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MONITORING REPORT vol. 3







"Get the Trolls Out!" – Program to Encourage Young People to Combat Discrimination and Religious Intolerance in Europe This *Get the Trolls Out!* (GTTO) media monitoring report draws attention to the patterns of media performance in the coverage of issues that touch upon religion in Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, and the UK in 2020.

We have been documenting incidents of intolerance and xenophobia on new and traditional media platforms in Europe since 2015 but for the first time in 2020, a year defined by the outbreak of COVID-19 and a global pandemic, we were able to identify the extent to which mainstream and social media merge in the case of pandemic news. As the world struggled to control the pandemic, the broader problem of misinformation or, in the words of the World Health Organisation, 'infodemic' emerged. Fostered by the use of social media, which give them worldwide visibility and capacity to spread, it brought to light the growth of conspiracy theories and the importance of trustworthy information at the time of crisis.



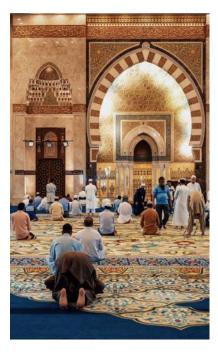
The rise of conspiracy theories and their relation to social media were addressed within the project by producing two additional reports in 2020: QAnon 2: Spreading conspiracy theories on Twitter. The first report found evidence that, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the QAnon conspiracy theory centres around a few fundamental assumptions, spreading claims that the global state

of lockdown is not about safety, but rather a means for political actors to take control. The report documented the QAnon presence in Europe and its links to religion-based discrimination. Specifically, the report found that that while much of the content monitored did not include overt antisemitism, many of those within the QAnon movement utilised antisemitic dog whistling. The second report examined the spread of conspiracy theories on Twitter, and the power of social media to promote and shape any given viewpoint by presenting information that supplements, expands, or localises its narrative.

In this GTTO report, we examine the ways media and religion intersect aiming to track down if and how the media performance and discriminatory talk change in the face of COVID-19 adversity. So far, we have documented stigmatisation of religious groups in pre-covid times and the 2020 monitoring project was approached as an opportunity to check if the major trends remain in the context of increased responsibilities related to the health crisis. Reporting on the pandemic and lockdowns, quarantines, financial and social hardships, requires socially responsible reporting of all and for all, one that informs without inducing fear and stress. The COVID-19 situation required inclusive reporting in the public interest, but how did it pen out at the end?

The 2020 monitoring report starts with a short reminder of the objectives of the project and the methods used. It is followed by the presentation of the major trends identified by looking at the selected media coverage of religion. We then focus on the issues identified by media monitoring team as most significant in the context within which discrimination and religious intolerance occur.









Objectives











The overall objective of the GTTO project is to identify discriminatory media texts through regular media monitoring and use the data to empower civil society organisations in Europe to counter intolerance and xenophobia targeting minority communities including Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities. Although the media landscapes in all six European countries involved in this project - Belgium, France, Germany, the UK, Hungary and Greece – significantly differ, it has been possible to set up a common framework for the analysis of anti-religious speech.

The monitoring is based on the premises that mainstream media reach the largest audience, have influence on decision makers and play a vital role in shaping public opinion.

The main criterion for selection of media to be monitored, as in all previous years, was the audience reach (circulation, number of viewers, listeners and number of views). Using key words that refer to religion and religious affiliation when selecting the sample, monitors collected data and analysed media content published on the main platforms (online pages of newspapers, radio, television, and online only news outlets), as well as the Facebook and Twitter accounts of these

organizations. Posts on the social media pages of mainstream organisations were used to identify individual posts that carried anti-religious messages.

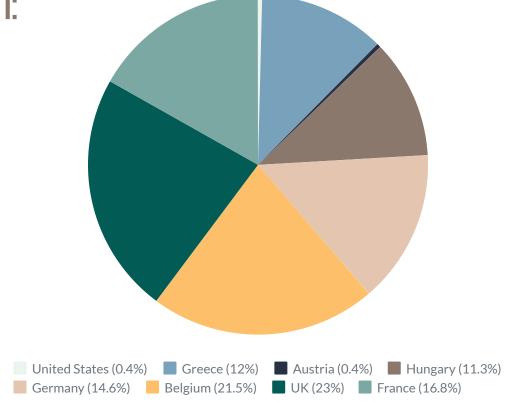
The media monitoring process generated data about the following aspects of reporting: date of publication, country, type of hatred speech, hate speech originator, type of content, description and context of the incident, details about the outlet, engagement level on Facebook and Twitter, if the incident was reported, could it be considered a criminal offence, and would a monitor report the hateful comment (on main platform or social media).

