

GENDER EQUALITY, FEMINISM and the Fight Against FEMICIDE

Balkan Talks
Special Issue

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**OPEN SOCIETY
FOUNDATIONS**
WESTERN BALKANS



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IMPRESSUM

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Table of Contents

Editor's Foreword.....	10
------------------------	----

Balkan Talkers in the Institutional Arena	16
--	-----------

Edit Babameto, Angela Dimovska and Jana Krstić: <i>Recognising Femicide as a Standalone Crime: Policy and Advocacy Recommendations from Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia</i>	18
--	----

Balkan Talkers and the Socially Engaged Academia of the Future: Research Essays	66
--	-----------

Silvia Fabijanić: <i>Women's function as change agents in nonviolent protests in Ukraine and the Balkan states</i>	68
--	----

Ema Selimović: <i>Letters Across a Vanishing Country: Epistolary Exchange as a Site of Feminist Transnational Counter-discourse in the Dissolution of Yugoslavia</i>	84
--	----

Teodora Milovanović: <i>"Biological Predisposition" and Media Pressure on Motherhood: An Analysis of Journalistic Code Violations in Serbia Based on Digital Portals</i>	124
--	-----

Balkan Talkers Talk Change: *Opinion Pieces*..... 146

Jana Krstić: *The Limits of Justice: Wartime Sexual Violence After the Yugoslav Wars*148

Dunja Stojanović: *Kindred or Succession: Sex-selective abortions in Montenegro*157

Lora Zaharievska: *How many women must die in North Macedonia before institutions act?*163

Milica Marković: *The Reality of Femicide in Serbia – The Crime That Hurts Everyone*.....170

Almin Šemić: *When the System Pulls the Trigger: The Femicide of Aldina Jahić and Institutional Failure in Bosnia and Herzegovina*185

Nina Anžić: *Women in Slovenian Politics*188

Tao Romevo: *Women, Tobacco and Smoking in Bulgaria*.....191

Stamena Kozić: *Flattery or Erasure: Recognising Unhealthy Admiration*.....199

Jovana Petković: *Generative AI cannot be feminist*202

Bojana Vuletić: <i>Beyond the Rainbow: Why Visibility Without Solidarity Is Never Enough</i>	215
--	-----

Balkan Talkers Talk with Others: Interviews 222

Mary Drosopoulos: <i>Borders of Solidarity: Balkan Women Authors and Their Advocacy for Palestine</i>	224
---	-----

Orida Dajko: <i>From Education to Activism: Brisilda Taço's Journey for Roma Women's Empowerment in Albania</i>	231
---	-----

Balkan Talkers Speak in Verse: Poetry (published in the original language) 234

Aleksandra Đorđević:	
Pleši.....	236
Posmatrač.....	238
Dan	239

Jana Krstić:	
trans džender	241
brkovi	242
recept.....	243
pomen	244

Balkan Talkers Recommend: Reviews	246
Milica Jovanov: <i>Why Every Girl Should Know About Girl Programmers</i>	<i>248</i>
Almin Šemić: <i>Why Everyone Should See The Cell.....</i>	<i>251</i>
Eirini Tsordia: <i>Hive (2021): Women's Voices in Contemporary Balkan Cinema</i>	<i>253</i>
 Let's Keep Balkan Talking	 257

Editor's Foreword

Some publications emerge because a topic is timely. And then some emerge because remaining silent would mean accepting the world as it is.

This special issue belongs to the latter.

Gender equality, feminism, and femicide are not merely academic concepts or policy questions. They are lived realities that shape the everyday lives of millions of people across the Western Balkans. They determine who feels safe, whose voice is heard, whose work is valued, whose body is respected, and whose life is mourned only after it has already been lost. These questions concern all of us, not only policymakers, researchers, activists or institutions, but everyone who believes that democracy cannot exist without justice, and that justice cannot exist without equality.

This publication was created for precisely that reason.

The texts gathered here were written over the past year by high school students, university students, and young researchers from across the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe. In this issue, their voices come from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, France, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. Each contribution reflects a different experience, discipline, methodology, and writing style. Yet they all share one common conviction: that young people not only have something important to say about the societies they inhabit, but are already actively participating in changing them.

Many of these texts originated within the Balkan courses of the Invisible University for Ukraine, a Central European University programme bringing together students from Ukraine and the Balkans. It was within that programme that Balkan Talks itself was born in 2024, not as an institutional

project but as a grassroots initiative by young people seeking to create a space where authentic regional voices could exist beyond national borders and academic hierarchies.

What began as a small student initiative soon became something much larger.

As more young authors joined us, Balkan Talks gradually evolved into a community. A community of writers, researchers, artists, activists, students, and readers who recognised that they shared not only geographical proximity, but also similar concerns, hopes, frustrations, and visions for the future. This publication is, therefore, not simply a collection of texts. It is a conversation between young people across borders. It is this community that speaks to you through the pages that follow.

Although Balkan Talks was founded only in 2024, its significance quickly extended beyond the editorial collective itself. In 2026, our work was recognised with the Regional Jelena Šantić Award – “For Courageous Steps”, presented by the Jelena Šantić Foundation from Serbia and the CURE Foundation from Bosnia and Herzegovina to initiatives that contribute to peacebuilding, human rights, solidarity, and reconciliation through courageous civic engagement. Balkan Talks received the Special Recognition for creating a space where young people speak openly about the legacies of war and discrimination, and about building more just societies. For us, this recognition was never merely an award. It affirmed that spaces built on solidarity, volunteerism, and trust can become meaningful public platforms for a new generation to reimagine the region’s future.

Perhaps the most important thing to understand about Balkan Talks is that it has always been, and remains, a completely volunteer-driven initiative. Every article published on our platform, every editorial decision, every interview,

every translation, every illustration, every line of code, every design element, every social media campaign, and now every page of this publication exists because young people from the region decided that such a space deserved to exist. There are no salaries behind these pages. There is only enthusiasm, solidarity, countless hours of dedication, and the shared belief that social justice and peace are worth building together.

At the heart of this special issue stands a comprehensive policy paper advocating for the legal recognition of femicide as a distinct criminal offence within the Open Balkan countries - Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The paper combines legal analysis, comparative research and policy recommendations with the hope of contributing to ongoing regional discussions about institutional responses to gender-based killings. Complementing the policy paper are research essays and opinion pieces examining femicide from legal, philosophical, sociological, feminist, and media perspectives.

Yet this publication was never intended to become only a policy-oriented collection.

After the policy paper, readers will encounter research articles, essays, interviews, reviews, opinion pieces, and even poetry. This diversity was a deliberate editorial choice. From the very beginning, we refused to impose narrow thematic or stylistic boundaries on young authors. At Balkan Talks, contributors choose the questions they consider most urgent, because genuine public dialogue cannot be curated through rigid agendas. Freedom of expression also means allowing different genres, methodologies, and forms of knowledge to coexist.

Over the past two years, however, we have noticed something remarkable.

Although authors were always free to write about any

topic, certain themes repeatedly emerged. Questions of gender equality appeared again and again. So did the legacies of war, peacebuilding, feminist anti-war movements, historical memory, and the ongoing struggle against nationalism. None of these themes was editorially assigned. Young people themselves consistently returned to them, revealing what continues to shape everyday life in the region long after the conflicts formally ended.

This issue reflects precisely those concerns.

Alongside discussions of femicide, readers will encounter analyses of feminist anti-war activism, wartime and post-war sexual violence, media representations of women, particularly young women, women's political participation, critiques of nationalist narratives, and critical examinations of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence and the inequalities they reproduce. Although these topics may initially appear distinct, they are united by one central question: what kind of societies do we wish to build, and who gets to participate in shaping them?

One of the most striking characteristics of the texts collected here is their style.

Readers accustomed to conventional academic journals may notice that many of these contributions do not aspire to detached neutrality or bureaucratic objectivity. They are personal without becoming anecdotal, critical without abandoning evidence, emotional without sacrificing intellectual rigour. Over time, this has become one of the defining characteristics of Balkan Talks as well.

We have learned that young people who genuinely seek to transform their societies rarely write from a distance. Traditional epistemologies often encourage the illusion of complete objectivity, separating knowledge from lived experience. Yet

the authors gathered in this volume remind us that knowledge is also situated, embodied, and deeply connected to questions of justice. Those who participate in social change cannot always afford the comfort of emotional detachment. Their writing carries urgency because the realities they describe are not abstract research subjects - they are the conditions under which they themselves live.

Perhaps this is exactly what contemporary scholarship needs more of: not less evidence, but more courage; not fewer emotions, but greater responsibility; not the abandonment of academic standards, but the recognition that intellectual work and social engagement need not stand in opposition to one another.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the professors of the IUFU programme, whose continuous support over the past two years has made Balkan Talks possible in more ways than one.

My sincere thanks also go to my colleagues from the editorial board - Bojana Vuletić, Irene Tsordia, and Tao Romevo - whose dedication, generosity, and countless hours of volunteer work continue to sustain this journal every single day.

Special thanks are due to Antonio Nojić, who voluntarily maintains the Balkan Talks website; to Jelena Jaćim Jaćimović and Emilija Krstić for their invaluable design contributions; and to Jovana Petković, whose expertise in social media has played a crucial role in bringing Balkan Talks closer to thousands of young people throughout the region.

Finally, we are deeply grateful to SCiDEV (Albania), the Youth Educational Forum (North Macedonia), and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights Serbia for supporting the printing and publication of this special issue through a project funded by the Open Society Foundation. Their support made it

possible for these voices to travel beyond digital spaces and become part of a publication that we hope will inspire new conversations, new research, and new forms of regional solidarity.

