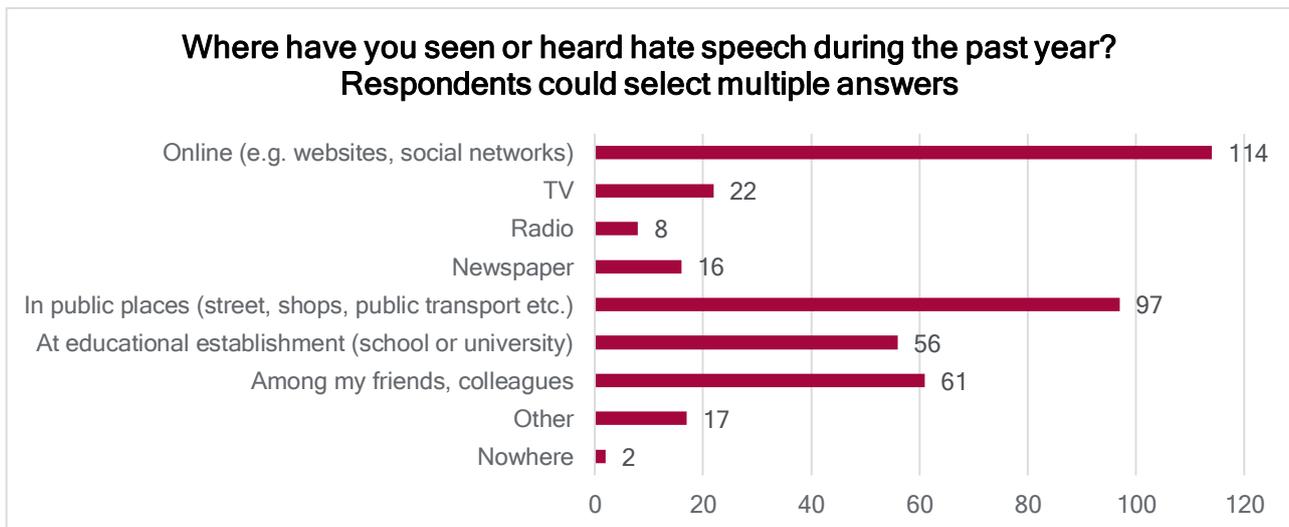


Hate speech and Euroscepticism in Latvia. National report: youth survey (2021)



Hate speech and Euroscepticism in Latvia. National report: youth survey (2021)

The survey clearly shows that hate speech most often occurs online. At the same time, people are also targeted in person in different public places, e.g. in streets, public transport, cafes and bars, shops, and education establishments (see also LCHR 2016). Many young people see or hear hate speech also in communication with friends and colleagues.

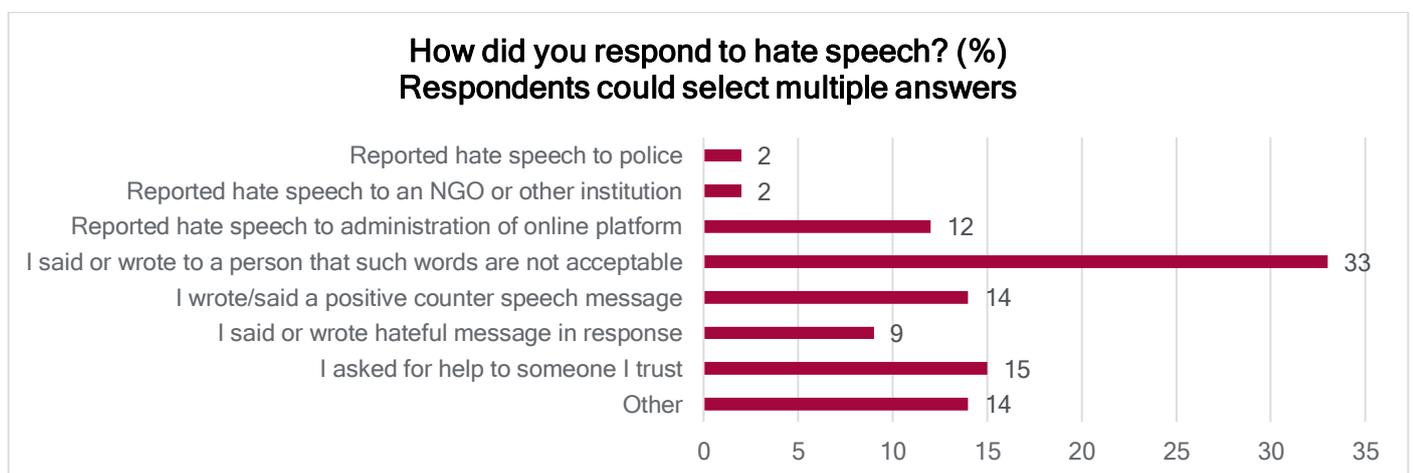


Hate speech and Euroscepticism in Latvia. National report: youth survey (2021)

A serious problem which is confirmed in different surveys is that the majority of hate-motivated incidents, including hate speech and hate crimes, are not reported anywhere. The absolute majority or 86% of foreign students - victims of hate incidents - did not report it, this includes half of those students who experienced physical violence (LCHR 2016). In the same way, 85% of LGBTQIA+ who were victims of hate-motivated physical or sexual attacks also did not report them to the police or any other institution or organisation (FRA 2020). The reasons for the underreporting of such incidents are similar in both surveys. Many foreign students believe that these incidents are minor or not serious enough to be reported,

especially verbal insults. Some do not trust the police (9%), some do not believe that reporting will change anything (8%), while some are used to such incidents (8%). Similarly the FRA 2020 LGBTQIA+ survey showed that 47% did report hate motivated crimes because of fear of homophobic attitudes from the police, 44% did not think they would or could do anything, and 40% have a distrust of the police in general.

The results of the survey of young people shows that half of the young people did take some action in order to respond to hate speech. 33% of those who responded to hate speech said that they spoke to or wrote to the person that such words are not acceptable, 15% asked a trusted person for help, 14% wrote or said a positive counter speech message, 12% reported the hate speech to the administration of the online platform, and 9% said or wrote a hateful message in response.



Hate speech and Euroscepticism in Latvia. National report: youth survey (2021)

1.2 Policy Documents

As evidenced from the previous section, biased public attitudes and hate speech and the way this affects vulnerable groups is an issue of concern that cannot be ignored and requires intervention by the state. The following section looks at Latvian national policy documents related to the prevention of hate speech.

Since hate speech is closely related to the consolidation of society and the promotion of tolerance, the Ministry of Culture, which supervises the area of integration, is considered to be the central policy making institution for this issue. The main policy documents elaborated by the Ministry of Culture for the development of civil society and the promotion of integration are the “Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012 - 2018” and its implementation plan. The policy and

implementation plan include tasks that should increase tolerance through different anti-discrimination activities, and the promotion of intercultural dialogue and social integration. Another policy document adopted in 2020, “Guidelines for the development of a cohesive and civic society 2021-2027”, is the central policy document for the future decade. One of its tasks includes raising awareness about diversity, and decreasing negative stereotypes about different groups. However, neither of the documents explicitly covers tasks or actions on the combating of hate speech.¹

A document which explicitly covers hate speech challenges is an informative report, “Information report on proposals to prevent the dissemination of information inciting hatred and violence in the public domain, including on the Internet”. This was produced by the Ministry of Culture in 2016. The report provides an overview about the existing situation regarding the spread of hate speech in Latvia and analyses legal regulations. It highlights three directions for action for the prevention of hate speech: (1) preventive measures, (2) protection of the public and groups targeted by hate speech, (3) prosecution of incitement to hatred. According to the report, preventive measures should include the education of the wider public and specific target groups about hate speech, the facilitation of media literacy, and the development of critical thinking for children, young people and adults. The protection measures should involve the regulation of different online and media platforms aimed at the restriction of illegal content and the provision of support to victims. The report was approved by the government and so far, it is the only document produced specifically on hate speech. However, the report was not followed by any guidelines or an action plan and there was no dedicated state funding to support the measures for combating hate speech.

Interviewed representatives of the Ministry of Culture do agree that hate speech is an actual issue and that it negatively affects society. However, there are no plans to develop a policy document specifically on combating hate speech. It is argued that the prevention of hate speech is related to many other areas and is already addressed in different policy documents through a more general set of actions, e.g. activities aimed at the consolidation of society.²

Also in the area of youth policies there are no policy documents that include measures specifically concerned with combating hate speech. According to a representative of the Ministry of Education and Science, which is responsible for the coordination of youth policy, indirectly hate speech can be addressed through different policy directions such as the social inclusion of young people. In order to

¹ The detailed action plan for implementation of the guidelines was not approved by 31 August 2021.

² Representatives of the Society Integration Department of the Ministry of Culture (interviewed on 27 August 2021).

include countering hate speech measures as a specific direction in the youth policy, there needs to be a stronger political will to set it as a priority issue.³

According to one expert, hate speech is not recognised as a problem at the political level. Therefore, there are gaps in the institutional approach on combating hate speech from different perspectives, including a lack of institutional support to the victims of hate speech.⁴

1.3 Legal Regulation

The prohibition of hate speech or incitement to hatred, is included in a number of legal acts providing for criminal or administrative punishment. The Criminal Law criminalises public calls to genocide (Article 71.1.) and public glorification, denial or gross trivialisation of crimes against humanity or genocide (Article 74.1). Article 78 of the Criminal Law explicitly criminalises acts aimed at the incitement to hatred based on such features as race, ethnicity, nationality and religion. Since 2014, Article 150 criminalises incitement to social hatred and enmity, which explicitly covers such features as gender, age and disability of a person, while other protected features such as sexual orientation can be subsumed under the clause of “other characteristics”. During the adoption of Article 150, there was insufficient support in the Parliament to include sexual orientation explicitly among the protected characteristics. This can be seen as the lack of a clear signal from the Parliament that hate crimes and incitement to hatred towards LGBTQIA+ community are unacceptable (Kamenska 2017). The Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muižnieks, following his visit to Latvia in 2016, expressed concerns about inadequate responses to homophobic and transphobic crime and hate speech. He recommended that sexual orientation and gender identity be explicitly included among the prohibited grounds concerning discrimination and encouraged the application of the existing legal frameworks with full consideration for the protection needs of LGBTQIA+ persons.

Even though the law covers the main protected characteristics, there are some important distinctions. Firstly, sanctions for crimes committed under Article 78 are more severe than sanctions under Article 150. Secondly, Article 150 unlike Article 78, requires proof that substantial damage has been inflicted by acts aimed at incitement to social hatred. Therefore, in the view of legal experts and practitioners, the requirement to prove substantial damage hinders the prosecution of incitement to social hatred (Kamenska 2017). Thirdly, due to the fact that the two Articles are placed in different chapters of the Criminal Law, the investigation of crimes that come

³ Representative of Department of Political Initiative and Development of the Ministry of Education and Science (interviewed on 8 July 2021).

⁴ Expert on anti-Semitism (interviewed on 1 July 2021).

under Article 78 are in the jurisdiction of the State Security Service (Security Police until 2019), while crimes that come under Article 150 are investigated by the State police. However, as explained by the State Security Service in its annual report, it investigates only those crimes that are related to any alleged risk towards Latvian national interests, e.g. when a suspected person is an extremist or radically minded. All other hate speech cases which are related to threats towards public order and safety are forwarded to the State police. Therefore, it is not fully clear how cases of hate speech forwarded to the State police are actually investigated. According to some experts and practitioners, in order to avoid different approaches in the prosecution of incitement to hatred on different grounds, both articles should be placed in the same chapter of the Criminal Law (Kamenska 2017).

One positive development which has facilitated a more effective prosecution of hate crimes / hate speech are the “Guidelines on the Identification and Investigation of Hate Crimes” (State Police 2017) published by the Ministry of the Interior. The guidelines were developed in cooperation with the State Police college, Ombudsperson and a number of NGOs. The guidelines are intended to assist state police officers on the identification and the investigation of incitement to hatred crimes in accordance with Section 78, 150 and 48(14) of the Criminal Law. However, there is no assessment available on how effectively or how often these guidelines are applied in practice.