Data was collected and analysed in terms of the content and context of religious intolerance, as well as the production and reproduction of hate speech. Attention was paid specifically to the use of sources, dominant frames, newsgathering techniques, genre of the text, and language used. When it comes to the social media content, monitors examined comments and replies to the main text, number of likes, shares, replies, and background of the author. The objective was to provide information for creating counter narrative social media content.

FINDINGS:

There were 275 registered incidents over the monitoring period. This number of incidents is closer to what we registered in 2018 (310 incidents) than what was the case in 2019 (640 incidents). Having less incidents registered in 2020 was to be expected. The most dominant topic in the news was COVID-19 and while it was occasionally linked to religion, it most often was not.

Chart 1:



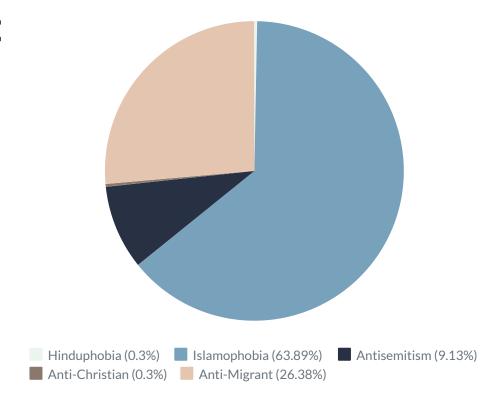




Religion

Present in 63.7 percent of the incidents recorded, Islamophobia remained the dominant type of religious hatred in the media content sample, followed by implied references to religion in anti-migrant and anti-refugee messages (26.3 percent). Disgraceful reporting on refugees and asylum seekers often went hand-in-hand with drawing connection to Muslims, making Islamophobic statements and narratives. The number of antisemitic incidents significantly dropped, from 21.2 percent in 2019 to 9.1 percent in 2020. This can be attributed to the topic that stirred majority of antisemitic texts in 2019: the Hungarian government decision to oust the Central European University from Budapest and the coverage that focused on its founder George Soros. By 2020 the CEU moved to Vienna, the story lost its currency and the right wing media's attention moved elsewhere.

Chart 2:

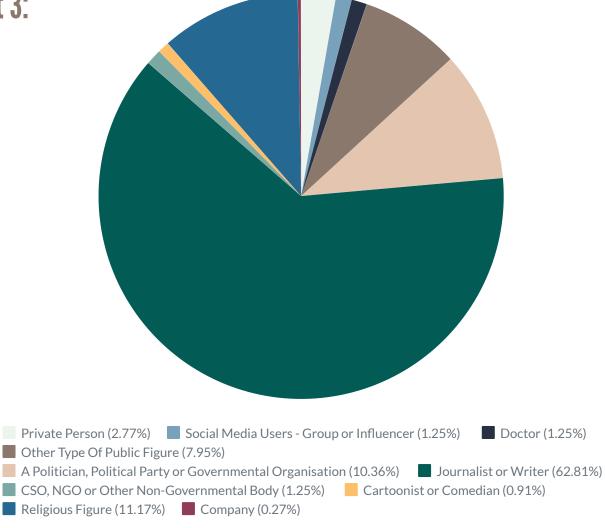




Perpetrators

In the previous report, we noted that the set of answers to the question 'who committed the discriminatory incident' has to be taken with caution because it only gives a snapshot of the chain of communicative events that underpins every news report - numerous conversations between journalist and editor, between journalist and source of information, between the source of information and his/her PR person and similar. Monitors discovered that journalists and writers of the text were the most dominant generator of offensive language on their own or in a dialogue with people they were reporting on (Chart 2). This has to be understood in the context of the communication space that allows an ongoing updating of the digital news text as well as a dialogue between both traditional and new media, and between the media and citizens.