This issue is not intended to offer the final word on gender justice in the Western Balkans.

It is an invitation: to read, to question, to disagree, to continue researching, and above all, to keep listening to the voices of young people who refuse to inherit silence.

Jana Krstić Editor-in-Chief, Balkan Talks



Balkan Talkers in the Institutional Arena

Recognising Femicide as a Standalone Crime: Policy and Advocacy Recommendations from Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia

Authors: Edit Babameto, Angela Dimovska and Jana Krstić

Executive Summary

This policy paper examines the institutional and legal gaps in femicide legislation and implementation in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Prompted by repeated killings of women in the three countries and the inadequate protection available to women facing abuse, this research reviews each country's legal framework, the institutional barriers victims encounter, and outlines illustrative cases and the media's role in shaping public perception.

The research shows that North Macedonia is the only country out of the three to have introduced femicide into its Criminal Code, yet implementation and monitoring lag behind. Albania and Serbia have not criminalised femicide, despite explicit recommendations from international monitoring bodies, and killings of women continue to be prosecuted under gender-neutral homicide provisions. All three countries display similar patterns in prosecutorial failures, lack of adequate protections, weak risk assessment, unreliable data, harmful media reporting, and a civil society sector carrying responsibilities that belong to the state.

This paper concludes with country-specific recommendations for improving protections for victims of gender-based violence within their respective contexts. For North Macedonia, these focus on the implementation and monitoring of the existing law, taking into account the difficulties

faced by ethnic minorities and the influence of media coverage. For Albania, they centre on amending its Criminal Code, assuming state responsibility, and introducing mandatory risk assessments for reports of abuse. For Serbia, they call for a national femicide monitoring mechanism, stronger regulations for media and ethical reporting, and improved risk assessment. This paper is intended as a blueprint for femicide advocacy to institutions, authorities and the general public.

List of Acronyms

AIRE (Centre) Europe Centre	The Advice on Individual Rights in
AWEN Network	Albanian Women Empowerment
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All
Forms of Discrimination Against Women	
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DV	Domestic Violence
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GREVIO	Group of Experts on Action against
Violence against Women and Domestic Violence	
KMD	Commissioner for Protection from
Discrimination (Albania)	
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UN	United Nations
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender
Equality and the Empowerment of Women	
UNDP	United Nations Development
Programme	
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and
Crime	

1. Introduction

The crime of femicide – the intentional killing of women and girls because of their gender – represents the most extreme, brutal, and irreversible manifestation of patriarchal violence. Globally, a woman or girl is killed every ten minutes, predominantly by individuals known to them, often within the supposed safety of their own homes (UN Women, 2025c). In the Western Balkans, femicide is a critical issue that has been systemically overlooked by institutions and relevant actors alike. This crisis assumes a deeply localised and culturally rooted dimension, where historical patriarchal structures, systemic institutional failures, and profound gaps in the legal framework allow a preventable epidemic to persist. The urgency of addressing this phenomenon extends far beyond academic observation; it demands immediate emotional resonance, cross-border solidarity, and decisive policy disruption.

Across Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, civil society organisations, activists, and youth networks have increasingly mobilised to demand that the state cease treating the murder of women as standard homicide or generic domestic violence (Beker, 2023). Their core argument is that a legal system incapable of naming a crime is inherently incapable of preventing it. Obscuring gender-based killings behind gender-neutral terminology erases the motive behind these deaths, distorts official statistics, and prevents the allocation of resources for prevention (UN Women, 2025c).

This analysis examines the socio-legal landscape of femicide in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, contextualised within a broader regional advocacy initiative involving researchers and youth leaders from across the Western Balkans. By dissecting the statistical realities, the tragic human narratives,

the specific deficiencies in the current Criminal Codes, and the binding international obligations established by mechanisms such as the Istanbul Convention and the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), a clear roadmap for legal reform and public advocacy emerges. The synthesis of rigorous policy analysis with emotionally resonant, youth-driven digital advocacy forms the foundation of a modern strategy to combat gender-based violence, shifting the paradigm from passive research to active, systemic disruption.

The genesis of this policy paper lies in a fundamental reassessment of how advocacy regarding gender-based violence must be conducted in the Western Balkans. For decades, academic institutions and non-governmental organisations have produced extensive research documenting the frequency of domestic violence, the gaps in legal frameworks, and the cultural normalisation of misogyny (Beker, 2023). However, consultations with frontline regional actors have revealed a critical strategic insight: conducting new, exhaustive academic research from the ground up yields diminishing returns. The data that can realistically be collected within the current fragmented institutional frameworks has already been gathered by these organisations. For many other aspects of gender-based violence, official data simply does not exist because the states have failed to create the necessary legal definitions and tracking mechanisms to capture it. Faced with this reality, the mandate for contemporary researchers and youth leaders has shifted. The most urgent requirement is no longer the passive accumulation of sociological data, but rather active contribution to the struggle itself through highly visible, cross-border advocacy. Legal reform regarding gender-based violence is not merely a technical legislative exercise; it

is a battle for the public narrative, and youth-led advocacy is the pioneer of that battle.

This paper begins with clarifying what the term femicide entails, then examines each country's legal framework, its implementation in practice, and the media environment surrounding femicide cases. A regional comparison follows, and the brief closes with policy recommendations addressed to the institutions responsible for reform.

2. Defining Femicide

The term “femicide” was first coined in 1801, and, at its most basic, it denoted the killing of women; it garnered significant traction with its reintroduction in 1976 by feminist scholar Diana E.H. Russell (Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability, 2026). The most recent definition, which was presented at the United Nations Symposium on Femicide in 2012, describes femicide as “the killing of one or more females by one or more males because they are female” (ibid.). However, the definition still undergoes variation depending on country or world region, making it difficult to find a universally accepted conceptualisation of femicide (ibid.). Reaching a consensus on the definition is critical since it could describe, report, prevent, and eradicate femicide (Grzyb et al., 2018, p. 18).

At the time of writing, there is no definition specifically for the Western Balkans context. For the purpose of our analysis, femicide will be understood as the killing of a woman specifically because of her gender identity (The AIRE Centre [AIRE], 2023a, p. 10). As per this definition, there are certain criteria that need to be met for a crime to be defined as femicide from a legal standpoint: particularly, the murder committed

needs to be intentional, with a clear gender motivation, with consideration that the victim is always female (AIRE, 2023a, p. 11). The manifestation of femicide can come as a result of societal and patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes and discrimination against women in social positions (ibid.).

Scholars distinguish between direct and indirect femicides. Direct femicides include honour killings, intimate partner violence and dowry killings; while indirect femicides come as a result of unsafe abortion practices, human trafficking and organised crimes (AIRE, 2023a, pp. 11-12). Intersecting factors such as race, age, ethnicity and geographic location place particular groups of women and girls at heightened risk, and definitions that ignore them exclude women who experience intersectional forms of gender-based violence (Hefti, 2022, pp. 247-248). These distinctions matter for the Western Balkans: they provide the yardstick against which the region's legal frameworks – including North Macedonia's, currently the only femicide law in the region – must be measured. At the heart of the advocacy effort across the Western Balkans is the demand for the legal recognition of femicide as a distinct, unique conceptual crime requiring specialised judicial treatment.

3. Femicide in Albania

The Legal Void: The Unwillingness to Name the Crime

The Albanian Criminal Code (Law No. 7895, heavily amended over subsequent decades) contains no specific provision, article, or clause that defines or criminalises femicide (Kaçupi, 2026, pp. 61-69). Instead, killings of women are prosecuted under generalised provisions for crimes against life, forcing a profoundly gendered crime into a gender-neutral

legal framework.

When a woman is murdered because of her gender in Albania, prosecutors are forced to rely on a patchwork of standard homicide articles. These include Article 76 (Intentional murder), Article 77 (Intentional murder in connection with another crime), Article 78 (Premeditated murder), and Article 79 (Murder under other qualifying circumstances) (UN Women, 2024b). Recognising the need to address the high rates of violence occurring within the home, the Albanian legislature passed a significant amendment in 2013, introducing Article 79/c, which explicitly criminalises “murder due to family relationships” with penalties of twenty years to life imprisonment (Kaçupi, 2026; UN Women, 2023c).

While the introduction of Article 79/c was championed at the time as a necessary step forward in acknowledging the domestic context of many homicides, it falls short of addressing femicide because it focuses exclusively on the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, ignoring the gender-based motivation behind the killing. Femicide is not defined merely by where it happens or who commits it; it is defined by the misogynistic intent – the killing of a woman because she is a woman, rooted in systemic patriarchal power imbalances. Under the current framework, a woman murdered by a stalker, a rejected suitor, a client in the sex industry, or an acquaintance motivated by extreme misogyny or so-called cultural “honour” would not fall under the severe protections of Article 79/c if no legally recognised family or intimate relationship existed. Consequently, the law creates an artificial hierarchy of victims, where gender-based killings outside the domestic sphere are treated as standard homicides, stripping the crime of its context and failing to hold the perpetrator accountable for the specific misogynistic nature of the act.

The legal “invisibility” weakens the justice process in three ways. Without a clear legal definition requiring courts to examine the pattern of abuse, controlling behaviour, and gender-based power dynamics that usually lead up to the killing, judicial decisions can easily be influenced by entrenched gender stereotypes. This paves the way for defence attorneys to successfully exploit this legal void by relying on traditional interpretations of homicide, arguing for mitigating circumstances such as “crimes of passion”, sudden emotional distress, or provocation. The absence of a standalone crime also actively undermines the state’s ability to generate disaggregated data necessary for public policy. When a gender-based murder is prosecuted simply as an “aggravating circumstance” or a “family relation” homicide, the specific misogynistic nature of the crime is buried in generalised judicial statistics. As regional legal experts at the AIRE Centre have noted, it masks a societal crisis behind neutral legal terminology, obstructing the allocation of adequate resources for prevention (Vojinović, 2024).