From 2010-2020, 98 criminal proceedings were initiated under Article 78, and 21 cases under Article 150. The majority of the cases were incitement to hatred on the Internet, predominantly comments published on different social media platforms and internet news sites. The data collected by the Supreme Court from 2012 until 2018 showed that there were 27 prosecuted cases on incitement to hatred, 26 of those were about incitement to hatred on the Internet - mostly on news sites and social networks. 10 cases concerned anti-Semitic hate speech, 8 were against ethnic Latvians, 3 against ethnic Russians, and the rest concerned cases of hate speech against Roma, Muslims, dark-skinned persons, LGBTQIA+, and migrants. 25 persons were sanctioned and one was acquitted. In 2020, there was an increase in criminal proceedings on the incitement to social hatred by the State police - 16 cases (Spundina 2021).

Besides the Criminal Law there are a number of legal provisions stipulating administrative punishment for incitement to hate speech in the media and during public events. The Law on Electronic Mass Media prohibits incitement to hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons on the grounds of sex, race or ethnic origin, nationality, religious affiliation or belief, disability, age or other circumstances, in media content. When a media company breaches the law, the National Council on Electronic Mass Media (NCEMM) has the right to ban the media company's broadcasting for a certain period. Between 2016 and 2021, NCEMM

banned the Russian national TV channel “Rossija RTR” three times for incitement to hatred and propaganda against Ukraine and Ukrainian people.

The Law on Press and Other Mass Media prohibits the publication of content that propagates racial, national or religious superiority and intolerance. The Law on the Safety of Public Entertainment and Festivity Events, prohibits the propagation of violence, hatred, Nazism, fascism, or communism ideologies during a public event, it also prohibits the use of symbols of authoritarian regimes, such as the swastika and SS signs. In accordance with the Law on Meetings, Processions, and Pickets, it is forbidden to incite violence, national and racial hatred, or to openly express Nazism and fascism. Violation of these laws is controlled by the State or municipal police. Since 2020, the new Administrative Liability Law (which replaced the Administrative Violations Code) stipulates that when committing an offence which has been motivated by hatred on the grounds of race, religious beliefs, nationality or other clearly obvious distinctive features of the person, is one of the aggravating circumstances for different administrative offences. It is expected that the new Administrative Liability Law could help to deal with hate speech or other minor incidents committed in public places which do not come under the Criminal Law.

A number of international organisations have drawn attention to the need for proper implementation of effective legislation on hate crimes / hate speech. The Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights Nils Muižnieks, following his visit to Latvia in 2016, urged the Government to organise continuous training for the police, prosecutors and judges, to ensure effective investigations, prosecution and punishment for hate crimes and hate speech against all vulnerable groups. In 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) also called for all reported incidents of racist hate crimes and hate speech, and incitement to racist violence to be effectively investigated and, as appropriate, prosecuted and punished, including incidents committed by politicians during political campaigns.

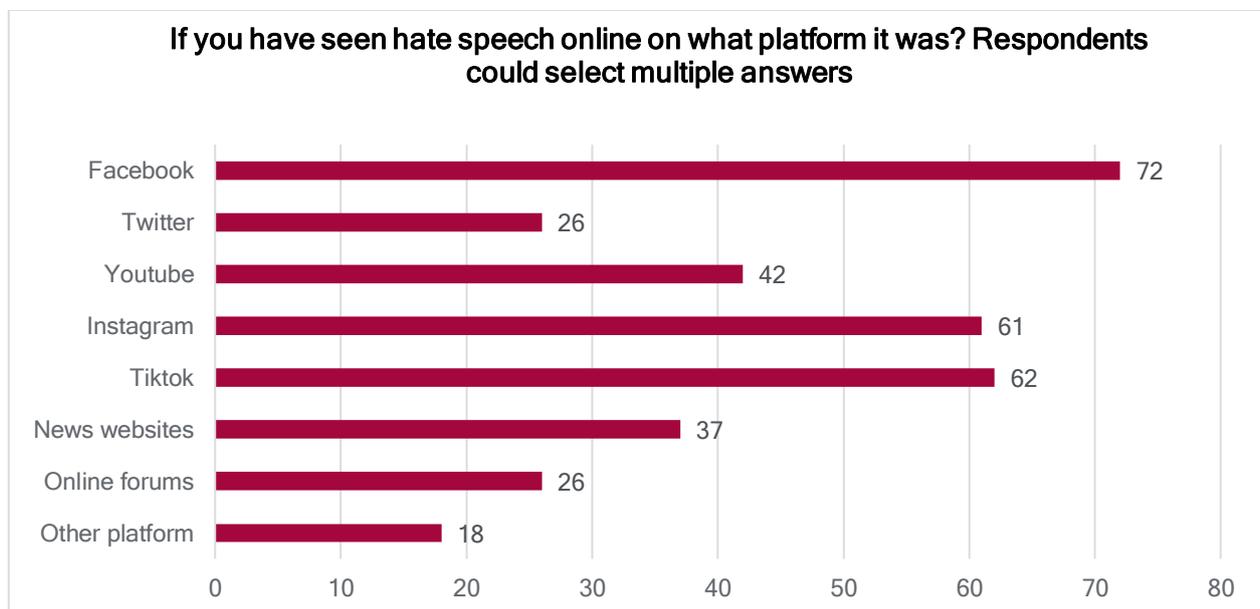
Other aspects being criticised are related to a lack of comprehensive data collection about hate incidents and a general underreporting. CERD in its concluding observations on Latvia in 2018, called for the country to prioritise the collection of reliable and comprehensive statistics, disaggregated by the ethnicity of the victims. It also called for an increase in investigations, prosecutions, convictions and sanctions for racist hate speech, hate crimes and incitement to racial hatred. In 2019, the European Commission against Racial Intolerance (ECRI), recommended that Latvia, as a matter of priority, establish a unit within the State Police tasked with reaching out to vulnerable groups in order to increase trust in the police and address the problem of under-reporting of racist and homo- / transphobic hate crimes. However, so far there have been no publicly announced plans to introduce such a unit.

1.4 Trends, Targets and Actors of Hate Speech

The identification of the trends, targets and actors of hate speech is crucial for building a comprehensive approach to combating hate speech. The following section analyses the spread of online hate speech as one of the most serious challenges and trends currently in Latvia. It identifies the groups most often targeted by hate speech in Latvia and the factors which facilitate hate speech towards these affected groups. The section also maps the actors who spread hate speech or whose actions or statements fuel hate speech among the general public.

1.4.1 Trends - Online Hate Speech

The Internet is the most widespread channel for spreading hate speech. The results of the survey of young people shows that the prevailing majority of young people in Latvia have noticed hate speech online. They identified that most often it is spread in social networks - Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and various news websites.



Hate speech and Euroscepticism in Latvia. National report: youth survey (2021)

The need to combat online hate has been voiced numerous times by NGOs, minority groups, Ombudspersons and international organisations. In 2018, CERD urged Latvia to take measures to prevent the use of hate speech on the Internet. Nevertheless, there is no body at national level systematically monitoring hate speech, nor any action plan to combat online hate speech in Latvia. According to the State Security Service, it conducts the monitoring of incitement to hatred in the

framework of its competence. However due to the secret nature of the institution there is no information on the regularity and scope of the monitoring.

The monitoring of online hate speech is conducted mostly by two NGOs - Latvian Centre for Human Rights (LCHR) and the LGBTQIA+ association "Mozaika". This is done in the framework of their own initiatives or monitoring exercises initiated by the European Commission. Data available from the NGO monitoring shows that the groups most often targeted by hate speech are: dark skinned persons, migrants, asylum seekers / refugees, LGBTQIA+, and ethnic Russians and Latvians (ethnic hatred). Analysing the results of the monitoring conducted in 2014-2015 and 2017-2020 by LCHR and by the Ombudsperson in 2016, it can be seen to what extent one or the other group is affected by hate speech and how this changes depending on current events and the political discourse of the time.

The results of the hate speech monitoring conducted by "Mozaika", from March to September 2020, showed that among the reported hate speech cases, 34 contained calls to kill or exterminate representatives of protected groups, 24 were a call to violence, 44 were a call to restrict rights, and 202 were insults and stereotyping. "Mozaika" reported 42 of these cases to the police. As of October 2020, the police had initiated criminal proceedings into 8 cases and refused it in 25 cases.

As a result of the LCHR monitoring in 2014-2015, it was concluded that even though the most popular internet portals do have terms prohibiting hate speech and have reporting tools, there were a number of local internet portals that did not have any reporting tools nor terms of service prohibiting hate speech. Reporting in some cases was not available at all or only available through direct contact with the administration of the web site, therefore hindering any rapid response to hate speech.

In 2015, the European Court of Human Rights issued its judgement: *Delfi AS v. Estonia*, no. 64569/09, 16 June 2015⁵. The judgement indicates that internet media might be liable for offensive comments published by their users. The judgement was widely discussed in Latvia and was one of the factors that forced internet news portals to react to reports about hate speech more actively. However, news websites are still not obliged to have special reporting tools for illegal content and there are certain popular news websites that do not have such an option.

⁵ European Court of Human Rights, Grand Chamber, Case of Delfi AS v. Estonia (Application no. 64569/09), Judgement, Strasbourg, 16 June 2015.

1.4.2 Targets of hate speech

As evidenced by surveys, opinion polls, data from online hate speech monitoring, and statistics on prosecuted cases, a clear pattern emerges that shows that hate speech most often targets visually different minorities, including dark skinned persons, Roma, asylum seekers, refugees and migrants - especially from Middle East and African countries - Muslims, and LGBTQIA+. Latvia is also specific for the manifestation of ethnic hatred which targets not only ethnic Russians and Russian speaking minorities, but also the majority population - ethnic Latvians. The following categories outline the targets of hate speech and the current trends or factors facilitating hate speech towards them as evidenced by the authors of this report, interviewed experts and other sources.

Xenophobia: anti-migrant, anti-refugee, anti-Muslim hatred.

Xenophobia towards immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and Muslims grew in 2014 and 2015. This was in connection with the migration crisis in Europe, impacted by the war in Syria, and the planned relocation of asylum seekers to Latvia. Often there is no distinction made between refugees, migrants or Muslims, they are all targeted by hate speech as one group. Since 2015 there has been an anti-migrant Facebook group called “Latvijas nav iebruktuve” (Latvia is not an entrance). The group has more than 12,000 followers and regularly posts disinformation and negative news about migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

The arrival of such migrants and refugees to Europe, and Latvia in particular, is perceived as an invasion, colonisation, Islamification, Africanisation of Europe. It is also widely perceived to be a burden on the welfare system. This attitude is sometimes linked to the white-supremacists ideology, the so-called “white genocide”. George Soros is frequently blamed for planning the invasion of migrants from the Middle East and African countries to Europe with the aim to destroy Europe. Hate speech targets also those organisations and individuals who have received Soros funding and who support the rights of migrants.

During the past few years anti-migrant speech has also increased against the growing number of foreign students in Latvia. Students from Pakistan and India are often associated with kebab food restaurants and illegal employment, they are also seen as being responsible for a perceived rise in crime, and as a general threat to the public.

Interviewed representatives of the groups affected by hate speech raised concerns about the negative effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on xenophobia. This is connected to the use of such expressions as “Chinese virus” and “Indian virus”, which increased

more negative attitudes towards the Asian population residing in Latvia by associating them with spread of the virus.⁶

Racism

Racist hate speech reflects the most widespread prejudice about dark-skinned people. It focuses on their perceived violent nature and proclivity to raping, it also highlights a fear of race mixing and a desire to keep the state “racially clean”. Racist hate speech targets migrants, foreign students, asylum seekers and refugees. Dark-skinned people are called names such as *monkeys*, *primates*, even *cannibals*, there are calls to sterilise them, extradite or simply just not let them into the state. Relationships between white women with dark-skinned men are strongly condemned. The Black Lives Matters movement that originated in the USA in the Summer of 2020 raised not only discussions about racism in Latvia, but also racist speech.