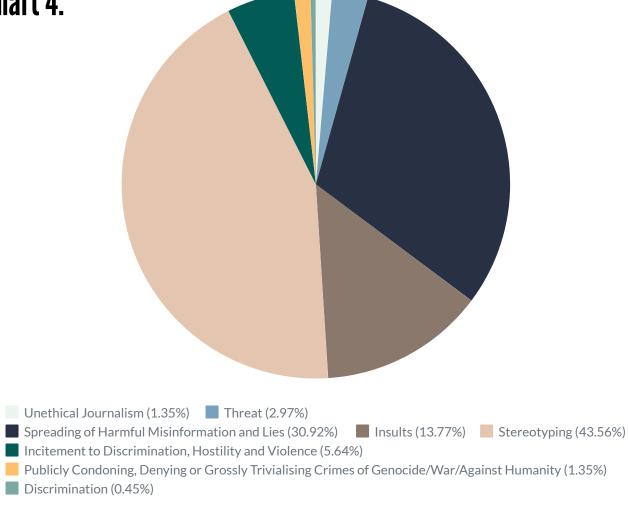




Types of Hatred

Our monitors looked at the nature of offensive statements. Stereotyping and spreading misinformation remained at the top of the list (Chart 4), highlighting and documenting the media's role in influencing prejudice within an increasingly diverse Europe. Stereotypes and personal beliefs were a starting point for derogatory talk towards religious minorities and in some cases making treats and insults as we will show in the second part of this report.







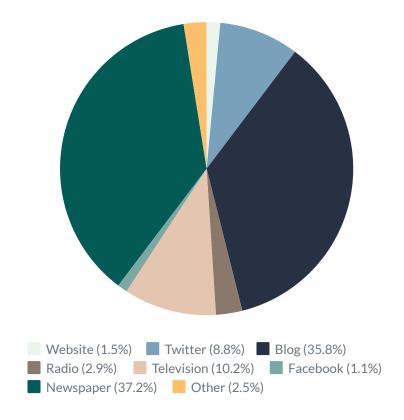
Platforms

When it comes to the type of medium offensive religious speech occurs (Chart 5), newspapers and blogs lead the list (37.2 and 35.8 percent), with Twitter incidents outgrowing Facebook post in this report (8.8 percent Twitter and 1.1 percent Facebook). Twitter has been described as a platform of preference for elites, and its use by public figures to disseminate anti-religious messages here confirms the trend. In the next monitoring period we will look closely at this finding.





Chart 5:

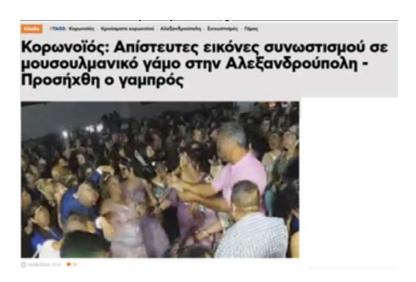


The quantitative part of media monitoring was conducted to identify major trends in problematic reporting about or on the religion. A relatively small sample of articles and focus on discriminatory incidents provide some insights but is by no means representative. The purpose of the GTTO media monitoring project was to generate material that would put anti-religious media language into the context of the dominant social issues at the time. The second part of the report, therefore, moves to the overview of media, religion, and social issues that dominated the year 2020.

COVID-19 and Media Coverage of Religion

The most contagious aspect of the COVID-19 crisis has been a surge of misinformation. While the long term social, political, economic, and psychological consequences of the pandemic are yet to be investigated, its media representation has already triggered significant scholarly attention (for example Gabore 2020[1], Chang and Liu 2021[2]) indicating the COVID-19 crisis has created an environment that has been rife for stigmatisation and prejudice toward social groups considered to be a 'threat' to society.

Our monitors in Greece highlighted an article from the highly popular Sunday newspaper Proto Thema about breaches of coronavirus rules at a wedding reception. The headline pointed out the religion of the bride and groom: "Coronavirus: Unspeakable images of crowds at a Muslim wedding in Alexandroupolis - The groom was arrested." (Proto Thema 14/08/2020). Stating that the people breaking the restrictions were Muslims was not relevant for the understanding of the story, yet, it was there to point a finger at Muslims disregarding the rules. What is interesting in this case is the editorial process. The original story was published on a regional news site, Evros-News. The religious affiliation of the people at the wedding was mentioned once in the original story, with no Islamophobic terms or covert disparaging comments attached. The Proto Thema editors decided to focus on the fact that the wedding reception, which did break COVID-19 rules, was a Muslim wedding reception, playing into Islamophobia tropes and narratives which have been more present in the Greek press and society in recent years.