Despite intense pressure from civil society and evidence of the law’s inadequacy, domestic legislative reform has stalled, reflecting a lack of political will. The draft revision of the Criminal Code was debated through 2025 and early 2026, but ultimately failed to introduce femicide as a distinct offence, with civil society organisations observing that femicide provisions were sidelined in a legislative debate dominated by defamation and press-freedom controversies (GOV.UK, 2026).

The Istanbul Convention, GREVIO, and CEDAW in Albania

The shortcomings of the Albanian Criminal Code place the country in breach of its binding international commitments

under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, universally known as the Istanbul Convention. Article 46 of the Istanbul Convention mandates that factors such as offences against a current or former partner, repeated offences, and offences committed in the presence of a child be treated as aggravating circumstances in the determination of criminal sentences (Council of Europe, 2011). Article 42 prohibits invoking culture, custom, religion, tradition, or “honour” as acceptable justifications for acts of violence (Council of Europe, 2011). While Albania has attempted to integrate some of these aggravating factors into the general part of its Criminal Code, extensive comparative legal analyses conclude that this integration remains incomplete, ambiguous, and fails to explicitly mandate the rigorous, gender-sensitive judicial evaluation required for lethal violence (Kaçupi, 2026, pp. 61-69).

The failure to comply with these standards has been noted by the international community. The Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), the independent human rights monitoring body mandated to oversee the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, conducted its first thematic evaluation of Albania, publishing a report in September 2024, which, documented high attrition rates, systemic delays and low conviction rates that undermine victims’ trust; a critical absence of standardised, multi-agency risk assessment tools; and protection orders routinely breached by perpetrators and inadequately monitored by police, rendering them largely ineffective in practice (GREVIO 2024; UN Women 2024b). GREVIO also urged Albania to align its criminal law with the

Convention – including replacing force-based definitions of sexual violence with the consent-based standard of Article 36 – and to establish retrospective reviews of gender-based killings (domestic homicide reviews) to hold state agencies accountable for failures to protect.

The CEDAW Committee reached similar conclusions in its 2023 concluding observations, recommending that Albania amend its Criminal Code to “specifically criminalise femicide and cyberviolence” and strengthen the criminal law response to all forms of gender-based violence against women. Together, the findings of the CEDAW Committee and GREVIO point to a clear international consensus that the current Albanian legal framework remains inadequate.

On the Ground: Review of a Notable Case

Femicide in Albania is rarely an isolated eruption of violence; it is the fatal culmination of a continuum of abuse, coercive control and institutional negligence. The Dan Hutra case of March 2023 illustrates this with brutal clarity. Hutra had been convicted of rape and hostage-taking in 2003 and of murdering his ex-wife in 2007, for which he served 16 years; rearrested in 2022 for violence against a new partner, he spent only months in custody. Released on 16 February 2023, he acquired an AK-47 – exposing, in the process, a serious gap in firearms regulation – and within two weeks shot four women, killing three (Taylor, 2023). The case triggered mass protests outside the Ministry of Justice, with placards reading “I am three years old, 23 Albanian women have been murdered in my lifetime” and chants of “Women are killed, the state is silent”. Since 2022, activists have annually replaced the names of 20 streets in Tirana with the names of women murdered the

previous year, and March 8 marches have adopted the slogan “We march, we don’t celebrate” (Çibuku, 2025).

The continuum of violence extends into the digital sphere: 41% of women and girls active online in Albania have experienced at least one form of digital violence, and preliminary findings from the 2024 Femicide Report link online blackmail and sustained psychological pressure to the suicides of at least two women (UN Women Albania, 2025b).

The Statistical Reality of Femicide in Albania

To build the case for the criminalisation of femicide, emotional narratives must be rigorously anchored in empirical evidence. For years, the absence of a distinct legal definition of femicide in the Albanian Criminal Code resulted in statistical invisibility that minimised the gendered nature of the violence. However, the establishment of the Observatory on Femicide by the Ombudsperson (People’s Advocate) of Albania in March 2024, supported by UN Women and the Government of Sweden, marked a critical turning point in the standardisation of data collection and institutional accountability (GOV.UK, 2026).

The Observatory bypasses the limitations of the domestic Criminal Code by applying the “Statistical Framework for Measuring the Gender-Related Killing of Women and Girls”, developed globally by UNODC and UN Women to analyse and categorise homicides in Albania (UNODC and UN Women, 2025). Findings for the 2021–2023 monitoring period are summarised in the table below:

Table 1. Observatory on Femicide, Albania, 2021-2023

Key femicide indicators in Albania (2021-2023)	Statistical data
Total women and girls killed	32 victims
Cases qualifying strictly as femicide	24 cases (meeting UN criteria for gender-related killing)
Killings by family members or intimate partners	27 of 32 cases
Femicides by intimate partners specifically	15 cases (63% of classified femicides)
Femicides by other family members	5 cases
Perpetrator demographics	28 perpetrators identified; 26 were men/boys, most aged 45-59
Victim demographics	Majority aged 30-59; 71% married; 83% had children
Crime location	Approximately 60% occurred in the victim's private residence
Generational impact	37 children lost their mothers to fatal violence
Highest-frequency municipalities	Tirana (6 cases), Fier (4), Elbasan (3)
Femicide rate (per 100,000 females)	2021: 0.85 2022: 0.50 2023: 0.84

This data reveals deep-seated, systemic flaws in the state's prevention and intervention mechanisms. It demonstrates that femicide in Albania is overwhelmingly foreseeable. Approximately 90% of the murdered women had suffered physical, psychological, or sexual abuse at the hands of the

perpetrators prior to the fatal incident. Yet only 25% (six victims) had formally filed complaints with law enforcement before they were killed (UN Women, 2024b). This discrepancy between the occurrence of violence and the reporting of violence highlights a profound collapse of public trust in the judicial and law enforcement systems. It points to a deeply entrenched, patriarchal societal mentality that frequently blames the victim, stigmatises those who seek help, and relies on community pressure to keep domestic abuse hidden behind closed doors.

The data also exposes severe institutional negligence regarding risk management and the monitoring of known, violent offenders. The Observatory report reveals that two of the murdered women were under the theoretical protection of active, court-granted protection orders at the exact moment they were killed, rendering the state's guarantee of safety entirely meaningless. Even more indicative of systemic failure is the finding that four women and girls were murdered just days after their abusers were released from prison, having served sentences for prior domestic violence. The lack of inter-agency communication, failure to notify victims of an abuser's release, and the total absence of post-release monitoring essentially facilitated these murders. Additionally, in several instances, perpetrators committed suicide immediately following the femicide, further complicating the pursuit of post-mortem justice, denying the state the ability to prosecute, and leaving devastated families to navigate the trauma without any form of legal closure or accountability.

When contextualised regionally, Albania's intentional female homicide rate of 0.84 per 100,000 females in 2023 is alarming. While this rate sits in the mid-range when compared to certain global contexts, it represents a highly acute, localised

crisis within the Western Balkans. The rate closely tracks the high levels of violence seen in neighbouring North Macedonia and significantly surpasses the femicide rates documented in numerous European Union member states.

Findings from Expert Interviews

To examine how Albania's protection system functions in practice, interviews were conducted with representatives of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination (KMD) and the Albanian Women Empowerment Network (AWEN). Together, the interviews indicate that the country's principal shortcomings no longer lie primarily in legislation itself, but in the implementation of existing legal obligations.

The KMD interview highlighted the importance of the anti-discrimination framework as a complementary mechanism to criminal law. While criminal proceedings address individual offences, anti-discrimination procedures can identify and challenge recurring institutional failures that disproportionately affect women, including unequal access to protection, legal aid, housing, healthcare, and social services. The findings further suggest that these shortcomings often have an intersectional dimension, particularly where gender-based violence intersects with poverty, disability, ethnicity, migration, or rural isolation. The interview also drew attention to the largely overlooked consequences of femicide for surviving family members, emphasising the long-term psychological, social, and economic impacts experienced by children and other dependents.

The AWEN interview confirmed that the main challenges arise from uneven implementation rather than legislative deficiencies. Despite significant legal reforms, protection

services remain concentrated in larger urban areas, while many municipalities lack adequate shelter capacity and specialised support. Continued dependence on donor funding further limits the sustainability of services. Access to state-funded legal aid also remains problematic, with administrative procedures frequently preventing women from obtaining legal representation within the short deadlines applicable to emergency protection orders.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between cyberviolence and physical violence. AWEN's experience suggests that online threats, digital surveillance, and other forms of technology-facilitated abuse frequently precede physical violence and should therefore be treated as indicators of elevated risk. Although Albanian legislation already provides mechanisms for digital risk assessment and evidence collection, implementation remains inconsistent.

Finally, the interviews identified long-term reintegration as one of the weakest components of Albania's protection system. Limited access to housing, employment, and long-term social support often leaves survivors economically dependent after leaving shelters, increasing the risk of returning to abusive environments.

Overall, the qualitative findings reinforce the broader documentary analysis presented in this paper. Rather than revealing major legislative deficiencies, they point to persistent implementation gaps characterised by weak institutional coordination, insufficient funding, unequal territorial access to services, and limited accountability. Strengthening Albania's response to femicide therefore requires not only continued legal reform but also more effective implementation of the protections already established in law.