Homophobia

Homophobic hate speech traditionally increases during Pride and when there are political and public discussions, for example, about the “morality” clause in the Education Law⁷ or the regulations regarding same-sex marriage / partnerships or the ratification of the Istanbul convention. Homosexuality is associated with an “invasion” of Western values which endanger the traditional Latvian or Christian values such as the marriage between a man and a woman, family and child upbringing. It is perceived as a disease or mental disorder or perversion and is frequently (and often deliberately) mixed-up with paedophilia. Hate speech is accompanied by calls to discriminate and isolate homosexuals from the society, there are also calls for violence against them.

Ethnic grounds

Hate speech on ethnic grounds focuses on ethnic Latvians and Russians (or Russian speakers)⁸ and is widespread in Latvia due to the state’s complex recent history. This is related to differing perceptions of certain historical events such as the outcome of WWII, Latvia’s occupation by the USSR, collaborators during WWII, and integration policy.

The escalation of hate speech between both groups is often connected to specific controversial events. For example, the end of WWII is celebrated by many Russian

⁶ Representative of International Students Association (interviewed on 21 June 2021).

⁷ The parliament amended the Education law to require that schools provide “constitutional morality education” to schoolchildren, ensuring they are educated in line with the constitutional definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

⁸ The term “Russian speaking residents” is referring not only to ethnic Russian minorities who compose 26% of the population, but also to other minorities who speak Russian as their native language i.e. Ukrainians, Belarussians, and others.

speakers and by sections of the populations of the former Soviet republics, this is on the 9th May, “Victory Day”. At the same time many ethnic Latvians consider this day as the day when Latvia’s occupation by the USSR brought mass deportations to Gulag camps⁹ and saw the oppression of the Latvian nation. Controversies also surround 16th March, this is the unofficial day of the commemoration of the “Latvian Legion” (part of a Waffen SS Unit). It is recognised that many people were forcibly conscripted into the unit but it is also recognised that some divisions of the unit took part in the extermination of Jews. Parts of the Russian speaking community perceive it as a “glorification of Nazism,” while other sections of the Latvian population see them as independence fighters against the Soviets. Discussions regarding both events usually causes a wave of mutual hate speech.

Certain integration and language policies also create disagreements, e.g. the policy on the usage of Latvian and Russian languages, citizenship and non-citizens, and minority education. Russian speakers are portrayed as those not willing to integrate, learn or use the Latvian language, while some sections of Russian speakers perceive integration policies as assimilation, discrimination and a restriction of their minority rights.

Hate speech also occurs with regards to Russia’s foreign policy, Latvian - Russian relations, Russia’s interference in Latvia’s internal affairs, and EU sanctions against Russia. While some Russian speakers will justify Russia’s actions, many ethnic Latvians blame Russia for aggression, particularly the occupation of the Crimea by Russia and the ongoing military conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

Events in the Ukraine and the hybrid warfare have intensified the activities of “trolls”, predominantly from Russia, in Latvian online spaces. There is an increase in the spread of hate speech, particularly in relation to events in the East of Ukraine and Western sanctions against Russia. As investigated by the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence (LIIA 2016), the trolls operate in both Latvian and Russian language in online media.

Anti-Roma

Hate speech towards Roma is most often connected to persistent negative perceptions and stereotypes about the whole community. Occasionally the negative stereotypes about Roma as criminals are reinforced by the media who generally portray Roma as the offenders. According to a research on Roma portrayal in the media in 2013-2014 (Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2015), comments made in the comments sections of such articles are predominantly negative. They are full of stereotypes and hate speech, and are often not linked to the content of the particular material, but express a general negative or offensive opinion. As noted by one of the

⁹ In June 1941 and March 1949 more than 57 000 people were deported to Gulag camps.

interviewed experts, the reaction towards anti-Roma hate speech is usually weaker than against other groups, therefore hate speech towards them is often perceived as normality.¹⁰

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitic hate speech is not a new trend in Latvia because it is based on historically formed myths and prejudice about Jews. As noted by the interviewed expert on antisemitism, the Jewish community in Latvia is used to negative attitudes and hate speech and generally people feel powerless against it.¹¹ The most widespread anti-Semitic myth in Latvia relates to the Nazi propaganda about “Jewish Bolshevism”. This is when Jews were being blamed for terrorising the local population by stressing that the number of Jews was disproportionately high among the soviet officials who issued decrees about the deportations of Latvians to Gulag camps during the Soviet occupation in 1940 (Lenskis and Berzinš 2015). Conspiracy theories such as the desire of the Jews to rule over the world is also commonly referred to.

Some anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are also being spread among Latvian internet users concerning the Covid-19 pandemic. The most widespread is that Bill Gates invented the virus in order to earn more money by selling the global vaccination. Another is that Covid-19 is caused by 5G electromagnetic waves which is a part of a depopulation strategy. Both conspiracy theories are connected to the theory that the Jews rule the world. There were also some posts arguing that the virus was invented by Jews (the Illuminati) with an aim to crash the economy.

Misogyny

Even though hate speech towards women is not a new phenomenon, over the last few years it has often been directed against feminists and women active in organising supporting actions for women’s rights. There were instances when young women taking part in protest actions connected with human rights were targeted by male-counter protestors who yelled at and insulted them.¹² Defenders of “traditional values”, including high ranking politicians have used sexist language in discussions on the potential ratification of the Istanbul Convention by Latvia, claiming that it endangers the “man’s” role. Some opine that violence against women is exaggerated or that it can sometimes be justified. Sexist speech is also used against women politicians by stressing that they are overemotional compared to men.

¹⁰ Expert on anti-Semitism (interviewed on 1 July 2021).

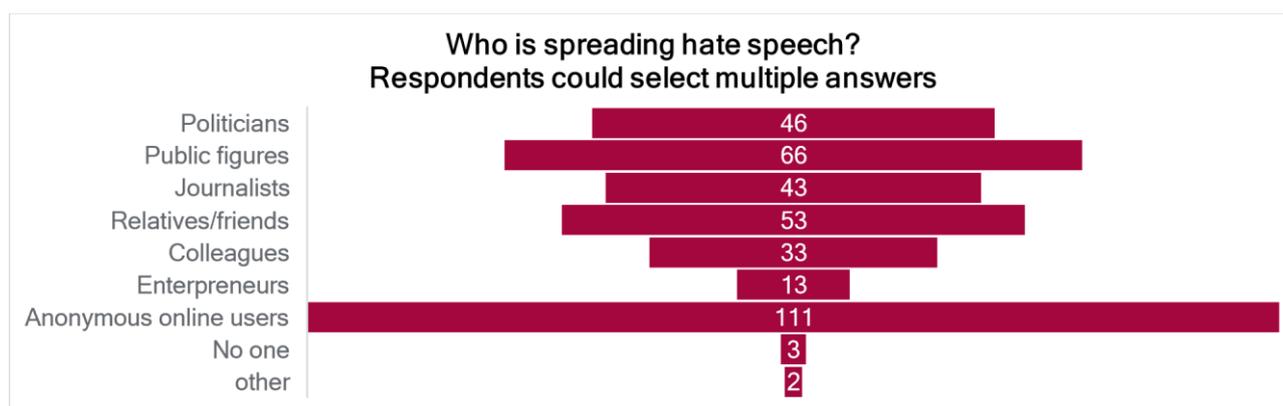
¹¹ Expert on anti-Semitism (interviewed on 1 July 2021).

¹² Representative of youth organisation “Protests” (interviewed on 22 June, 2021).

1.4.3 Actors of Hate Speech

There have been no reports, nor research conducted in Latvia so far providing the full picture about the actors of hate speech. A review by the Supreme Court in 2018, on prosecuted hate speech cases, gives a narrow picture as it provides data only about those convicted for incitement to hatred. All 27 convicted persons from 2012-2018 were male and predominantly were middle-aged. Most of them had published one or several comments on the Internet reacting to news articles on sensitive topics.

A survey of foreign students and NGO / migrant representatives (Latvian Centre for Human Rights 2016) showed that they are targeted by hate speech in public places by locals, often by elderly persons in public transport and young people when intoxicated in the streets or bars. The results of the survey conducted with young people for this report showed that in most of the cases, hate speech is spread by anonymous Internet users. This can be linked to the fact that young people most often see hate speech online. The young people also highlighted that hate speech is being spread by public figures, politicians, and journalists.



Hate speech and Euroscepticism in Latvia. National report: youth survey (2021)

According to interviews and general observations, members of the nationalist party Nacionālā Apvienība (National Alliance), Jaunā Konservatīvā Partija (New Conservative Party), Asociācija ģimene (Association Family), the newspaper Neatkarīgā (Independent), the online news portal Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze (Independent Morning News), and the anti-migrant Facebook group Latvijas nav iebrauktuve (Latvia is not an entrance) are among the most frequently mentioned public actors of hate speech with potentially the highest reach in terms of audience. Even though their statements or published texts mostly fall within the legal scope of the freedom of speech, they still provoke hate speech among ordinary people and internet users. There are also a number of small radical nationalist organisations who are active in spreading hate speech messages, however, as noted by one of the experts, it is hard to evaluate their impact as it is difficult to assess how many people in reality read their texts.

Russia's online news portal "Sputnik" is mentioned as one of the actors inciting hate speech in regards to inter-ethnic relations between Latvians and Russians because of providing sensational or biased information, especially concerning the rights of Russian speaking residents in Latvia. The presence of a Russian "troll factory" in Latvia fosters the spread of hate speech, especially about sensitive inter-ethnic topics.

The interviewed experts also mentioned that representatives of the Lutheran and Catholic churches are occasionally spreading "intolerance" statements towards women and LGBTQIA+. Analysis of different internet platforms has shown that the charismatic religious organisation "New Generation", and its leadership, frequently publish anti-LGBTQIA+ statements.

2. Euroscepticism in Latvia

Since Latvia restored its independence in 1991 after 50 years of occupation by the USSR, the Latvian Government took the course towards European integration. In 1995 Latvia took significant steps towards becoming an EU member - all the political parties of the 6th Parliament (Saeima) supported the President's Declaration on the accession of Latvia into the EU. A few days after that declaration, Latvia submitted an official application for accession to the EU. The accession negotiations entered their final stage in 2002. On 20th September 2003, 67% of Latvian citizens supported the accession in a national referendum and on 1st May 2004 Latvia officially became a member of the EU. As of 2022, Latvia has been a fully-fledged member of the EU for almost two decades. However, like other member states Euroscepticism is present in Latvia. This chapter outlines the forms and actors of Euroscepticism in Latvia, public attitudes towards the EU, and analyses whether Euroscepticism can be linked to the spread of hate speech by looking at trends in the political discourse towards certain EU policies and values.

2.1 Forms of Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism in Latvia has been comprehensively analysed in several academic publications and articles. Austers (2016, 2017) argues that Euroscepticism in Latvia mostly takes a soft form and does not have a systemic institutional phenomenon. Euroscepticism in Latvia, similarly to other Baltic countries, is mostly driven by the critical appraisal of the negative side-effects of the EU (Austers 2017). The hard form of Euroscepticism is typical only for a few radical Eurosceptic parties, however none of those have ever been represented in Parliament. Traditionally, the Latvian Parliament includes pro-European parties and parties that can be characterised as

moderate Eurosceptic parties - those who support EU membership in general but are critical or oppose certain EU policies and further integration (Bekišas 2017). Austers (2016) outlines the following dominant concerns impacting Eurosceptic views during the past decade: a loss of sovereignty because of joining the EU; unequal treatment of Latvia in the EU; the survival of the Latvian language, which is perceived as a strong part of Latvian cultural identity; and danger to Latvian culture by the relocation of refugees during the migration crisis in 2014-2015. Austers also mentions some external factors impacting Euroscepticism, like growing populism in other EU member states, the financial and refugee crises, as well as Brexit.