Islamophobia

The rise of anti-Muslim sentiment has been attributed to the September 11 terrorist attacks and "a greater sense of fear among general population has exacerbated already existing prejudices and fuelled acts aggression and harassment in European Member States" 1 Historically. Islamophobia has been used to describe the anti-Muslim feelings of a mostly Christian population in Europe since immigrants from Muslim countries began arriving there in the early 14th century but the current attitudes have been examined mainly in the light of the rise of populist political parties that call for action against Muslim minorities in their countries, and their presence in the media. Two years ago, Belgian journalists reported the annual gathering of the nationalists' Flemish organization IJzerwake, with no hesitation to reprint the defamatory used Ilzerwake's talk chairman Wim de Wit, said that "in principle, freedom of expression still applies, except when it comes to Muslims, Negroes, holibi's [homosexual, lesbian and bisexual people, individuals, Transgender transvestites, Gypsies, feminists, certain politicians." (GTTO Report 2020).



To be a good reporter means to know the field, cultivate good sources, ask good questions, and then carefully craft the story (Cohen 2018). These credentials are a prerequisite for producing news stories that provide an accurate, factual, and truthful account of reality. Such accounts intended to assist in the healthy functioning of society, facilitate the formation of public opinion, and foster public engagement with day. That's code issues of the а understanding between journalists and the public, but how does it function in practice, and what happens when sources of news provide a distorted picture of reality, use derogatory language that fuels tensions and intolerance towards religious groups?



2. Cohen, Y. (2018). Spiritual News: Reporting Religion Around the World. Peter Lang: New York.

The GTTO monitors identified a number of news stories that proved the opposite. For example, Hungarian public service media Hirado's website published a piece "Research: Muslim people are willing to use force in order to defend their culture", which was also broadcast on national TV. The author framed the issue as an "insoluble conflict" between Muslims and the West, established correlation where it did not exist - the arrival of illegal immigrants and the increase of the number of violent crimes in Western Europe, including anti-Christian attacks - and by making a misleading statement such as one in the headline. The article mentioned a British survey by the Tony Blair Institute that states "15 percent of young British Muślims would even defend their culture and religion by force", but what it leaves out is that the study is about the scale of both Islamist and far-right extremism among British young people, and that also "9 percent of young White Non-Muslims would even defend their culture and religion by force". As a source, Hirado's journalist also interviews a researcher of Századvég, which is not an independent body, but political government-linked research institute. whose echo the immigration policies of the Fidesz government. In a similar vein, the government-friendly news site Origo published a story "Brussels set to settle down 34 million migrants in order to gain votes for the left" filled with anti-migrant and Islamophobic sentiment, misinformation, and unfounded claims. The article alleges, with no sources indicated, that the European Union plans on allowing the settlement of 34 million immigrants in order to gain more votes for liberal and leftist parties. The author claims that in newly revealed plans, immigrants would homeownership and financial support that will help them settle into the region. The article also suggests that Brussels' action is in line with George Soros' idea of "Open Societies", and that multinational companies have already been forced to ban displays of Christian symbols not to offend anyone. For the many claims made in the article, there are no sources cited. Some of the allegations in the article are serious, and it is extremely unprofessional and unethical to make such claims without providing evidence.

Twisting the facts to suit the narrative, identified on mainstream media platforms, has been a common feature in the political blogosphere since its inception. Germany, the online platform Compact Magazin published an article criticizing a local politician for allegedly pandering to Muslim voters. Our German monitors noted that the article attempts to stir up outrage among readers by framing these perceived "concessions" as advantageous for the mayoral candidate. The insinuation here is that the politician is selling out his country for a few votes. The article "Andreas Lipp, SPD candidate for mayor in Kerpen, goes a step further and, in view of waning support for the former workers' party, makes far-reaching concessions to Muslims to win their voters' favour: 'You are our future'." The article also employs the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory, and concludes the article in a sensationalist manner: "All that is missing is the promise to introduce the Sharia - the complete declaration of surrender - in Kerpen: after all, this is a city in North Rhine-Westphalia. the federal state with the highest percentage of Muslims, which the people sometimes call "North Rhine-Islamistan"....