4. Femicide in North Macedonia

In 2023, in line with its commitment to the Istanbul Convention, North Macedonia amended its Criminal Code to expand the scope of sexual violence to include femicide, genital mutilation, sexual harassment and stalking, thus becoming the first and only nation in the Western Balkans to criminalise femicide fully (UN Women, 2023a). The amended Code defines femicide as a form of murder with a gendered motivation and prescribes a minimum of ten years in prison for taking the life of a woman or of a girl under the age of eighteen (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2025, p. 19). Legal protection was also extended to other forms of gender-based violence, including stalking, kidnapping, rape, sexual assault and physical injury (*ibid.*). Under the Code, government institutions are obliged to intervene in cases of femicide and gender-based violence, social services must work directly with perpetrators to correct their behaviour and prevent escalation, and police forces are tasked with strengthening their capacities and conducting risk assessments to determine the severity of each situation (*ibid.*, 21). These changes reflect the country's commitments under the Istanbul Convention, the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2022–2027, and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (*ibid.*). Despite this progress, implementation remains a challenge, leaving cases of gender-based violence neglected and unsolved (National Network to End Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, 2025).

These amendments, however, came only after numerous femicides in which inadequate legislation left victims unprotected. An analysis conducted under UNDP North Macedonia, covering eight cities including the capital Skopje,

found that fourteen of the sixteen murders of women between 2017 and 2020 could be classified as femicides (UNDP, 2021, p. 18). Most victims were women over the age of 61; ten were ethnically Macedonian, three Albanian and two Roma (ibid.). All were killed by an intimate partner or family member, in some cases by their own sons or grandsons, and the leading motive was conflictual intimate-partner relationships, most of which involved psychological and physical violence as well as death threats (ibid.).

An earlier analysis of femicides committed between 2008 and 2016 reveals similar patterns. Of the thirty-four identified cases, most victims and perpetrators were between 41 and 50 years old (National Network to End Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, 2018, p. 24). Most femicides were committed by spouses, extramarital partners or intimate partners, confirming a longstanding trend of intimate-partner violence in North Macedonia (ibid., 25). The majority of cases went unreported to police and social services, as victims were unable to leave their homes or were economically dependent on their abusers (ibid., 26) – an underreporting that also signals distrust in institutions and leaves victims trapped in cycles of violence. As in the later period, the dominant motive was conflictual intimate relationships, with victims suffering prolonged psychological abuse and death threats before the crime (ibid., 27). Taken together, the two studies demonstrate that North Macedonia's justice system failed victims over an extended period: institutions rarely treated prior domestic violence as an aggravating circumstance, despite evidence that most victims had endured abuse before their deaths (ibid., 28). Perpetrators were typically sentenced to between 10 and 40 years in prison, though in some exceptional cases they were confined to mental health facilities due to severe

psychological disorders (ibid.).

Has the Law Been Applied? Femicide Cases After 2023

The law's early record is troubling. In September of 2023, a few short months after the amendment entered into force, a 46-year-old woman in the city of Kochani was stabbed forty times outside of her home by a man who had loaned her money (Koshevaliska et al, 2024, p. 206). Prior to the crime, the woman had reported the perpetrator numerous times to the authorities, which unfortunately failed to protect her (ibid., 207). Following the killing, a number of NGOs and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights demanded that the case be treated as femicide and that an investigation be launched into whether the woman's reports were properly processed (ibid.). The perpetrator received a life sentence for murder committed with a gender-based motive – yet he was not charged with femicide itself, raising the question of why prosecutors were reluctant to apply the new provision. Moreover, this example further illustrates the ineffectiveness of the police and institutions in addressing reports of gender-based violence. It is unknown whether the police had conducted a risk assessment after the victim's report.

At the time of writing, there is no comprehensive report on the exact number of femicides and instances of gender-based violence in North Macedonia since the 2023 amendment. Even high-profile cases, such as Rosica Koceva in 2025 and Ivana Stojanovska and her daughter in 2026, which have gained massive media attention and generated public discourse on legal protections for gender-based violence, suggest that killings which could qualify as femicide may still be prosecuted as abuse or homicide – a signal of poor implementation and

inadequate prosecution.

Ethnicity compounds these failures. In May of 2025, Ramajana Asan, a Romani woman, was murdered by her partner in their home in Skopje in front of their daughter (European Roma Rights Centre, 2025, p.3). Similar to other cases, Ramajana's story details her multiple attempts to file criminal complaints against her abuser, with instances of abuse being witnessed by her father and others (ibid.). However, officials dismissed her multiple complaints, stating that she would make amends with her abuser (ibid.). Romani women face additional institutional barriers when reporting cases of abuse to the authorities, which results in feelings of abandonment and loneliness due to inadequate protection (ibid., 4).

In May 2026, 31-year-old Ajnet Vejsel was stabbed to death by her former partner in Bitola (APLA, 2026). At the time of writing, there is little media coverage of her story, with few details indicating that she was stabbed to death by her former partner in front of her home (ibid.). The victim's family indicated that she had suffered abuse prior to the murder, which was underreported due to their children (ibid.).

As a result of these institutional failures to protect Romani women, Isi Arka, an organisation which deals with women's rights within the Roma community, launched Project 101254762- Arakhel (2026-2028), offering tailored services to Roma communities (Isi Arka, 2026). Although this project is a step forward in the right direction, it does not erase the need for institutional support for Romani women when dealing with gender-based violence.

CSOs in North Macedonia have repeatedly highlighted the state's inefficiencies in protecting women from gender-based violence and getting justice for victims of femicide. Prevention

and risk assessment are still the most neglected areas even with laws in place. For example, various training courses have been offered to state institutions to recognise when abuse takes place, with little result (Gagovska, 2025). Furthermore, there is an even bigger issue with coordination among multiple institutions, including the police force and prosecution, making it immensely difficult for victims to seek protection and justice (ibid.). A fragmented justice system often leads victims of abuse to withdraw their reports to the police, which leaves them only as “complaints” on record (ibid.). Multiple CSO networks, such as the National Network for Ending Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, have a longstanding history of advocacy, specifically targeting institutions and stakeholders that can bring about change. Additionally, the national network Women for Women has united organisations based in communities such as Veles, Kumanovo and Bitola to combat patriarchal norms and promote activism within young girls (Women for Women, 2026).

Headlines and Perception: The Role of Media

Media portrayal of femicide cases plays a vital role in shaping public opinion and, potentially, the institutional response and legal consequences that follow the crime (UNDP, 2021, p. 23). Although traditional media has become better at reporting on gender-based violence and femicide, it still does not take into account the deeply rooted systemic inequalities that can cause social imbalances between men and women (ibid.). Part of this issue stems from the cultural “silence” on femicide and violence towards women, making it difficult for the media to adequately report on the topics (Jahjaova, 2022, p. 68). In turn, this creates a negative cycle of reinforcing gender stereotypes,

victim-blaming and stigmatisation, shifting the focus from the perpetrator and lack of institutional response (ibid.).

Most of the coverage on femicide contains generic information that does not take into account the socio-political context of the crime, which is especially relevant in the Western Balkans, and its language and imagery downplay the gendered nature of the killing for engagement (Trajkovski, 2025, p. 189). Analysis of 2017-2020 coverage found that reporters portrayed cases of femicide as “family drama” or “love drama”, reducing the crimes to trivial disputes between intimate partners. Only one media outlet used the term “femicide” when referring to the crime (UNDP, 2021, p. 24).

On social media, posts about these media articles receive public comments that mostly condemn the violence, but some justify perpetrators or blame victims – including misogynistic comments from other women (Institute of Communication Studies, 2023, p. 16; Trajkovski, 2025, pp. 189-190). In addition, a survey of 100 social media users in North Macedonia found strong agreement that social media normalises abuse against women while failing to provide victims a platform (Sherovska, 2024, p. 302). Respondents to the questionnaire strongly indicated that social media facilitates a culture of violence against women, normalises abuse towards them, and does not provide sufficient space for victims to share their stories (ibid.)

A recent independent analysis examined which female-/femicide-related content gains the most traction with the Macedonian public, focusing on the previously-mentioned cases of Rosica Koceva and Ivana Stojanoska and her daughter, Katja. In the Koceva case, the most popular article was one in which another woman detailed her experience with Rosica’s killer, revealing that she had reported him to the police twelve

years prior to the crime (Dimova, 2026). That article alone generated 2,126 engagements and reached over 115,000 people despite not containing any details on the Rosica case itself (ibid.). The second most engaging article revealed that Rosica had written a letter to the Minister of Interior, Panche Toshkovski, five months before being murdered. This revelation reframed the case around institutional failure and negligence, which proved to be more “moving” to the general public than the crime itself (ibid.). The Stojanovska case illustrates how media coverage treats femicide as a concept but disregards the actual victim: each new occurrence prompts references to previous femicides as context, but never demands justice for the victims.

5. Femicide in Serbia

In its March 2025 Annual Report for 2024, Serbia’s Commissioner for the Protection of Equality stated that 19 women were killed in Serbia that year, and 415 women and girls had been murdered between 2011 and 2024. More than half were killed in their homes by current or former partners, and many had previously reported violence to the authorities (Commissioner for Protection of Equality, 2025). The report further emphasised that femicide remains the most extreme manifestation of gender-based violence and highlighted the continued absence of a systematic national femicide monitoring mechanism in Serbia.