2.2 Actors of Euroscepticism

Right after EU accession, European affairs took a larger place in the programmes of the political parties. The dominating issue was the use of the EU structural funds in order to increase welfare and to raise the standard of living up to the EU level. Some parties also linked EU membership with stronger stability and national security, especially in relation to Russia's influence. The nationalist party Tēvzemei un Brīvībai / LNIM (For Fatherland and Freedom / LNIM) supported EU-Russian dialogue for the improvement of the Latvian-Russian relations. They insisted on the recovery of losses caused by the Soviet occupation and pushed for the repatriation of residents who arrived in Latvia during the Soviet era. Other parties insisted on closer EU cooperation with Russia. The political party Par Cilvēka Tiesībām Vienotā Latvijā, (For Human Rights in United Latvia - FHRUL) supported a "common political and economic area from Lisbon to Vladivostok."

The majority of the Latvian political parties supported EU accession, however there were several parties, such as the Apvienota Sociāldemokrātiskā Labklājības Partija (United Social Democratic Welfare Party), the Latvijas Sociālistiskā partija (Latvian Socialistic party) and the Euroskeptiku partija (Eurosceptics party), who voted against the EU accession at the referendum. The Latvian Socialistic Party was politically the most successful as its members were represented in Parliament from 1995 to 2010, they were in alliance with the biggest pro-Russian party "FHRUL" (FHRUL partially broke up in 2003, whereby Harmony Centre left and a year later the Socialistic party left). The Latvian Socialistic Party's leader Alfrēds Rubiks, was elected to the European Parliament in 2009 and became a member of the Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left (soft Eurosceptic). Traditionally the party's programme was oriented at closer cooperation with Russia and attracted mostly Russian speaking voters. Today the parties programme says that EU and NATO accession, ratification of the Lisbon treaty and joining the euro zone was "a legal loss of Latvian sovereignty."

Support for the so-called “radical” Eurosceptic parties is constantly low and there are no major Eurosceptic movements in Latvia. According to Austers (2016), the most notable radical Eurosceptics are Juris Paiders, a columnist in the daily newspaper and the online news portal, Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze (Independent Morning News) and Normunds Grostiņš, the former leader of the Rīcības partija (Action party). The Action party was the first and most well known of the Latvian “Eurosceptic” parties, it was established in 2003 before the referendum on joining the EU. Grostiņš unsuccessfully ran for the European Parliament and Latvian Parliamentary elections. Initially he ran with the Eurosceptic party and later with the Latvian Socialist Party, No Sirds Latvijai (From Heart to Latvia). In 2019, Grostiņš representing the Centra partija (Centre Party), ran for the European Parliament elections together with Waldemar Herdt, a German politician, and member of the Eurosceptic and right-wing populist party “Alternative for Germany” (AfD). The party received 0.49% of votes.

Under the leadership of Grostiņš and after his leave, all attempts by the Action Party to be elected to the European Parliament, the Latvian Parliament and local government have failed. The party received 0.43% of votes in the European Parliament election in 2009 and 0.17% in 2019. In the Latvian Parliamentary election in 2018 they received 0.12%. In the Riga municipal election in 2013 they received 0.24% and 0.18% in 2020. The party’s programme traditionally supports strict migration control and is against the reception of asylum seekers and refugees. As Austers notes, “the radical Eurosceptics of Latvia contend that the Western culture in general, and the EU in particular, is alien to Latvia, that it is hypocritical and perverse in nature, and as such is a major threat to the Latvian existence.”¹³

There are several moderate Eurosceptic mainstream parties such as the nationalist political union Nacionālā Apvienība (National Alliance), the conservative Zaļo un Zemnieku Savienība (Union of Greens and Farmers), and Saskaņa (Harmony). The National Alliance is one of the biggest and most influential of Latvia’s political parties. Its members are represented in the European Parliament, the Latvian Parliament and local governments in a number of municipalities. Even though the party is moderate in terms of its Euroscepticism and supports Latvia’s membership in the EU, its programme consequently opposes certain EU policies and values related to migration, the reception of asylum seekers, and LGBTQIA+ rights. The National Alliance actively proposes and supports initiatives aimed at more strict migration policies and residence permit conditions for foreigners and opposes the adoption of same sex partnerships.

Another of the conservative right-wing party’s, the “Union of Greens and Farmers”, is generally pro-European. However, on certain occasions it has been critical to

¹³ Austers, A. (2016), The case of Latvia: Popular Euroscepticism in Impasse, In: Euroscepticism in small EU member states, Publishers Zinātne, Riga. p88.

liberal European policies regarding migration control, refugee quotas and LGBTQIA+ rights. Iveta Grigule, a member of the party, was elected to the European Parliament in 2014 and consequently joined the radical Eurosceptic Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (FDDG) chaired by Nigel Farage (then leader of the British populist right-wing party UKIP). After five months Grigule left the FDDG, resulting in the temporary collapse of the political group. Latvia's Green Party chairperson, Edgars Tavars, congratulated the British people concerning Brexit, on their move away from the "liberal-global course of destruction represented by the EU"¹⁴.

The social democratic party, Harmony (successor of FHRUL and Harmony Centre), has continuously supported EU membership, has its focus on the Russian speaking residents of Latvia, and supports closer relations with Russia. Up until 2017, Harmony had an effective agreement with Russia's governing party "United Russia", implicitly suggesting that the party's true interests lie in Russia's direction (Austers 2016).

2.3 Public Attitudes

In 2003, six months before the referendum on Latvia's accession to the EU, a broad public information campaign "For Latvia's accession to the European Union" was organised, it aimed to reach all groups of the population, from young people to the elderly and pensioners. The headliners of the campaign were representatives from the different regions, various professionals, social and ethnic groups. The campaign emphasised economic benefits, availability of EU structural funds for the further development of Latvia, access to the EU labour markets, business development grants, and other benefits of the economic order. In the context of European values, only the issue of security was raised - the security of Latvia from its eastern neighbour - Russia. At the same time, there were practically no public discussions with the opponents of accession to the EU. Despite the extensive information campaign, support for accession to the EU in Latvia, in comparison with 10 other candidate countries, was rather low. Only 67% of those who took part in the referendum voted for joining the EU. The only lower percentage was only in Malta.

Since 2003, the level of support towards the EU has significantly increased. According to a public opinion poll conducted by a research centre SKDS in 2020, 72% of Latvians assessed the EU positively, as compared with 42% of like-minded people in 2008. The more positive attitude was the result of a number of factors, including; the successful EU integration process, joining the Schengen area and the euro zone, economic growth, and perception about the EU as a major source of stability in the context of security concerns, especially due to Russia's annexation of

¹⁴ *ibid.* p89.

Crimea and the crisis in Eastern Ukraine that started in 2014. Support level for the EU slightly decreased in 2016, which can be associated with the European migration crisis and plans to relocate a number of refugees to Latvia within the framework of the so-called “quota” programme. However, as evidenced by Eurobarometer data, after the migration crisis gradually decreased, Euro-optimistic attitudes were on the rise again - 75% of Latvian residents felt that they belonged to Europe and 73% to the EU in 2019 (European Union 2019).

Over the past 15 years, the perception of residents about the values of the European Union has been slowly changing. In 2004 and 2009, the Eurobarometer showed that the values appreciated the most by the Latvian residents were freedom of movement and study and work opportunities in the different EU countries (67% and 71%). In 2015 the values appreciated by the Latvian population were peace (53%), human rights (41%), respect for human life (38%) and personal freedom (38%).

Austers and Nīkišins (2017a) in identifying Eurosceptic attitudes among Latvian residents, clustered them into four groups:

- Euro-optimists - those who agree that the EU is a good thing and support membership in the EU.
- Radical Eurosceptics - disagree that the EU is a good thing and disagree that the membership in the EU is a good thing.
- Moderate Eurosceptics or Euro-pragmatists - those who support membership in the EU but are opposed to the EU as such.
- Alienated - those who disagree the EU membership is a good thing although they like the EU as such.

In analysing public attitudes by these categories, the majority of Latvian residents or 71.48% are Euro-optimists, 21.58% are Radical Eurosceptics, 3.69% are Moderates and 3.25% are Alienated. By exploring the social demographic portrait of the four groupings it can be seen that most Euro-optimists are young people in the age group 15-24. 59% of this age group believe EU membership is a good thing, while only 10% think it is a bad thing. The most Eurosceptic are people from older generations - 19% of persons aged 65-74 believe EU membership is a bad thing and 27% believe it is good. The percentage of people who are Eurosceptic in the capital city of Riga are 15% of the population, other major towns in the country see this slightly increase to 17%. Interestingly, Euroscepticism in rural areas is only 12%. At the same time, Riga shows the highest number of those who see EU membership as a good thing - 43%, as compared with 35% in other towns or cities and 38% in rural areas (Austers and Nīkišins 2017).

When analysing Eurosceptic attitudes, it is important to note the fact evidenced by opinion polls, that Latvian residents whose native language is Russian are more Eurosceptic than those residents whose native language is Latvian. Austers and Nīkišins (2017a) analysed public attitudes and calculated that 56.75% of Russian

speakers could be classified as Euro-optimists, 34.99% as radical Eurosceptics, 4.13% as Euro-pragmatists and 4.13% as alienated.

The following conclusions are based on the opinion poll of May 2017 conducted by research centre SKDS. It shows that only 15% of Russian speakers completely agree with the statement that “membership in the EU should be supported”, 28% tend to disagree and 10% completely disagree, as compared with 36% of ethnic Latvians who completely agree, 11% who tend to disagree and 4% who completely disagree. Only 13% of Russian speakers completely agree that the EU is a good thing, as compared with 33% of ethnic Latvians. Russian speakers are also more supportive of the opinion that Latvia would do better if it belonged to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) not the EU - 11% completely agree with this, 20% tend to agree and 16% completely disagree, as compared with 2% of ethnic Latvians who completely agree, 7% tend to agree, and 48% completely disagree. Russian speakers are also more likely to think that the EU will collapse soon - 13% as compared to 8% of ethnic Latvians.

A similar opinion poll, disaggregating respondents by native language, was conducted in 2011. Comparing both it can be concluded that Eurosceptic attitudes have decreased among both language groups, however the decrease is more substantial among ethnic Latvian residents (Austers and Ņikišins 2017b).

There are a number of researches that have been conducted during the past several years in Latvia proving the presence of Russian propaganda being spread through different channels. Even though, as noted by the report on Russia’s influence on the Latvian information environment (Valtenbergs et al 2018), it is hard to assess any real impact of the propaganda on the attitudes of Latvian residents, though some link between Russia’s narratives and Eurosceptic attitudes can be found. For instance, Denisa-Liepniece (2017) when analysing the reasons why the Russian speaking population is more Eurosceptic, outlines the following Kremlin narratives being spread in Latvia: Latvia is portrayed as a “failed state”, the message illustrates the economic downturn and emigration of Latvians abroad; they maintain a picture of a pessimistic future for the EU or the fall of Western civilisation; they redefine European values, including human rights, freedom of speech, democracy, the model of Western economy, and history; and they spread conspiracy theories undermining trust of the EU management.

The main channels of the Kremlin's propaganda are in the Russian language and are actively consumed by Latvian residents. Content produced by Russian TV channels is consumed by 63% of Latvian residents, including 82% of ethnic minorities and 51% of ethnic Latvians. 46% of Russian speakers do not access media in the Latvian language at all. The majority of the Latvian population are consumers of Russian entertainment programmes, but even here it is evidenced that such programmes also

contain propaganda narratives (Ozoliņa et al 2017). In fact, there are a number of media producing original content by local journalists in Russian language - newspapers, TV and radio channels, as well as internet media. The most popular internet news portal for all of the Latvian population is Delfi¹⁵ which produces content in both the Latvian and Russian languages. The next most popular media for Russian speakers are the Russian TV channels, while ethnic Latvians consume more Latvian TV and radio channels (Valtenbergs et al 2018). Despite the availability of content in Russian language produced by local media, Denisa-Liepniece (2017) argues that there is a lack of original analytical content covering EU events and benefits, that would help to counter the Kremlin's anti-EU narratives. Therefore, Russian media have quite a strong impact on the attitudes of Russian speakers, while local media struggle to counter it.

2.4 Trends in the Political Discourse Towards Certain EU Policies and Values

Are Euroscepticism and hate speech in Latvia interrelated? The authors of this report believe that some links can be found in the political discourse of both radical and moderate Latvian Eurosceptic political parties on issues regarding specific EU policies and values. In this section the authors will take a deeper view into two of the most noticeable examples - LGBTQIA+ rights and migration issues. The chapter will explore the political discourses by different political actors around both issues.