The role of media in the social reproduction of islamophobia is particularly striking when it comes to the representation of Muslim women wearing headscarves. The 'veil affair' in the French media and its echo in Belgium dominated the headlines and social media discussions involving religion last year.

Headscarfs

Analysing the origin and social implications of anti-radicalisation laws in France and its media documented treatment. scholars have were instrumentalised rights women's in public debate and "how claims identifying the racist aspects of the law were ignored by the majority of media and politicians, in spite of the fact that this law affected mainly the Muslim community-thus fuellina division discrimination" (Navaro 2010).3 In 2011 France was the first country to ban all women from wearing any sort of veil in a public space. In 2014, this ban was upheld by the European Courts, which stated that the goal of the ban was to preserve the ideas of national integrity. In 2016, several of the coastal municipal towns imposed the burkini ban for Muslim women. In March 2021, the French senate voted for the "separatism bill" that aims to give the state the tools to fight Islamic radicalism and includes the ban on the headscarves as a means of 'empowering' women, that were seen as victims of their own culture. At the time of this report, the law is still to pass in National Assembly. French and mainstream media covered the story extensively.



3. Navarro, L. (2010). Islamophobia and sexism: Muslim women in the western mass media. *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, 8(2), 95-114.

Elisabeth Levy, Editor-in-Chief of the French magazine Causeur, conservative fostered harmful divisions between Muslims and the rest of French society by saying on the CNEWS, that Muslim women should have taken their headscarf off for a week in honour of Samuel Paty, the teacher beheaded for having shown caricatures of the prophet Muhammad during a lesson on free expression. Levy's suggestion that Muslim women should have removed the headscarf in honour of the teacher puts the blame of the attack on all Muslims and Muslim women as if wearing the headscarf was a sign of allegiance to terrorism. Far from being an isolated case, after the killing, journalists and figures have expressed public hostile Íslamophobic rhetoric, leaving Muslims France fearing further stigmatization.



The role of social media in further stigmatisation has been significant. For example, French network BFMTV produced for the start of new academic year video where Imane Boune, a 21-year-old food blogger, offered tips on cheap recipes for students on a tight budget. The video has been posted on Twitter too. Judith Waintraub, a journalist at the right-wing newspaper Le Figaro, retweeted it with the words: "11 September". The fact that the blogger was wearing a hijab and that the video was posted on the 11th of September, was enough for the journalist to draw a connection with the 9/11 attacks by the Islamist terrorist group Al-Qaeda. In doing so, Judith Waintraub equated the headscarf, and the religion of about 5 million people in France, to terrorism. Our French media monitoring team stresses that this incident makes it clear how, 19 years after the Twin Towers attack, Muslim communities are still suffering its consequences in the shape of stereotypes, stigmas, and discrimination.

Uniform policy, a policy which some parents felt was not inclusive of their culture. Writing on the blog The Conservative Woman, Ukip's free speech spokesman Jon Holbrook states: "When the child is saying 'I have a different race and culture to which the school must adapt' he is requiring the school to adapt to him. He is seeking a dispensation and privilege. But he ought to be adapting to the school, which is imposing a socially desirable norm." He also outlines some similar cases which involved the hijab. The issue here is the reference to a "socially desirable norm" that our UK monitor challenged asking: "Who decides what is desirable in society? And who decided that afro hair and hijabs are not desirable in society? Of course, different people have different opinions on this subject; however, when we talk about the media, we need to keep in mind journalistic ethics. The issue here is that this opinion is being stated as fact."

Immigration

The media coverage of immigration, a complex phenomenon that touches on a multiplicity of economic, social, security aspects, has always challenging. What started as empathetic concerns for 'immigrant workers' in the 70s in Europe, shifted towards the politics of fear, identified in the media's coverage of the Middle East and North African immigrant movement Europe. to Immigration is closely related to the issues of human rights and geopolitics, topics that journalists tend to avoid as being too complex to the application of conventional criteria of newsworthiness.