In 2025, monitoring by FemPlatz, a Serbian feminist organisation that tracks femicide and other forms of gender-based violence while advocating for legal and policy reforms, recorded at least 18 femicides and 13 attempted femicides. The organisation emphasised that these figures are likely to

represent only a minimum, as incomplete public information on gender-related killings limits comprehensive documentation. Furthermore, FemPlatz's analysis of 94 judicial rulings on femicide and attempted femicide from 2015 to 2019 found that women were most often killed at home or in a home shared with the perpetrator; nearly half of the victims were killed by a spouse, common-law partner, former partner, or a man with whom they were in an intimate relationship (Beker, 2021). The same research found that court files often contained no data on whether risk assessments had been carried out in cases with prior domestic violence, and that timely protective measures under the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence were lacking. Among the survivors of attempted femicide in the sample, only 20% had gone to the police beforehand. The pattern is clear: home remains the most dangerous place, intimate control remains central, and the system far too often reacts late or not at all (Beker, 2021).

Civil society as a compensatory actor in the absence of institutional mechanisms

Because state institutions have failed to build a coherent anti-femicide infrastructure, civil society organisations have taken over the monitoring, research, and advocacy work. FemPlatz maintains an interactive regional femicide map based on media reports, cross-checked with official institutions and partner organisations. It has presented this mechanism as a model for a future official femicide monitoring body (FemPlatz, 2026). Its broader body of work includes the first interdisciplinary research on femicide in Serbia, analyses of institutional capacities, judicial practice, attempted femicide, and the role of firearms in killings of women.

This body of research points to several recurring patterns: women are most often killed in their own homes, perpetrators are predominantly current or former intimate partners or family members, prior violence frequently preceded the killings, and institutional responses often failed to recognise escalating risk in time. The studies also found that judicial proceedings frequently focused on perpetrators rather than patterns of gender-based violence, that histories of abuse were inconsistently treated in court, and that available data systems remained fragmented and insufficient for prevention-oriented policymaking. Particularly significant was the finding that firearms were among the recurring means used in intimate partner femicide-suicide cases, reinforcing earlier evidence that weapon availability functions as an important lethality risk factor in gender-based violence.

At the same time, FemPlatz has also articulated three structural reforms: i) criminalisation of femicide as a separate offence, ii) a unified and centralised database on violence against women and femicide, and iii) the establishment of an independent Femicide Watch (FemPlatz, 2026). Based on its research, FemPlatz and partner organisations wrote to competent institutions in 2020, to members of parliament in 2022, and in 2023 submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Justice working group on Criminal Code amendments (ibid.). The informal network #TogetherAgainstFemicide was formed in March 2023 by 16 organisations to pursue the same agenda: advocating for the establishment of a monitoring body, separate criminalisation of femicide, better regulation of femicide risk assessment, and accountability of local institutions for failures in prevention and prosecution. When more than 70 organisations issued a public call for an urgent institutional response after a spate of femicides and

attempted femicides in March 2022, the intervention exposed a deeper structural problem: civil society was not merely raising awareness, but articulating policy demands that should have come from state institutions themselves (Commissioner for Protection of Equality, 2025). The immediate state response was limited and largely rhetorical. Although public officials reiterated commitments to combating violence against women and existing legal mechanisms formally remained in place, the structural demands raised by activists, including improved risk assessment, coordinated prevention measures, transparent femicide monitoring, and stronger institutional accountability, were not followed by a comprehensive policy shift.

In subsequent years, civil society organisations continued to repeat many of the same demands, including the establishment of a national Femicide Watch mechanism, suggesting that institutional responses remained fragmented, reactive, and insufficient rather than strategically transformative. In that sense, the absence of a systemic response became a response in itself. Following the two mass shootings that took place in Serbia in May 2023, including the shooting at Vladislav Ribnikar Primary School in Belgrade and a second attack in the villages near Mladenovac, which together claimed the lives of 18 people and prompted an unprecedented public debate on firearm possession and violence prevention, the government introduced a broad package of disarmament measures. These included a nationwide voluntary firearm surrender campaign, stricter licensing requirements, and enhanced police oversight of registered firearm owners. While these reforms were primarily designed to reduce the risk of mass violence, they also raise an important policy question that remains insufficiently explored: whether large-scale firearm surrender, tighter firearm regulation, and increased

police oversight had any measurable effect on the incidence or modalities of femicide and attempted femicide. Existing research on intimate partner femicide-suicide committed with firearms has already demonstrated that firearm availability significantly increases lethality and reduces opportunities for intervention once violence escalates. In that sense, the post-2023 reforms created a rare policy opportunity to examine the relationship between firearm access and gender-based lethal violence, yet this question has so far received little systematic scholarly attention in Serbia (FemPlatz, Women's Research Centre for Education and Communication, & Gender Knowledge Hub, 2021).

Institutional implementation gaps in femicide prevention

On paper, the institutional architecture in Serbia appears adequate: the National Gender Equality Strategy identifies the Coordination Body for Gender Equality as the government's standing mechanism for horizontal and vertical coordination on gender equality (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021); the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue as the line ministry responsible for gender-equality policy, monitoring, and oversight; the Ministry of Justice as responsible for criminal law amendments. However, the strategy also admits that the Coordination Body has operated with limited staffing, organisational and logistical support, and financial resources (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). In the current government architecture, responsibility is also politically linked to a minister without portfolio in charge of gender equality and prevention of violence against women. In other words, Serbia has multiple addresses for responsibility but little accountability.

It is worth noting that the state has not been entirely inactive. GREVIO acknowledged continued mandatory training and emergency protective measures under the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, as well as some positive developments in local coordination (GREVIO, 2020). In fact, in September 2025, the government reported that more than 30,000 emergency protective measures had been issued in 2024 (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2025). The government also announced further amendments to the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, the Criminal Code, and the Criminal Procedure Code. However, the persistence of femicide cases, including in situations where prior violence had already been reported, raises questions on whether emergency interventions alone (i.e., without stronger long-term risk assessment, monitoring, and institutional follow-up) are sufficient. By April 2026, it had also adopted support programmes for local gender-equality policy and violence-prevention activities. State institutions have additionally reported adoption of a General Protocol of action and multisectoral cooperation and the creation of several new support services (Council of Europe, 2025).

But that is precisely why the official reassurances ring hollow. In 2025, GREVIO found that the 2021–2025 strategy on gender-based violence had never been operationalised because its action plans were not adopted (Council of Europe, 2025). The Commissioner’s 2024 annual report stated that a draft 2024–2025 action plan existed but had not undergone a public hearing and thus had not been adopted, and that the national control mechanism for femicide had not been established (Commissioner for Protection of Equality, 2025). In these circumstances, the government responded by extending the strategy until 2027 instead of addressing the gaps from the original timeframe. Unfortunately, while this is presented as a

mere delay in procedure, for an issue like femicide, procedural delay costs lives.

The European Commission (2024) notes that Serbia lacks reliable official femicide statistics and depends heavily on civil society for specialist services; GREVIO (2024) finds support services under-resourced, long-term protection orders not effectively enforced, and convictions in cases of violence against women often lenient. This is not a state that is unaware; it is a state that has normalised partial implementation: the Commissioner resubmitted the initiative for a national control mechanism on femicide to the Ministry of Justice. Even the progress made in the legal framework has been slowed by the Constitutional Court's suspension of acts deriving from the Law on Gender Equality (GREVIO, 2024).

Media and Public awareness

A serious anti-femicide policy is impossible without serious public language about violence, and Serbia still fails that test. A 2024 analysis of 10,826 media reports by Journalists Against Violence Against Women supported by UNDP found that 35% revealed the identity of the survivor, victim, or her family, 27% used sensationalist or stereotypical language, and 56% of headlines or teasers violated at least one basic principle of ethical reporting (UNDP, 2026). The media still focused overwhelmingly on individual incidents: 77% of articles reported on specific cases, while only 18% dealt with prevention, broader social context, or public education. This is not a minor professional problem. When media coverage turns femicide into a lurid headline, it teaches spectatorship instead of prevention (UNDP Serbia, 2026).

The deeper problem is framing. Femicide is still treated

as ordinary crime reporting rather than as the most extreme consequence of systemic gender-based violence (UNDP Serbia, 2025). The history of prior violence appeared in only about one-third of the analysed reporting, and the media rarely pursued institutional accountability further. That omission matters because it reproduces the same logic institutions rely on: focus on the fatal outcome, not on the failures that made it possible.

In Serbia, this has an additional bitter irony: because official femicide statistics are inadequate, NGOs often build minimum counts partly from reports by the same media ecosystem that sensationalises women's deaths. The rules already exist. The guidelines developed by Journalists Against Violence Against Women explicitly tell reporters not to shift responsibility onto the victim by implying she should have reported earlier, and to place femicide in the continuity of prior abuse (Journalists Against Violence Against Women, 2019), but these are not consistently applied. The media culture needs to stop packaging the murder of women as consumable content and start treating violence against women as a social emergency.

Perspectives from Serbian politics and civil society

To complement the analysis, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals actively engaged in the fields of women's rights advocacy and policymaking. Natalija Stojmenović, the youngest Member of Parliament in the National Assembly of Serbia and a representative of the Green-Left Front, argues that the situation regarding violence against women has significantly deteriorated in recent years. Serbia is witnessing not only the persistence of gender-based violence but also the expansion of newer forms, such as digital

violence. She emphasises that the problem is accompanied by broader legislative and institutional setbacks, including attempts to narrow legal protections for women and a lack of political commitment to addressing femicide as a systemic issue. While expressing concern about the current institutional response, she highlights the importance of women's activism and social mobilisation as drivers of future reforms. In her view, meaningful progress requires the development of a new social consensus that recognises women's safety in both public and private spheres as a fundamental democratic value.