2.4.1 LGBTQIA+ Rights

LGBTQIA+ rights and equality are often perceived as “imposed” Western values. This has been a “red flag” in the political discourse for more than a decade. It concerns not only populist statements but also relevant policies and legal aspects ensuring equality of sexual minorities.

The first Gay Pride march in July 2005 was accompanied by a wave of homophobic hate speech and actions. The organisers of the Pride received permission to hold it only after an appeal to the courts because initially Riga City Council banned it. The participants of the Pride were attacked by aggressive protestors physically and verbally. A number of politicians were spreading hate speech and insulting statements. The Prime Minister at the time, Aigars Kalvītis (People's party) said in relation to Pride that, “we cannot advertise things that are not appropriate to the majority of population”¹⁶. MP Leopolds Ozoliņš of the Greens and Farmers Union and

¹⁵ www.delfi.lv

¹⁶ Mozaika (2007), Homofobiskā runa Latvijā: politiķu monitorings [Homophobic speech in Latvia: Monitoring of politicians], Mozaika, Riga.

member of the Parliamentary foreign affairs committee, distributed to a number of officials and mass media a letter stating that “homosexuality is a morally and physically distorting phenomenon” and that Pride is about “degenerates being proud of their perversions.” He also said that Latvia will leave the EU if it keeps demanding we honour, respect and support homosexuals which mocks normal people, the Latvian nation, the concept of family, and all fundamental values of a healthy society. The organisers of the Pride sued Ozoliņš over these insulting and discriminatory statements.

Similarly, in July 2006 the march was banned because of alleged threats of violence against the participants. The then Minister of Interior, Jānis Jaundžeikars (Latvijas Pirmā partija - Latvian First party) was against Pride, stating that the march is dangerous because the majority of society is against it. He also said that it might be difficult for police officers to protect homosexual people because they might find homosexuals “inappropriate”. Due to the official refusal of Riga City Council to allow Pride to happen and increasing tensions in society, the organisers decided to replace the march with other events. However, the participants of these events were again attacked both verbally and physically. Members of the anti-gay Pride movement ‘No Pride’, threw eggs and human excrement at participants of a service held in the Anglican church attended by LGBTQIA+ supporters. Jānis Cālītis, the priest who led the service, blamed other priests, politicians and authorities for incitement to aggression. After the events the police were criticised for a lack of proper reaction. However, Jaundžeikars stated that the police acted professionally.

Another event that caused a wave of political hate speech towards LGBTQIA+ in 2006 was the transposition of the general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation (EU 2000/78EC) into the Labour Law. Initially, the Latvian parliament refused to include sexual orientation as a prohibited discrimination ground, as required by the framework. The adoption of the amendments were accompanied by debates containing discriminatory and biased statements. The head of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, member of the Christian conservative Latvian First Party, Jānis Šmits, also a priest, stated that the amendment would “open the gate for pederasty, lesbianism, paedophilia, zoophilia and other forms of perversions.” He also stated that homosexuals are “alcoholics and mental degenerates”. Pēteris Tabūns, a For Fatherland and Freedom/LNIM party member, stated that persons with “other” sexual orientation could choose professions that “do not harm public interests”. However, the President of Latvia, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga refused to proclaim the amendments and sent them back to Parliament to be revised asking them to bring them in line with EU standards and human rights. Only after this pressure did parliament include a discrimination ban on the grounds of sexual orientation. This happened in September 2006.

In this context it is worth noting that in June 2005, the Parliament ratified the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe¹⁷ which says that the EU “is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”¹⁸ Six months later, in December 2005, the majority of Parliament adopted the amendments to the Constitution of Latvia, defining marriage as a union between a male and a female. The amendments were initiated by the Latvia First Party in order to avoid that same sex partners would enjoy legal protection in Latvia.

In 2005 and 2006 there was a spike in the escalation of homophobia in Latvia. In the past decade, attitudes towards Pride and other issues have become more moderate. However, it is still an issue in the political discourse of the mainstream political parties and small Eurosceptic parties. A number of parties include in their programmes promises to protect Christian and traditional family values. During the past decade the most noticeably encouraging events have been the so-called “morality” clauses, introduced into Education Law, the possible ratification of the Istanbul Convention, attempts to introduce partnership regulation, and the most recent decision of the Constitutional Court in regard to social protection of same sex families.

In 2014, three Latvian MEPs - Roberts Zīle (National Alliance), Inese Vaidere and Kārlis Šadurskis (Unity) did not support the EU Roadmap against homophobia and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity adopted by the European Parliament. Zīle argued that the report may contradict the Latvian Constitution. MEP Aleksandrs Mirskis (Harmony), who did not participate in the voting, commented on the report stating that “sexual minorities are parasites in the chain (of reproductivity), they want to live at expense of our reproductivity.” He also stated that any homosexual propaganda must be banned.

In 2015, the Latvian Parliament adopted draft amendments to the Education Law stipulating that the education system must ensure moral education in accordance with the Constitutions values, especially related to family and marriage. The author of the amendments, MP Jūlija Stepanenko (Harmony) proposed the provisions as a response to schools using a booklet issued by NGO “Papardes zieds” on sexual education, which says that romantic and sexual attraction can be towards opposite and same sex persons. The amendments were aimed at forbidding the use of such materials in schools. It is worth noting, that the amendments were supported by two

¹⁷ The Treaty has never come into force due to the lack of unanimous support from all member states.

¹⁸ European Union. (2004), *Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe*, Official Journal of the European Union, Brussels, Article 1-2.

opposing parties - the pro-Russian Harmony and the nationalists party, National Alliance.

During the past decade the National Alliance party has been one of the most active opponents of the recognition of same sex marriage and partnership, as well as the ratification of the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention)¹⁹. In 2019, the European Parliament called upon Latvia and seven other member states to ratify the Convention. However, due to a lack of support by the majority of the governing coalition, its ratification stalled in Latvia. According to National Alliance member Dzintars Rasnačs (former Minister of Justice), "interpretation of certain section of the Convention on same sex marriages, social gender and the number of genders and gender roles, contradicts the fundamental values of Latvian society and folk wisdom." This argument was used also by the Convention opponents from other parties. Ramona Petraviča, Minister of Welfare (party KPV LV), refused to initiate the ratification of the Convention in the Parliament, stating that it contradicts Christian values. Augusts Brigmanis, chairperson of the Union of Greens and Farmers, stated that the ratification of the Convention is a step towards the recognition of same sex marriage which is unacceptable for him and the party. It is worth noting that in 2019, the Latvian Party of Greens was excluded from the European Greens party. One of the reasons was that the party's actions contradicted the values of the 'Greens'. The chairperson of the Latvian Greens party, Edgars Tavors, stated that the contradictions are related to values which are not connected with environmental protection but are because the Latvian Greens do not support same sex marriages or the rights of the Russian speaking minorities for education in their native language. He also reproached the European Greens Party for being aggressively neoliberal, stating "we see nothing in common between the green idea and being sexually, ethnically, economically leftist, modern and right. Our flag is green-white, not rainbow or red."

In 2020 the Constitutional Court of Latvia issued a ruling recognising that the provisions that do not grant access to a 10-day parental leave to a mother's partner in a same sex family, as in the case of a father in a heterosexual family, is not in line with the Constitution. In its argumentation the Court stated that the government must adjust the legal provisions ensuring the protection of same sex families. The ruling caused another wave of hate speech and intolerance from certain politicians and in the online space. The National Alliance, in its turn, submitted draft amendments to the Constitution of Latvia stating that the foundation of the family is a mother (female) and father (male). Signatures began to be collected to initiate a referendum because the passing of amendments to the Constitution require a qualified majority vote in the

¹⁹ Latvia has now signed the Convention.

parliament, and there was not sufficient support for such amendments among the represented political parties.

In its European Parliament pre-election programme in 2019, the radical Eurosceptic Centric party stated that it is against the ideology of “genderism”, and public propaganda for “sex life, LGBTQI+ and homosexuality”. Action Party’s candidate for the post of the Mayor of Riga, Ruslans Pankratovs, during a pre-election campaign at the Riga City Council in 2020 stated that, Riga, in his opinion, is the place where all residents would feel comfortably and “not only sexual minorities, gays, bike riders, thieves and onanists.”

2.4.2 Migration and Asylum Policy

Another “red flag” in the political discourse is migration and asylum. Manifestations of intolerance reached their height in 2015/2016 during the migration crisis in the EU and following the EU policy of the relocation of asylum seekers among the member states. As part of the EU strategy on the relocation of asylum seekers from Greece and Italy, Latvia initially agreed to host 250, and then later 531 persons within 2 years. The “quota” strategy raised populist debates. Initially the introduction of “quotas” was criticised by political parties from both the coalition and the opposition. MEP Andrejs Mamikins (Harmony) stated that this quota is only the beginning, and that Latvia may be forced to accommodate up to 4,000 refugees from North African countries and Afghanistan. MEP Roberts Zīle (National Alliance) criticised mandatory refugee quotas, referring to the similar position of the Visegrad states, and Romania and Hungary.

Several protest actions took place against the reception of asylum seekers. In August 2015, about 1,000 people took part in a street protest action. Participants produced posters saying “No to the genocide of white people!”, “Baltic states for Baltic people. Europe for Europeans. Africa for Africans”, “SOS! Help Latvian pensioners and children”, there were many other examples. The protestors demanded a national referendum on the accommodation of refugees into Latvia. Members of the governing coalition from the National Alliance, Janis Dombrova, Imants Paradnieks, Kārlis Kresliņš, and Rihards Kols, were among the participants of the protest. During other protest actions, organised by the radical and nationalist organisations, protestors held racist and anti-European posters for example, “send Straujuma (Prime Minister) to Cologne to blacks”, “leave EU”, “Europe does not have an obligation to make collective ethnocultural suicide”. There were also pictures portraying migrants as terrorists and images comparing the President of the European Commission, at that time Jaen-Claude Juncker, with Hitler and Stalin etc.

The National Alliance was one of the most active opponents of the relocation of asylum seekers. According to MP Jānis Dombrava, the main arguments why Latvia should not accommodate asylum seekers are: there are already too many immigrants living in Latvia who arrived during Soviet times, asylum seekers from Africa might bring terrorism threats, they will be a burden to the social system, and if there are too many immigrants with alien culture and religion it would lead to catastrophe.

Even after its pique in 2015/2016, the migration and asylum topic is still current and exploited by many politicians. In its European Parliament pre-election programme in 2019, National Alliance stated that Latvia cannot handle the relocation of immigrants from other world regions because it has not solved the problem with a large number of immigrants who arrived to Latvia during the Soviet period (Russians speakers). One of the current leaders of the Action Party, Einārs Graudiņš, stated that illegal migration is a common threat (to the EU) and that “black crowds that wander around Europe [...] have to be sent back to where they came from. At all others who are floating to our direction [...] we will open fire immediately if they cross the border”. The radical Eurosceptic Centric party in its pre-election programme stated that it will stop immigration to Europe because it creates terrorism, crimes, and risks the spread of infectious diseases. The Action Party stated that Latvia must stop the reception of refugees and deport persons who already received refugee status from the country.

3. Civic Activism Countering Hate Speech

In the absence of any coordinated national policy on combating hate speech, the majority of the implemented initiatives in Latvia have so far been performed by civil society. At the same time, within the NGO sector, there are only a few organisations purposefully and sustainably working with hate speech issues. This section maps some of the initiatives implemented in Latvia on countering hate speech and other initiatives aimed at the promotion of tolerance targeting wider society and young people in particular.

The only national campaign on combating hate speech in Latvia was launched in 2013 in the framework of the “No Hate Speech Movement” initiated by the Council of Europe. The campaign was coordinated by the Society Integration Foundation in cooperation with the Latvian Centre for Human Rights and the Ministry of Education and Science. The campaign included a limited number of public events, e.g. training for journalists about hate speech and a competition for young people to produce videos on the theme of “No to Online Hate Speech.” Even though the campaign was coordinated by a state institution, it did not receive national funding, but was funded by the EEA / Norway grants.