The case study from Hungary illustrates some of these challenges, mainly political pressure put on journalists to report in a certain manner. <u>Reporters at Hungary's</u> public broadcaster MTVA faced pressure and specific orders to push an antimigrant narrative, an investigation RFE/RL has revealed. Leaked material demonstrates that editors at MTVA instructed journalists on how to cover migration, and other topics including LGBTQ+ issues, climate change, parties opposition candidates. and Reporters at MTVA were given a migrantstory quota of at least one a day and were what tone to Stories use. migration had to be framed in a way that viewers would form a negative image of Instructions foreigners. were specific. Reporters were ordered to start with the most brutal visuals: example, a migrant who stabs kills, or screams 'Allahu Akbar.' ." Reporters were also prohibited from using the word 'refugee' in any context. Instead, they had to use 'migrant' even to refer to people officially who were granted refugee status. Our monitor in Hungary stressed that these findings confirm what Get the Trolls Out! has been denouncing since 2015: that the tough anti-immigration of the Fidesz-led Hungarian agenda government is reflected in the reporting of public service media.

The British tabloid press has been 'a model' for the form of reporting desired in the previous case. On 1 August 2020, the Daily published an article titled: "Muslims slaughter cattle, camels and sheep in bloody sacrifice to celebrate Eid al-Adha durina scaled back festivities because crisis". coronavirus The article focuses on Eid al-Adha, one of the most important festivals Muslim calendar, which is observed all over the world and includes the sacrificing of animals. While the of the coverage event newsworthy. this piece used sensationalistic and language images, reinforcing the false narrative that depicted Muslims as violent and barbaric. Christian religious festivals involve the killing of millions of turkeys and lambs, and yet hostile framing and wording are used only with Muslims.



- · WARNING: GRAPHIC CONTENT
- · Muslims who can afford it sacrifice cattle as part of the celebrations, as well as camels, goats, sheep or rams
- · The slaughtered animal meat is distributed to the poor to commemorate Abraham's sacrificing of his son
- · Mosques across the world have imposed hygiene rules to prevent the virus from spreading at Eid prayers

By MAILONLINE REPORTER

PUBLISHED: 16:56, 1 August 2020 | UPDATED: 17:16, 6 August 2020



















The last trend we would like to emphasise in the 2020 Get The Trolls Out! report is the rise and power of right-wing blogs to influence not only social media discussions, as became obvious in our previous reports, but to set up the agenda for the mainstream media. The 'intermedia agenda setting', a process in which different media organisations give each other issue attention by citing reporting on the issue, has been so far mainly contained on an exchange of texts between mainstream news organisations. Last year study of intermedia agenda-setting in the Scandinavian countries Sweden, and Denmark 4 Norway, documented that the process now includes right-wing alternative media outlets and online mainstream newspapers. monitors from Germany have been highlighting the issue since the beginning of GTTO and last year provided a number of examples both in Germany and other countries.



4. Nygaard, S. (2020). Boundary work: Intermedia agenda-setting between right-wing alternative media and professional journalism. *Journalism Studies*, *21*(6), 766-782.

Right-wing Blogs

In November 2020, Anabel Schunke who describes herself as a freelance journalist published in Die Achse des Guten (achgut.com) and Tichys Einblick but also published in ÈMMA-Onliné and Huffington Post Germany, <u>authored a</u> post for right-leaning blog Achgut.com titled: "There Is No More Protection". The article claimed that Muslims posed a threat to public safety in Germany. The focus of the article was a YouTube video created by Fayez Kanfash, in which a person dressed in traditional Arab clothing is leading another person through Berlin. The second person is wearing a Macron mask, a blonde wig, and is bound with ropes. In several instances throughout the video, the leading person sets Macron masks on fire. In response to this provocative video, the author claimed: "The case exemplifies that the German state is neither willing nor able to protect its citizens from people who openly reject the free democratic basic order of the Federal Republic Germany. Moreover, the reasons for this raise the guestion of whether the security of an asylum seeker, even if he poses a threat to this society and values, is worth more than that of its own citizens." Schunke seems to be taking her criticism of the individual who produced the video and applying it to all asylum seekers in Germany, furthering the us vs. them narrative. Schunke also states: "The problem with the fight against Islamism is that there is no sharp dividing line between Islamism on the one hand and Islam, which the majority of Muslims also practice in this country. Thus, the problem does not lie solely with the few extremist lone wolves who are actually willing to cut off the head of someone who insults their religion, but with the many who sympathize with the perpetrators and justify the acts." The article was posted on a blog, used YouTube material, and amassed 5.480 total interactions on Facebook.