Similar concerns were raised by Marija Virijević, a long-term women's rights activist and former SOS hotline worker supporting women survivors of domestic violence. Virijević points out that Serbia still lacks an official database on femicide, forcing the public to rely largely on media reports to understand the scope of the problem. She stresses that hundreds of women and girls have been killed over the past decade, while many deaths resulting from prolonged violence remain invisible and unrecognised as femicides. According to her, the absence of a comprehensive institutional response demonstrates that femicide is not yet treated as a priority issue by the state. Virijević further argues that recognising femicide as a separate criminal offence would strengthen prevention efforts by ensuring that gender-based motives, patterns of prior abuse, and the structural nature of violence against women are adequately reflected in criminal proceedings and sentencing practices.

Both interviewees underline that legal reform alone is insufficient without institutional accountability, improved protection mechanisms for women experiencing violence, comprehensive data collection systems, and broader societal efforts to challenge the normalisation of misogyny and violence

against women.

6. Regional perspective

The struggle for the legal recognition of femicide in each of these countries does not exist in a vacuum. Shared patriarchal structures, fragile justice systems in transition, and a common historical legacy make the region a unified arena for advocacy, and evidence gathered by civil society networks strongly suggests that coordinated regional strategies outperform isolated national efforts.

The evidence gathered by civil society networks strongly suggests that isolated national efforts are vastly less effective than coordinated, regional strategies. A regional report published in March 2023 by a coalition including the Center for Legal Civic Initiatives (Albania), the Helpline for Women and Children (Montenegro) and FemPlatz (Serbia) documented an upward trajectory of violence – Serbia alone recorded 27 femicides in 2022 and 22 more by August 2023, many committed with illicit firearms in defiance of active restraining orders – and its central recommendation was the establishment of independent femicide watches in every Western Balkan state, eventually culminating in a unified Regional Femicide Watch (Funa, 2023; Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023). The primary, unifying recommendation emerging from this regional civil society coalition is the absolute necessity of establishing centralised, independent “Femicide Watches” or observatories in every Western Balkan state, eventually culminating in a unified Regional Femicide Watch. These mechanisms, operating free from direct police or political interference, are required to analyse the entire chain of events leading up to a murder, meticulously mapping the specific institutional

omissions (from ignored police reports to inadequate judicial sentencing) that allowed the perpetrator to succeed.

Within this regional landscape, North Macedonia demonstrates that legislative change is possible: following years of sustained pressure from civil society, rigorous policy advocacy, and a collaborative drafting process involving the Ministry of Justice, resulted in the 2023 amendment of its Criminal Code to criminalize femicide in line with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention (adding point 2a to Article 123) (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023). By doing so, North Macedonia became the first nation in the Western Balkans to legally name the crime, proving that deep-seated legislative resistance and patriarchal inertia can be overcome (AIRE, 2025). By contrast, the Serbian legal and political systems continue to resist the criminalisation of femicide (FemPlatz & Fenomena, 2026). Activists, particularly youth-led movements, have repeatedly taken to the streets, linking the fight against gender-based violence to broader, national anti-corruption and anti-impunity protests. Albania shows largely the same legal resistance.

The contrast between North Macedonia's legislative success and the ongoing struggles in Serbia and Albania underscores the necessity of sharing advocacy tactics, legal templates, and public awareness strategies across the borders of the Western Balkans. The regional comparison also demonstrates that anti-femicide policy does not depend on a single model. Albania prioritised monitoring and institutional review mechanisms, while North Macedonia moved toward criminal-law recognition and multisectoral observatory structures. Neither model is complete, but both illustrate that governments can take concrete institutional steps rather than indefinitely postponing implementation. For Serbia,

the regional lesson is not simply comparative but practical: monitoring mechanisms, legal reforms, and inter-institutional review structures are already being operationalised elsewhere in the Western Balkans, making further delay increasingly difficult to justify as a matter of administrative complexity or political timing.

7. Policy Recommendations

An overarching recommendation to be addressed by all countries is the establishment National Femicide Observatories of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, which must formalise cross-border data-sharing protocols and establish a unified Regional Femicide Watch to track transnational violence trends and harmonise judicial best practices. A formalised regional approach will harmonise legal definitions, allow for the precise tracking of transnational violence trends, and facilitate the rapid sharing of judicial best practices and successful legislative templates. By creating a unified, cross-border legal and advocacy front, the nations of the Western Balkans can collectively dismantle the culture of impunity that has allowed femicide to persist.

This is followed by country-specific recommendations:

7.1 Albania

The social outcry against femicide, coupled with the evidence on institutional failure, must be channelled into precise, actionable, and systemic policy interventions. The analysis of the Albanian context confirms that gradual, piecemeal solutions will not produce lasting change. The

following interventions represent the minimum required to address gender-based killings.

- **The Albanian Parliament** should amend the Criminal Code to introduce femicide as a distinct, standalone criminal offence, with a definition that captures gender-based intent, intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation, cyber-harassment, and “honour” codes.

- **The Albanian Parliament** should expand the statutory authority, access to classified institutional files, and funding of the Femicide Observatory within the Office of the People’s Advocate to mandate exhaustive, retrospective domestic homicide reviews for every gender-based killing and violence-induced suicide. The Office of the People’s Advocate should be responsible for establishing, coordinating, and managing the Observatory, while ensuring the systematic participation of the State Police, the General Prosecution Office, the judiciary, healthcare institutions, social services, and civil society organisations in case reviews and data collection.

- **The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection** should deploy standardised, mandatory multi-agency risk-assessment tools across all local police precincts and social service providers in accordance with Article 51 of the Istanbul Convention.

- **General Directorate of Prisons, in coordination with the State Police**, should establish an automatic notification system that alerts both the victim and the relevant local police precinct immediately when a convicted perpetrator of domestic or sexual violence is granted early release, parole, or completes their sentence.

- **The Ministry of Justice and the General Prosecution Office** should launch a formal inquiry into the high attrition rates in gender-based violence cases to determine the systemic

causes behind case delays and dismissals.

- **The State Police and judicial authorities** should ensure that any breach of a court-granted protection order triggers immediate, non-negotiable criminal detention of the perpetrator.

7.2 North Macedonia

North Macedonia's challenge is no longer primarily legislative but institutional: implementation gaps continue to undermine the protection the 2023 law promises. The country should prioritise the following actions:

- **The Government of North Macedonia** should establish a National Femicide Observatory as a permanent multi-institutional body responsible for collecting and analysing data on femicide, conducting domestic homicide reviews, and issuing recommendations for institutional reform. The Observatory should operate under the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, with the mandatory participation of the Ministry of Interior, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the judiciary, healthcare institutions, social services, academia, and civil society organisations, in line with the recommendations of GREVIO and the CEDAW Committee on strengthening data collection, institutional coordination, and femicide monitoring.

- **The Ministry of Health** should develop and implement a standardised curriculum on gender-based violence and femicide prevention for healthcare professionals, ensuring consistent training and risk-assessment practices across urban and rural areas.

- **The Ministry of Education** and Science should introduce mandatory training for teachers and school staff on gender-based violence prevention and integrate education on

gender equality, healthy relationships, and violence prevention into school curricula.

- **The Ministry of Justice, Public Prosecutor's Office, and judicial authorities** should ensure the timely investigation and prosecution of femicide and gender-based violence cases, reduce delays in court proceedings, and strengthen sentencing practices to reflect the severity of these crimes.

- **Courts and law enforcement authorities** should strengthen the implementation and monitoring of restraining orders and other protective measures, ensuring that victims are effectively protected from repeat violence.

- **The Ministry of Labour** should expand access to shelters, legal aid, psychological support, and other victim services, while strengthening coordination among social services, healthcare providers, police, and civil society organisations.

- **The Government of North Macedonia** must ensure that services for victims of gender-based violence are accessible in Albanian, Romani, Turkish, and other minority languages, particularly through national helplines, public institutions, and community outreach programs.

- **The Ministry of Health and relevant public institutions** should improve access to healthcare and support services for women living in Roma settlements and other underserved communities.

- **The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services and the Council of Media Ethics** should strengthen monitoring of media reporting on femicide and gender-based violence and impose sanctions for sensationalist, victim-blaming, or gender-insensitive reporting.

7.3. Serbia

Serbia's central challenge is one of implementation. The persistence of femicide despite repeated warnings from domestic and international monitoring bodies demonstrates the need for the following measures:

- **The Government of Serbia and the Coordination Body for Gender Equality** should establish measurable implementation obligations, designated responsible institutions, budgetary commitments, and regular public reporting for the Strategy for Preventing and Combating Gender-Based Violence against Women.

- **The Ministry of Justice and the National Assembly** should establish, without further delay, a national femicide monitoring mechanism and a centralised database on violence against women and femicide; the Protector of Citizens (Ombudsman) should host an independent Femicide Observatory responsible for coordinating the mechanism, collecting and analysing data, conducting domestic homicide reviews, issuing recommendations, and monitoring institutional compliance with those recommendations.

- **The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, the Protector of Citizens, and parliamentary committees** should strengthen oversight of the implementation of Serbia's commitments on preventing gender-based violence and femicide, drawing on GREVIO and European Commission monitoring.

- **Police, prosecutors, courts, and Centres for Social Work** should strengthen femicide risk assessment, improve enforcement of long-term protection orders, and conduct mandatory reviews after every femicide and attempted femicide; judicial authorities should ensure risk assessments

are systematically documented and reflected in proceedings and protection measures.

- **The Government of Serbia and local self-governments** should provide sustainable financing for specialist women's services, safe houses, and crisis support, with equal territorial availability.