NGO - The Latvian Centre for Human Rights (LCHR) has been working with the topic of hate crimes and hate speech for over a decade through research, monitoring, training, advocacy and the provision of legal support to the victims of hate speech. In 2012, LCHR implemented a project “Hate speech monitoring” which resulted in checking the ability of local online media to control hate speech posted by users and the production of guidelines for moderators of online hate speech. A series of different activities aimed at strengthening NGO capacity on combating hate speech was conducted by LCHR in 2014-2015. This was in the framework of a project titled, “NGO Capacity Building to Combat Online Hate”. The activities included; a comprehensive approach to combating hate speech (the monitoring of online hate speech and improving the response of local internet portals on hate speech), the training of NGO representatives and young people on identification and responding to online hate speech, and strengthening cooperation between law enforcement and NGOs.

Since 2017, LCHR, in cooperation with NGO “Participation for All”, each year organises training for pupils and teachers in schools about hate speech. The activities are funded by the Department of Education, Culture and Sports of the Riga City Council in the framework of the annual Society Integration Programme. The aim of the training courses are to raise awareness among young people about hate speech and to develop their skills for responding to online and off-line hate speech. The training for teachers raises not only their awareness about the impact of

intolerance but also gives them a methodology which can be used in talking about these issues with the pupils. The training programme is based on non-formal education methods, promoting debates among participants, and the sharing of experiences. This is especially important when talking about often sensitive topics. Almost 600 pupils and 75 teachers have attended the training courses so far.

In 2020, LCHR in cooperation with partner organisations from Estonia and Lithuania produced a set of guidelines and 4 videos on what hate speech is, what hate crimes are, and what to do in these cases for victims and witnesses. The videos are available in Latvian, English, Russian, Estonian and Lithuanian.²⁰

Since 2017, LCHR and the LGBTQIA+ organisation “Mozaika” participated in a hate speech monitoring exercise initiated by the European Commission. The monitoring was set up in order to test how global social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and others, observe the Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online. Both NGOs also conduct the monitoring of online hate speech in the framework of their own initiatives and they both provide legal counselling. “Mozaika” also organises different activities aimed at combating homophobic hate speech and hate crimes. In 2020, “Mozaika” analysed police reaction and investigation of homophobic hate speech.

Several NGOs are implementing various activities aimed at the promotion of tolerance in general and towards specific target groups. The NGO “I want to help refugees” implemented various activities aimed at decreasing intolerance towards asylum seekers and refugees. One of the projects “Living library”, implemented in 2017, was aimed at breaking stereotypes about refugees by sharing stories of real people. Another project “In a refugee shoe” was implemented in 2018. The project included an educational programme for young people and a simulation game designed to gain a better understanding of the plight that refugees face.

The Museum “Jews in Latvia” regularly implements educative events for different target groups aimed at awareness raising about the Holocaust, anti-Semitism and the impact of intolerance. In 2019/2020 the museum provided special programmes for schools, including tours to memorial Holocaust places, seminars about tolerance, remembrance, and European values.

Creative association “Trepes”, actively involves young people, including young people of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. It implements different projects and volunteer activities, including those aimed at solidarity and tolerance.

²⁰ The videos were produced in the framework of a project “Police and NGO cooperation to combat hate crime in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania”. Guidelines and videos are available: <http://cilvektiesibas.org.lv/en/publications/guidelines-and-videos-what-are-hate-crimes-hate-sp-503/>

Despite the existing initiatives, all the interviewed experts mentioned that there are not enough activities on combating hate speech in Latvia. Especially activities on the provision of support for the victims of hate speech.²¹ Therefore, there is a need to conduct more initiatives and provide more support, including psychological.²² Youth centres were mentioned as possible support points for young people, but they need to be equipped with appropriate knowledge and resources.²³ There is also the need for better institutional support for activities against hate speech as well as better cooperation between state institutions and NGOs. More effective initiatives could also be implemented by improved cooperation between different NGOs, which so far can be evaluated as poor.²⁴ The EUact youth survey showed that many young people believe that everyone should be educated about the harm of hate speech and young people should take an active role in its prevention. Most of the interviewed experts also stressed the necessity for more educative and awareness raising activities targeting general society which would be aimed at decreasing negative stereotypes and prejudice towards groups affected by hate speech.

²¹ Representative of International Students Association (interviewed on 21 June 2021) and representative of youth organisation “Trepes” (interviewed on 18 June 2021).

²² Representative of youth organisation “Protests” (interviewed on 22 June 2021).

²³ Representative of the Ministry of Education and Science (interviewed on 8 July 2021).

²⁴ Expert on anti-Semitism (interviewed on 1 July 2021).

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The overview of the situation in Latvia shows that different groups in society are targeted by hate speech often as a reaction towards actual events or manipulative political discourse on sensitive topics. Growing migration, migration crises and the reception of asylum seekers causes a growth of racist and xenophobic hate speech. The struggle for equal rights for LGBTQIA+ causes homophobic political initiatives and discourses which are accompanied by a wave of online and offline hate speech towards these groups. Antisemitic hate speech grounded in century old long formed myths and prejudice is seen in online discourse and is alive in both old and current conspiracy theories. Hate speech between the ethnic Latvian and Russian population is fuelled by the Kremlin's propaganda and trolls. Meanwhile the nationalistic discourse from the other side continues to spread. Roma, as one of the smallest and most vulnerable ethnic groups in Latvia, are targeted by hate speech reinforced by biased media reports. Sexist hate speech and misogyny accompany the fight for gender equality and women's activism. It is beyond doubt that the internet is and most likely will remain the main channel for the spread of hate speech.

Policy analysis shows that hate speech is forbidden by a number of legal acts and imposed punishments can serve as a preventive factor for the spread of hate speech. The effectiveness of the legal regulations depends on various factors, including the capacity of law enforcement and other responsible authorities on their ability to identify hate speech and the level of trust towards the police by vulnerable groups. At the same time, as evidenced by practice, legal sanctions cannot fully stop hate speech. Currently the provision of effective responses to the existing challenges is hindered by the lack of concrete policy measures and coordinated actions, and especially the lack of political will to elaborate a comprehensive approach to combating hate speech.

Even though it is ordinary people who mostly get prosecuted for incitement to hatred and anonymous internet users are blamed for posting hate speech, the impact on the public of biased statements and online hate speech posts by influential politicians, public figures, and journalists cannot be underestimated.

By entering the EU, Latvia has subscribed to fundamental European democratic values and human rights principles. Even though the majority of the Latvian population are Euro-optimists, not all European standards and policies are equally accepted and supported. The share of popularity by radical Eurosceptics is constantly low, but at the same time, there are a number of mainstream moderate Eurosceptic political parties who are able to reach a much wider audience. Political discourse of radical and moderate Latvian Eurosceptic political parties on issues concerning certain EU policies and values, correlates with the dynamic of hate

speech towards certain groups. Analysis of anti-LGBTQIA+ and xenophobic discourse by populists and politicians shows that hate speech does not remain only as words. Bias and prejudice get incorporated into the programmes of moderate Eurosceptic mainstream political parties and leads to the adoption of policies and legal acts affecting the rights of both groups. It is clearly evidenced by the adoption of the Constitutional provisions about marriage being between a man and a woman, the unwillingness to adopt partnership regulation or ratify the Istanbul Convention, and the lack of solidarity with other EU member states during the migration crisis.

Analysis of public attitudes outlines an urgent need to raise awareness among vulnerable groups and general society on how to respond to hate speech and why it is important to react to such incidents. There is a positive tendency that many young people are raising their voices in protest against hate speech by saying that it is not acceptable, many are also writing counter speech. However, raising their awareness about other reporting means is necessary, e.g. how to report online hate speech or which organisations can provide support.

So far, the main efforts on countering hate speech have been taken by a limited number of Latvian NGOs. They have been implementing different projects, monitoring, training, and undertaking awareness raising activities. However, it is more than obvious that the problem of online hate speech will not disappear on its own and there is a need for a more comprehensive approach on combating hate speech involving various actors - national authorities, institutions and civil society - and covering different areas, especially the spread of online hate speech.

Based on the report and conclusions, the authors propose the following recommendations for more effective measures to combat hate speech:

- There is a need for a national action plan on combating hate speech involving intersectional actors, including the Ministry of Culture, who coordinate integration and media policies, the Ministry of Education and Science who are responsible for education and youth policies, the Ministry of Welfare whose functions include the promotion of social inclusion of vulnerable groups, and the Ministry of Interior who is responsible for the capacity of law enforcement.
- There is a need to increase trust between law enforcement and vulnerable groups and a need to strengthen police capacity in the identification of hate speech and hate crimes thus ensuring effective prosecution.
- There is a need to raise public awareness about hate speech reporting mechanisms, to make information on what to do when encountering instances of hate speech and where to find support, and to ensure more support is available to the groups affected by hate speech as well as the general public.
- There is a need to strengthen cooperation between state institutions, including law enforcement, and NGOs, and also among NGOs, for more effective implementation of different activities and measures.
- There is a need for more public discussion about the notions of hate speech, freedom of speech and political ethics and liability for actions or statements promoting intolerance.
- There is an urgent need for education for different groups in society, especially young people, educators, teachers, and youth workers, about the harm of hate speech. These groups also need support with regards to the identification and reporting of hate speech because they are the multipliers of knowledge and actions aimed at combating hate speech and promoting European and democratic values.
- There is a need for raising the capacity of NGOs, especially youth organisations and youth centres on hate speech, including the provision of support to the victims of intolerance and hate speech.
- Issues promoting European values, democracy, human rights and diversity should be included in education programmes throughout the education system creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment.

- There is a need for further open discussions with administrations of local internet portals and social networks on improving their capacity to react to hate speech and remove it.
- There is a need to strengthen the role of media and journalists in promoting tolerance and countering hate speech as well as raising their awareness of their impact on the spread of hate.
- There is a need for targeted involvement of different groups in society in common events and activities in order to promote diversity and decrease negative stereotypes and prejudice.