Successful right-wing bloggers are getting attention and over time some of them developed into online news outlets and even agencies. The take on the issues and the style remain the same but the media status increases. In Greece, a news site, Newsbreak.gr, published an opinion piece by Faelos Kranidiotis, leader of the far-right party New Right (Nea Dexia), which used strong and abusive language against Muslims. The piece, titled "The threat is called Islam", said: "The EU, together with us, is watering the tree on which we will be hung. We also give them the rope. We subsidize the suicide of European nations". The author claimed refugees and asylum seekers lied about the persecutions they faced in their countries of origin ("they [NGOs] will even advise you what lies to tell about your origin and fantastic stories of persecution and adversity"), and then smears them for benefitting of European welfare systems and civil rights "if you stick to Greece for a long time, you will not be killed at work, nor will you be forced".

Hungary, news agency V4NA, which aim to give conservative, right wing perspective of the key political, economical, cultural and other news critical to the EU and "Liberals world," published a Sacrifice storv to Christmas." itself The article talked mainly environmentalists' fears around Christmas trees and the harm this may cause the planet, which V4NA suggested was actually a tactic rooted in Communism which aimed to get rid of Christmas. In the opening paragraph, the author also stated: "Christmas trees may also be viewed as hurtful by immigrants." sensitive Muslim Hungarian commented that nowhere further in the article was this claim elaborated on. Together with Hungarian platform 444.hu, Get the Trolls Out! partner the Center for Independent Journalism (CIJ) published a report within the project which analysed content from V4NA to understand more about the sensationalist messages they attempt to spread.

The GTTO monthly highlights provide a range of other examples of the influence of right-wing groups on the content of mainstream media. For example, national TV channel C8 has invited Thaïs D'Escufon, representative of the far-right group Génération Identitaire (Generation Identity), to speak on their evening show "Balance ton post". This came after the group went to the Col de Portillion pass on the border of France and Spain to create their own surveillance operation to "defend Europe" from migration. C8, which belongs to the same editorial group as the far-right channel CNEWS, interviewed D'Escufon, giving a nationwide platform to a white supremacist group. Licra, Get the Trolls Out! partner in France, was among the organizations that denounced D'Escufon's invitation, arguing that presenting anti-Muslim and racist conspiracy theories has "The factional far-right harmful effects. thanks you for the publicity and audience you offer to them. Obviously, the intrusion in the Capitol by Trump's rioters did not give you any lesson", Licra tweeted. After pressure from civil society organisations, France's Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin announced the dissolution of the group due to their anti-migrant and anti-Muslim operations that incite racial hatred.

Conclusions

Islamophobia remained the dominant type of religious hatred in the media content sample in 2020. Usually linked to the negative coverage of the immigration, Islamophobia emerged last year in the reports on the legislative changes in France related to the veil and in Belgium, related to public uniforms.

The main finding of the 2020 report is the rising influence of right-wing blogs whose content has been used, shared, and promoted both on social media and in mainstream media content. We will examine if this trend continues in 2021 and if so, focus on the context within which the intermedia agendasetting as a mechanism that underpins media hate speech occurs.

This report, along with the GTTO database, supports the production of counter-narratives and dynamic social media engagement by all partners and their partners in numerous other activities run by the civil society organizations involved in the project. We believe that documenting incidents provides evidence and generates knowledge about the ways traditional and social media contribute implicated and to antireligious discourse.



The "Get The Trolls Out" campaign is led by the Media Diversity Institute from the UK, with the support of Center for Independent Journalism from Hungary, The International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism from France, Karpos from Greece, Amadeu Antonio Stiftung from Germany and European Union of Jewish Students and ENORB from Belgium.

The GTTO campaign harnesses the power of social media to disseminate innovative media outputs and generates dialogue in order to deliver a powerful counter-narrative against diverse forms of hate speech, including antisemitism, Islamophobia and anti-Christian sentiment.



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