- **Editors, media owners, journalists, the Press Council, and relevant regulators** should consistently apply existing guidelines on reporting gender-based violence and femicide, and ensure accountability for victim-blaming, sensationalism, and violations of victims' privacy.

- **Civil society organisations, Members of Parliament, journalists, youth leaders, and citizens** should use shadow reporting, strategic litigation, public hearings, parliamentary questions, and media scrutiny to demand transparency, adequate funding, legal reform, and institutional responsibility for failures to prevent femicide.

8. Conclusion

Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia continue to fall short in protecting women from gender-based violence and in preventing it. North Macedonia's criminalisation of femicide is a genuine legislative achievement, but cases occurring since 2023 show that without implementation and a monitoring mechanism, the law has produced few tangible changes. Albania and Serbia have been stagnant, leaving victims to confront institutional barriers and social stigma when seeking help. In order for progress to be made, both should criminalise femicide and ensure the provision is applied in practice. In all three countries, civil society is carrying burdens that belong to the state – and state institutions must recognise that the

primary responsibility lies with them. Women's safety should not be an abstract concept that exists only on paper; it should be a norm of everyday life. The evidence compiled here makes clear that all three countries are in urgent need of reform, and that the region as a whole stands to benefit from collective progress on this issue.

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**Balkan Talkers and
the Socially Engaged
Academia of the Future:
*Research Essays***

Women's function as change agents in nonviolent protests in Ukraine and the Balkan states

Author: Silvia Fabijanić

Conflicts or rebellion against authority do not necessarily have to be violent. Nonviolent resistance does not seek victory over the enemy but the overcoming of injustice, thus a real solution and thereby the liberation of both those affected by the injustice and the opponents (Raffai et al, 2022). It is about shaping actions that seek to stop wrong and harmful policies as they are being implemented, not an abstract idea that peace is “built” by the very act of resistance. Nonviolent movements throughout history have opened up space for reflection and the reshaping of social structures, often questioning relations between power, material inequalities, and dominant social norms.

During the 1990s in Serbia, public space was dominated by fear, war propaganda, and the onset of armed conflicts. While much of society passively observed the events of the war, the organisation Women in Black appeared on the streets of Belgrade. Their activism was based on the clear conviction that war is wrong and must be publicly and consistently opposed while it is happening. Women in Black had no institutional power or weapons. Still, they possessed a strong political stance and a visible, symbolically powerful presence in public spaces, which makes their activism particularly significant. This paper focuses on the work of Women in Black during the 1990s because of the specific historical and political context, marked by war, nationalism, and strong repression. Although armed conflicts did not take place on the territory of Serbia, the state was directly involved in the wars in the territory of the

former Yugoslavia. A socio-political framework characterised by propaganda, militarisation, and political control was established. Under such circumstances, nonviolent resistance takes on a special gravity and risk.

Years later, during 2013 and 2014, in Ukraine, under conditions of peace and without armed conflict, the pro-democracy protest movement Euromaidan emerged. The protest movement began as a response by the people to the decision by the then-President of Ukraine not to sign an agreement with the European Union and to turn the country's policy toward Russia. The movement started as a peaceful protest but later escalated into a violent conflict. This paper focuses on the role of women during the nonviolent period of Euromaidan. During Euromaidan, women stepped out of socially imposed traditional roles and actively participated in political and social changes. Although the historical, political, and social contexts of the Women in Black and the women during Euromaidan differ, they are comparable in how women entered the political sphere nonviolently through public activism during times of profound political and social change. Neither the Women in Black nor the women during the (nonviolent) part of Euromaidan were overshadowed by men; rather, they sought to be equal to men.

We live in patriarchal social structures that systematically diminish or ignore women's overall contributions. Does women's activism in nonviolent movements serve as a corrective to social invisibility, rather than as an affirmation of difference? Based on this thesis, the paper focuses on the actions of Women in Black during the 1990s and on the participation of women in the nonviolent part of the Euromaidan protests. Although they operate in different historical and political contexts, this paper aims to present their nonviolent resistance, the motives

that drive them to enter the public sphere, the risks they face, their level of visibility, and the contribution they have made to society through their nonviolent actions.

This paper is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary sources. The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis of scientific, media, and audiovisual sources.

Nonviolent Resistance and the Role of Women in Social Movements

A passive attitude toward injustice in society is considered a greater problem than violence itself. Passivity represents implicit support for the violent structures of social power. Nonviolence is not a sign of weakness, but a conscious and deliberate abstention from violence while actively fighting against injustice. Nonviolent resistance does not seek victory over the enemy but the overcoming of injustice, thus a real solution and thereby the liberation of both those affected by the injustice and the opponents (Raffai et al, 2022). It is useful to point out that nonviolent resistance is not the same as pacifism. Pacifism is a moral conviction, while nonviolent resistance is a strategic choice. People choose it because they think it will make it easier to win, not necessarily because they “love peace” (Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008: 9).

Nonviolent movements offer various methods of action, from public protests and strikes, through boycotts and symbolic actions, to information campaigns. Their main characteristic is that they do not create moral constraints¹ or other forms of obstacles². The accessibility for participation enables mass mobilisation of citizens.

Compared to violent methods, nonviolent resistance also

1 Moral constraints refer to the absence of violence or the use of any physical force.

2 Obstacles refer to age, gender, religion, or any other barrier, and anyone can participate in nonviolent resistance.

demonstrates strategic effectiveness. Empirical data confirms that nonviolent campaigns are twice as likely to succeed (53%) compared to violent uprisings (26%), and they also leave behind more stable and democratic societies (Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008: 8). The first key reason is the aforementioned mass participation, and the second is “political jiu-jitsu.” It is a mechanism in which brutal repression of peaceful protesters backfires, destroying the authorities’ reputation (ibid, 8-9).

It is precisely in these mechanisms of mass participation and strategic countereffect that women are a key strategic advantage. Since women make up approximately 50% of the total population, their active involvement in resistance movements is a crucial factor in achieving critical mass. Without women, a movement cannot reach the critical mass needed to exert effective pressure on the regime’s “pillars of power.” The presence of women on the front lines in 99% of cases directly undermines the regime’s patriarchal authority and forces security forces to question their loyalties (Chenoweth, 2019: 12). On the other hand, violence directed against unarmed women dramatically increases the moral and political cost of repression (Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008: 13–15). That women’s participation is not just a statistical figure, but a reality is demonstrated by the Women in Black organisation in Belgrade and the massive turnout of women at the Euromaidan in Ukraine. Although they may seem difficult to compare due to different political and social circumstances, the bridge connecting them is their entry into the public sphere through nonviolent resistance.

Women in Peace Initiatives in the Balkans During the 1990s: The Case of Serbia and Women in Black

The political context of 1990s Serbia was marked by strong militarism and nationalist homogenization of society, as well as

the breakup of SFRY³. Slobodan Milošević⁴ used mass rallies to consolidate his power and create an atmosphere in which any voice of reason was branded “treasonous.” Although the first multi-party elections were held, the system was not truly democratic. A strong retraditionalization of society occurred. The war discourse required men to be warriors and women to be “mothers of the nation” who would bear new soldiers and remain silent (Cockburn, 2007: 101).

The political crisis of 1990 was merely a prelude to the armed conflicts that would follow on the territory of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia found itself in the paradoxical position of a state with no war on its own territory, yet simultaneously carrying out mass mobilisation and sending resources to the battlefields. In such a specific context - where the war is waged “in the name of the people”, but not on their territory - a strong internal resistance emerges in the form of the organisation Women in Black.

Women in Black is an activist group and network with a feminist-anti-militarist orientation, composed of women and men from different generations and ethnic backgrounds, with varying levels of education, social statuses, lifestyles, and sexual orientations. The organisation grew out of earlier feminist initiatives, including Women’s Studies and anti-war centres (ibid, 86-87), in response to the militaristic regime of Slobodan Milošević and the start of the war in Croatia and Bosnia. In Belgrade, on October 9, 1991, the organisation began its weekly “vigil” (ibid, 54). Every Wednesday on Republic

3 The SFRY (Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) was a federal state of six Yugoslav republics that existed from 1945. until 1992, organised on the basis of a socialist political system and under the leadership of the League of Communists

4 Slobodan Milošević was a Serbian and Yugoslav politician and lawyer, the founder and first president of the Socialist Party of Serbia, who dominated the political life of Serbia and the former Yugoslavia during the 1980s and 1990s.

Square in Belgrade, they stood in silence, dressed in black, holding banners. They used the traditional Eastern European/Christian custom of wearing black for the deceased, but gave it a new meaning: mourning the victims on “all three sides”, which was a radical act because the regime only recognised Serbian victims. The silence served as a shield against the aggressive, male discourse of war. They chose silence as a rejection of speaking unnecessary words that prevent and hinder reflection on oneself and others (Zaharijević, 2025: 272).

They used black clothing as an “instrument of reason” and a method for their nonviolent entry into the social sphere. Through their engagement, they consciously distanced themselves from socially gender-imposed female roles and “sending sons to war”, instead articulating their resistance as an independent political choice. This approach represented a radical critique of the very foundations of society, as they recognised militarism and war as direct extensions of patriarchal power structures. It was a direct blow to the very core of nationalist ideology. The members of the organisation stated: We are a group of women who stand in silence and in black every week to express our disagreement with the war. We decided to show what the female side of this war is. Women in our countries wear black to express their sorrow for the deaths of their loved ones. We wear black for the deaths of all the victims of war. We wear black because people have been driven from their homes, because women have been raped, because towns and villages have been burned and destroyed” (Bilić, 2012: 162).