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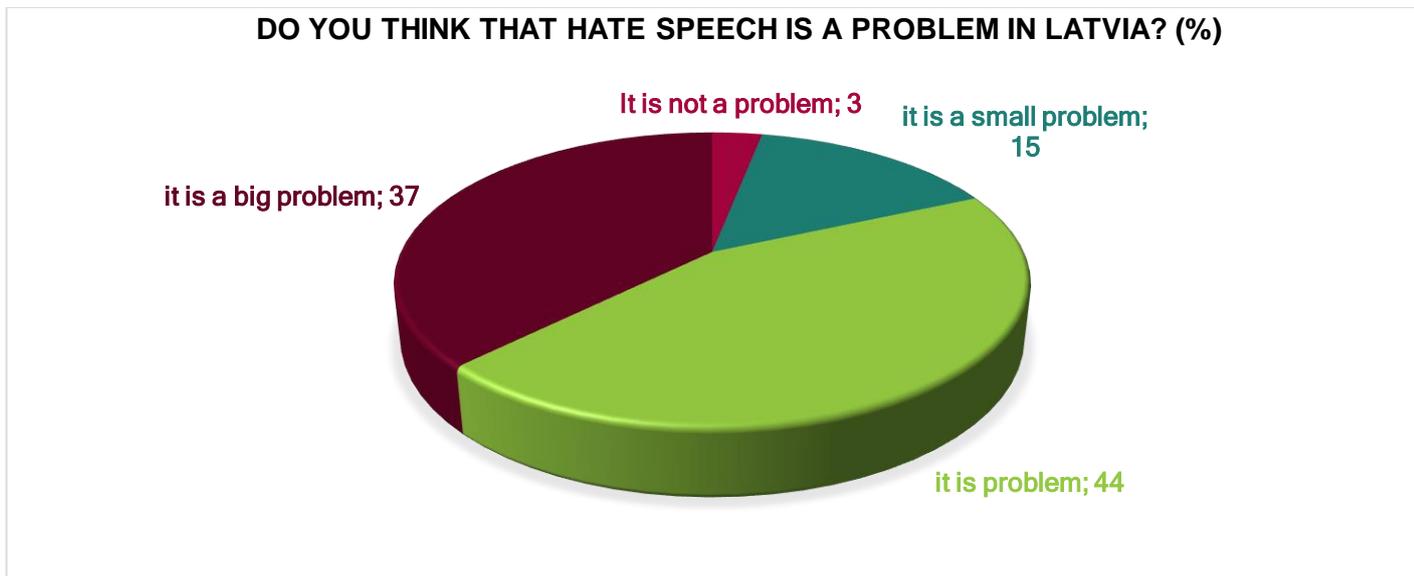
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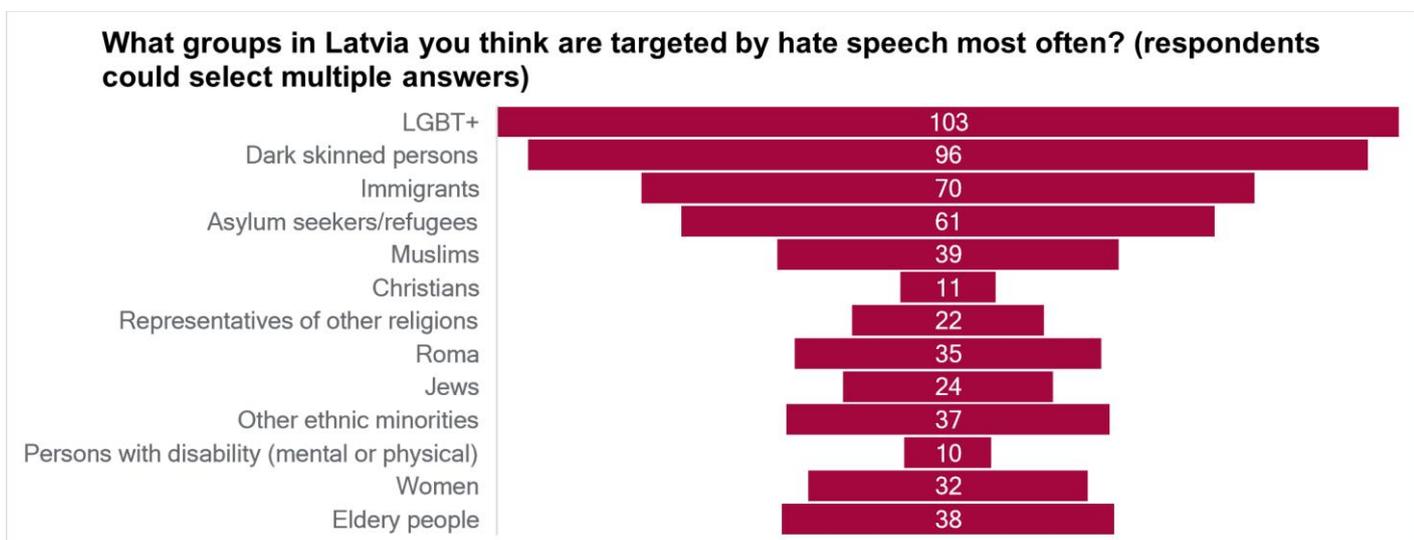
ANNEX. Results of the youth survey.

131 young people aged 16-25 took part in the survey. Survey was conducted in three languages - Latvian, Russian, and English to ensure representation of opinion non-Latvians.

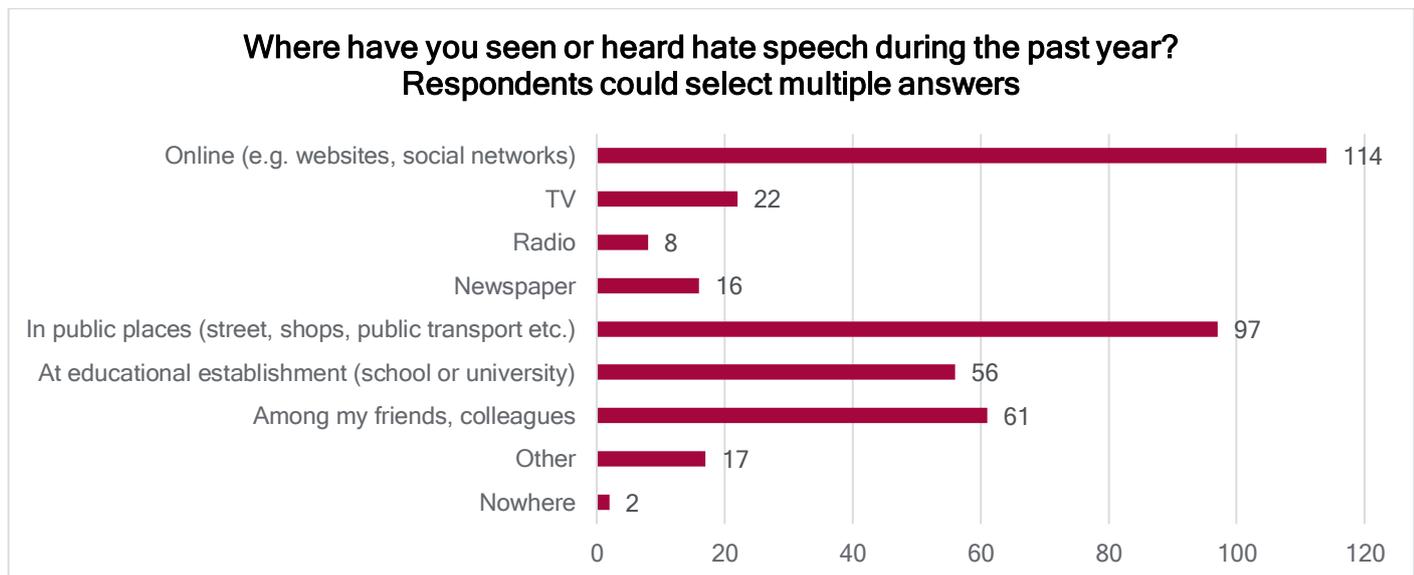
[1] The survey shows that the majority of young people believe that hate speech is a problem or it is a big problem in Latvia - 44% and 37% correspondingly. 15% considers that it is a small problem, but for 3% of respondents it is a not a problem at all.



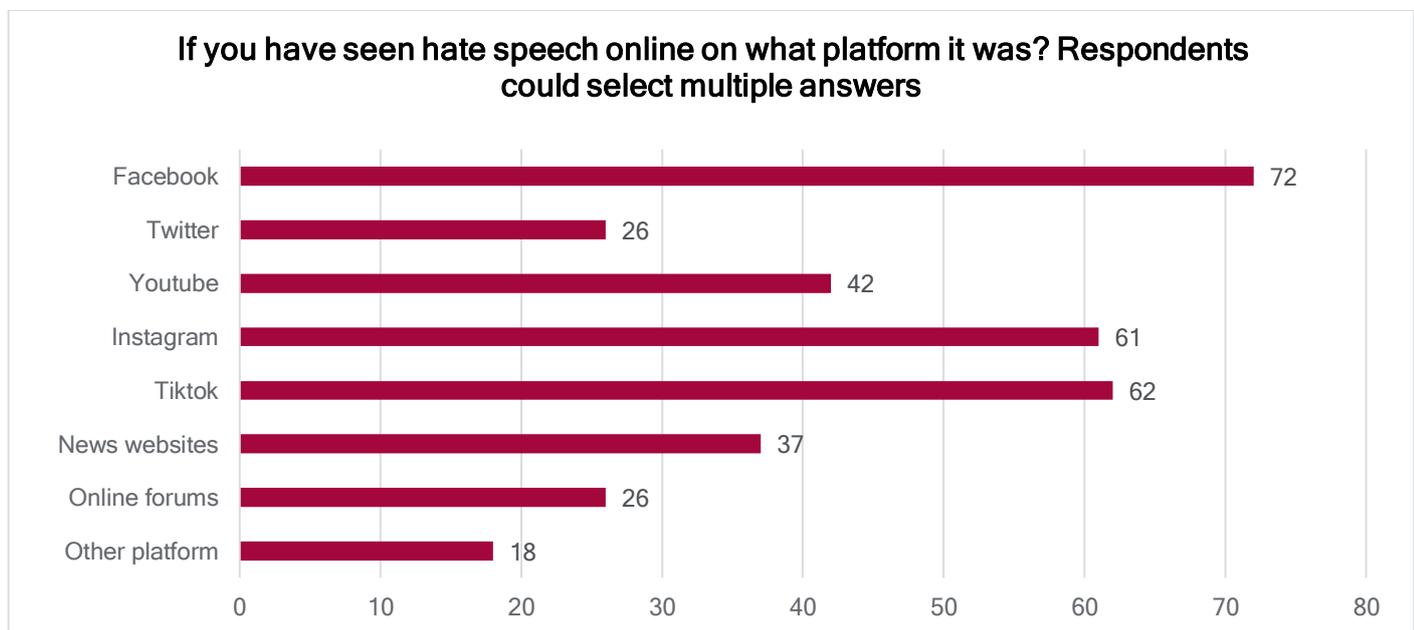
[2] Young people believe that most often hate speech targets LGBTQI+ people, dark skinned persons, immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Quite often hate speech targets also Muslims, elderly people, Roma and other ethnic minorities, and women.



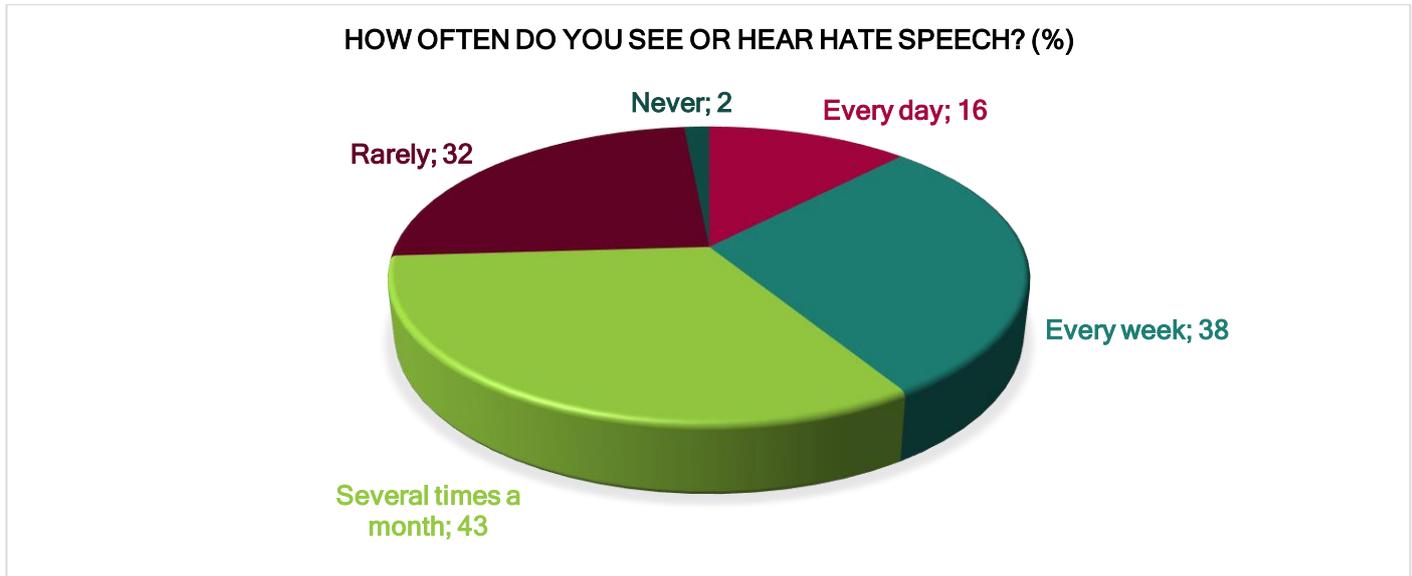
[3] Majority of respondents most often seen or heard hate speech online and in public places. Hate speech is often spread also among friends or colleagues and in educational establishments.



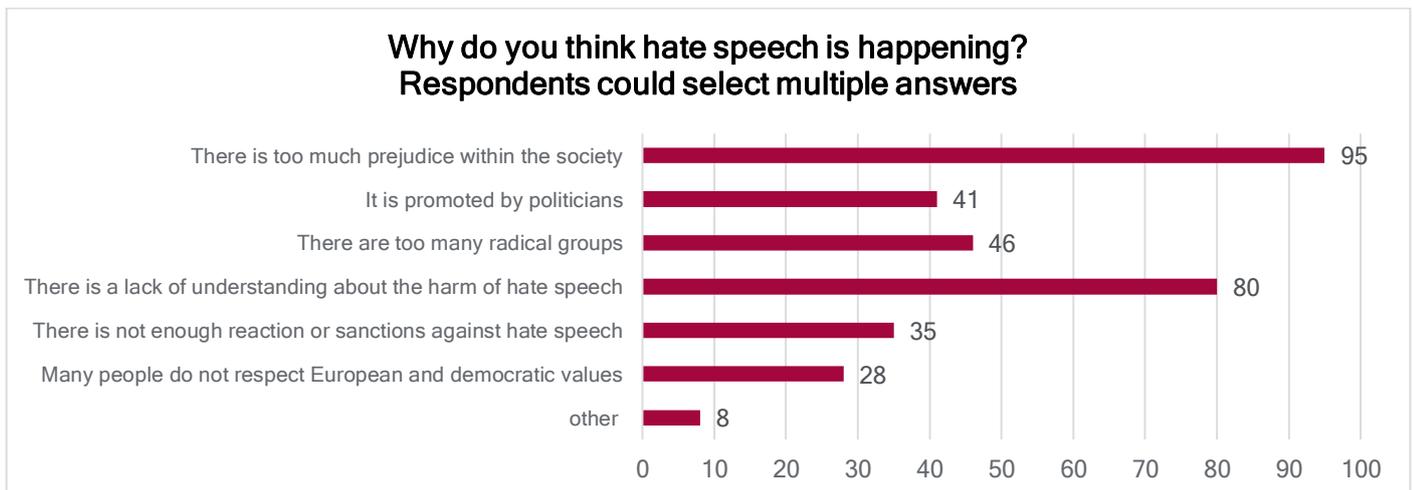
[4] Among the internet platforms, young people most often see hate speech on Facebook, Tiktok, Instagram, Youtube and different news websites.



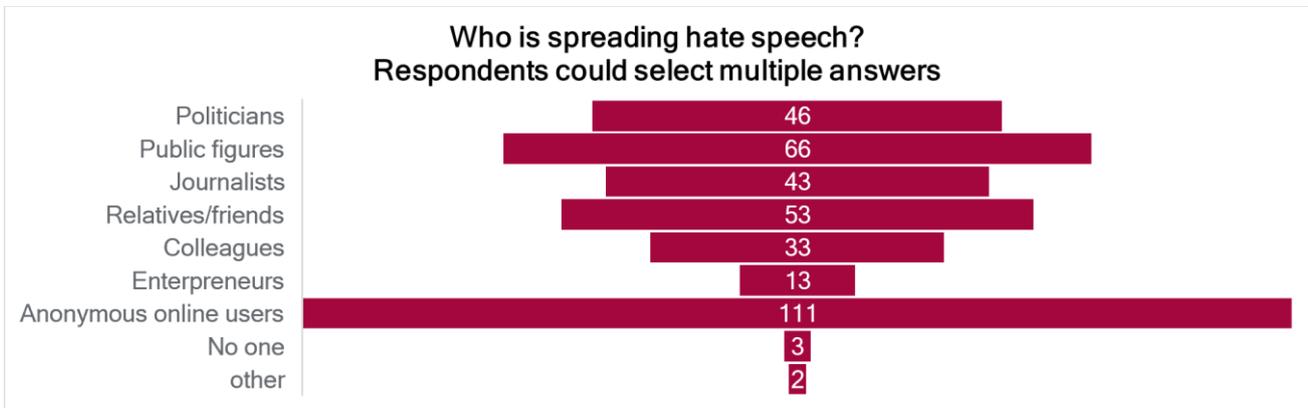
[5] 43% see or hear hate speech several times a month, 38% every week, 32% rarely, while 16% see or hear it every day.



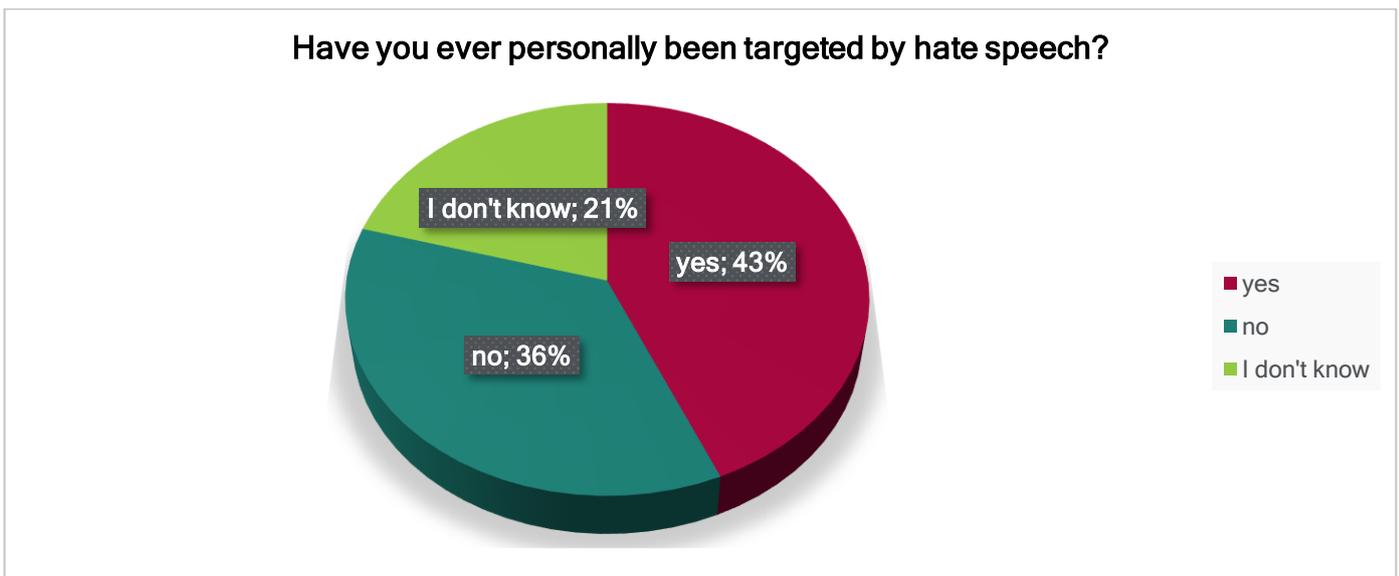
[6] Persuasive majority of respondents believes that hate speech is caused by too much prejudice in the society and lack of understanding of the harm of hate speech. Among other reasons respondents also mentioned that there are too many radical groups, hate speech is promoted by politicians, there is not enough sanctions or reaction to hate speech. 28 respondents also mentioned that many people do not respect European and democratic values.



[7] According to the majority of respondents most often hate speech is spread by online anonymous users, public figures, relatives and friends, politicians and journalists.

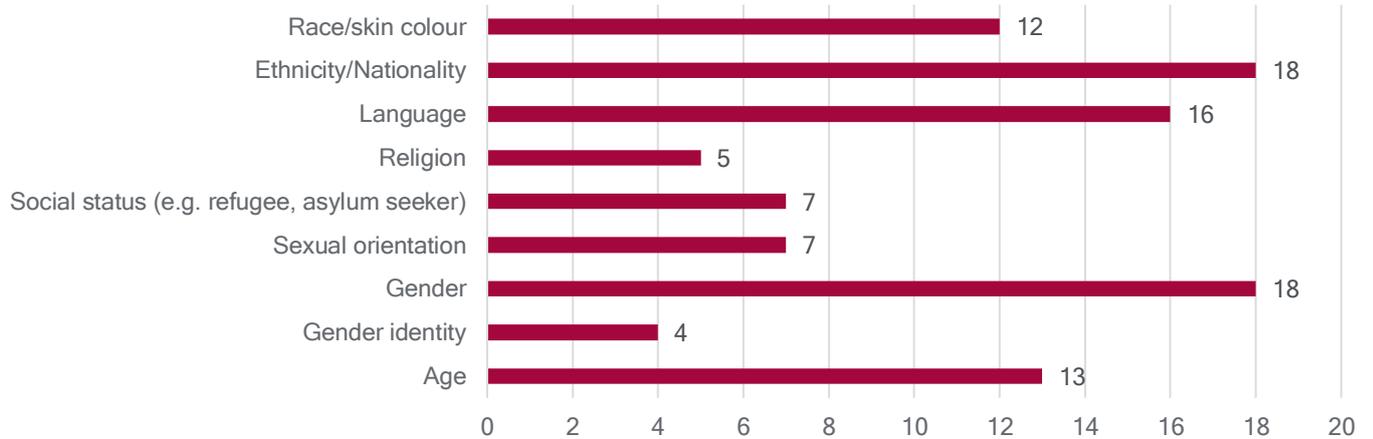


[8] 44% of young people personally were targeted by hate speech, while 21% don't know if they were targeted by hate speech.



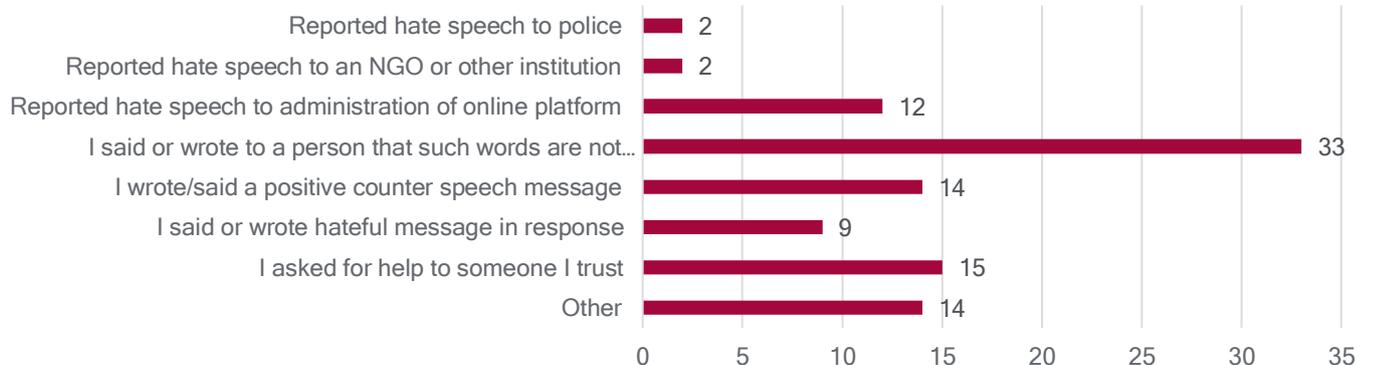
[9] 60% responded that their family members, friends, classmates, or colleagues have been targeted by hate speech. Among those who were personally targeted by hate speech, 18% mentioned that it was on the ground of ethnicity or nationality and gender, 16% on the ground of language, 13% because of age, 12% because of skin colour, 7% because of social status and sexual orientation, 5% on the ground of religion and 4% because of gender identity.

If you personally have been targeted by hate speech, what was the ground? (%)
Respondents could select multiple answers



[10] Half of the respondents did some action responding to hate speech. Most often young people choose to say or write that such words are not acceptable (33%). 15% asked for help to a trusted person, 14% wrote/said a positive counter speech message, 12% reported hate speech to administration of online platform, while 9% said or wrote hateful message in response.

How did you respond to hate speech? (%)
Respondents could select multiple answers



[11] In order to combat hate speech ¼ part of young people believe that it is important to educate about the harm of hate speech. 19% believe draw attention at responsibility of online platforms and that they should delete hate speech, while 14% believe that everyone should report hate speech to online platforms or police. 17% believe that young people have to take active role in prevention of hate speech.

What has to be done in order to combat hate speech? (%) Respondents could select multiple answers