In addition to showing solidarity with the victims of war, the Women in Black also organised safe spaces for all men who refused military service. By practically protecting these men, they opposed the militaristic regime and shielded

individuals from the state's repressive apparatus. *Women in Black* also set up a rented apartment that became a refuge for opponents of conscription and deserters. When the wars began, it is estimated that 300,000 Serb men of military age went into exile rather than fight. Providing emotional, moral, and political support to these men who refused to participate in the fighting was one of the practical ways the women acted on their feminist and anti-militarist ideas. Some of these men, in turn, became valued members of the organisation (Cockburn, 2007: 85).

Because of their views, *Women in Black* were subjected to various forms of attacks. The attacks included verbal and physical assaults on the streets, both during and outside of street actions, destruction of the organisation's property, death threats against members, organised witch hunts and calls for lynching, and sexist outbursts. The use of sexist insults served to reduce their political message to "female hysteria" or moral depravity. Regime media called them "traitors", "foreign mercenaries", and other derogatory names and conducted media campaigns against the members. Almost no street action by *Women in Black* went by without physical and/or verbal attacks (Zajović and Spaić, 2022: 10). The attacks were not spontaneous actions or random incidents but were organised and systemic acts aimed at discrediting, isolating, and intimidating the members. In addition to random passersby, they were often attacked by organised groups such as members of paramilitary formations or far-right extremists. The sources of repression were society and the state apparatus. They were "traitors" because they rejected national homogenization and spoke publicly about the crimes being committed at the time by their own nation. One of the members stated: "*We protested in the street and exposed*

our bodies [using the body as an integral part of the political message] against the regime...people would come up to us who spat on us, pushed us, pulled our hair, and yelled that we were traitors." (Bilić, 2012: 159).

Police officers would often stand by while passersby attacked the women, intervening only when the situation escalated. Sometimes, the police officers themselves would hurl insults at the activists. The police's lack of reaction to these events indicated how complicit state authorities were in restricting the right to freedom of assembly (Zajović and Spasić, 2022: 87).

By standing in black, remaining silent, showing courage, and engaging in nonviolent action, they became highly visible in the public sphere of Serbian society in the 1990s. Women in Black were the first to show that it was possible to "take to the streets" in a strictly controlled regime. Their concept of long-term persistence (standing every week for years) is proof of the "possibility of nonviolent resistance" even under the harshest conditions. In doing so, they proved that a 'minority' movement can become the 'moral compass' of a society, ensuring that a critical voice is heard even in moments of greatest silence. They created a recipe for nonviolent resistance and perseverance.

After the end of all the armed conflicts in which Serbia was involved, Women in Black did not stop their work. They shifted their focus to confronting the past, being in solidarity with all victims of war, honouring the victims by visiting war crime sites, and insisting that the crimes not be forgotten and that Serbia's institutions confront what was done (Bilić, 2012: 160).

From the 1990s to today, the government in Serbia has changed, but the deep-seated mechanisms of the system have remained the same. After the collapse of the overhang at the Novi Sad train station (November 1, 2024), which killed

16 people, a new turning point was reached in Serbian society. A new wave of nonviolent resistance has begun, initiated by students demanding accountability for the deaths of 16 people and a change in political leadership. At the time of writing, the protests are still ongoing. The organisation Women in Black has offered its full support to the students. In the new nonviolent resistance on the streets across Serbia, female students are not just participants; they actively take part in the blockades and are also targeted by police intimidation and physical and verbal attacks by the authorities.

Women as Agents of Nonviolent Resistance During Euromaidan

On November 21, 2013, in Ukraine, protesters gathered on the main square in Kyiv to protest President Viktor Yanukovych⁵. At that time, Ukraine was at a deeply divided crossroads between European integration and a renewed strong bond with Russia. President Yanukovych's sudden withdrawal from Ukraine's Association Agreement with the European Union caused uncertainty about the country's future direction. For some Ukrainian citizens, membership in the European Union represented the only hope of bringing prosperity to Ukraine (Rukavina, 2024: 142). Aside from this reason, discontent among Ukrainian citizens had been smouldering for years. The causes lay in the oligarchic-clan system of power, corruption that permeated every sphere of society, and distrust in state institutions (ibid, 150). All of these were key drivers that brought the people of Ukraine onto the streets and sparked the Revolution of Dignity, better known as

⁵ Viktor Fedorovych Yanukovych was the President of Ukraine from 2010 to 2014, a prime minister on several occasions, and a member of parliament. He was ousted during the 2014 Revolution of Dignity and has since lived in exile in Russia.

Euromaidan. Depending on the authors, the uprising can be divided into two phases: the first phase, which began in 2013 with peaceful student protests in Kyiv, and the second phase in 2014 when the protests spread across the entire country, and police repression turned them from peaceful demonstrations into mass violent protests (ibid, 142). This paper focuses on the nonviolent part of Euromaidan, at a time when there was no immediate danger of war.

Although Ukraine has experienced earlier revolutions, during Euromaidan women nonetheless transitioned from the role of “helpers” to that of “creators” of the revolution. “Women of Euromaidan” do not operate as an organisation, like Women in Black, and therefore cannot be precisely defined. They are a generation of women who simultaneously navigated imposed traditional roles and actively participated in other protest roles, thereby permanently redefining public space in Ukraine. Their presence was multifaceted, and they occupied a space that was often under the strict supervision and regulation of male protesters. Although the media often emphasised the male aspects, women made up a huge part of the movement. At the very beginning of the protests, women made up as much as 44% of all participants (Martsenyuk, 2014: 17). According to the research, the motives for participating in the protest were multiple and often overlapping. The most common motive was opposition to corruption and human rights violations (60%), solidarity with the protesters (32%), the fight for a better future for their children (27%), and a sense of civic duty and helping society (24%) (Nikolayenko and DeCasper, 2018: 743).

Many women embraced traditional female roles and were often seen by fellow protesters, as well as the broader public, as aides to the male protesters rather than as revolutionaries in their own right (Khromeychuk, 2016: 6). Their reproductive

work - such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and logistics - was often undervalued and considered less important than the “real” fighting on the barricades (ibid, 17). In the post-Soviet context of Ukraine, such work in the private sphere (associated with women) is considered less prestigious. It rarely receives public recognition compared to “real” work in the public sphere. However, although at the start of the protests women were pushed into traditional roles, they took on the roles which marked the beginning of their growing visibility within the patriarchal environment. Women began offering legal aid to protesters, organising public lectures and documentary film screenings within the camp, patrolling barricades, distributing food and providing medical assistance, participating in negotiations, providing informational support, and handling logistics (ibid: 19). Ukrainian women thus fought for and occupied spaces traditionally reserved for men in the public sphere of a patriarchal society. Thanks to their participation in the Euromaidan protests, they became equal partners who shaped the protest and occupied male public spaces, unlike in earlier revolutions.⁶

The most prominent example of their organisation was the founding of the Euromaidan SOS initiative.⁷ The leaders of the initiative were women, most of whom were human rights activists (ibid, 7). Within the framework of the initiative, they coordinated activities, monitored cases of abuse, and ensured access to legal protection, thereby shielding individuals from the state’s repressive apparatus.

6 One example: “Unlike during the Orange Revolution, when women were predominantly the helpers of men in doing the revolution” (Martsenyuk 2014: 22)

7 *Euromaidan SOS* is an initiative that emerged in late November 2013, composed of lawyers, activists, and journalists who provide legal assistance to protesters, collect information on missing persons, and document human rights violations (Khromeychuk 2016: 7).

In addition to their involvement in mixed-gender collectives, they also operated through independently organised initiatives. They founded independent Women's Battalions ("Women's Sotnya") to make women's contributions visible and as a direct initiative by feminists appalled by the revolution's sexism. The most famous was the "Olga Kobylianska" Women's Battalion (Martsenyuk, 2014: 20). Although it was called a "battalion", it was not a military or violent formation, but rather an independent women's initiative focused on self-defence, guard duty, and organisational support within the nonviolent protest movement.

The activists organised special actions like "Women's Solidarity Night" to draw attention to their contributions, marching through Euromaidan with instruments and chanting "Freedom, equality, women's solidarity!". Their actions provoked hostile reactions from some protesters; they were told, "You're provocateurs! What are you doing?" and their banners were torn down (Nikolayenko and DeCasper, 2018: 727). Examples of sexism and misogyny were common. In the kitchens, you could find signs like: "Dear women, if you see trash - clean it up, [male] revolutionaries will be pleased", and there were also ads looking for "young women to create a positive atmosphere" (ibid, 17). There was also strong rhetoric among the male protesters and their "concern for women" that aimed to keep women away from "danger zones", not viewing them as capable of making decisions on their own (ibid, 16).

One of the more creative nonviolent actions by the protesters was the "Mirror Action". It was a powerful tactic in which protesters held torso-sized mirrors with the message "God, is that me!" as a counter-response to the police shields. The idea was for the police to see their reflections in the mirrors and confront their own actions. In addition, the protesters

offered tea to the police officers, played their national anthem, and attached flowers to the officers' shields.

Unfortunately, clashes with the police soon broke out, and Euromaidan became a violent protest. The police's violent crackdown on the protesters led to a large number of injuries and deaths, the radicalisation of the protesters, and ultimately the flight of President Yanukovich. "I realised that this was serious, that the state had now turned against its own people" (ibid, 738). It was precisely this realisation of a state attacking its own citizens that was key to mobilising women who had not previously considered themselves politically active. However, during Euromaidan, women in Ukraine had already shown how important they are in the public sphere through nonviolent engagement and participation, and how they can stand on equal footing with men.

After Euromaidan in 2014, there was the Russian annexation of Crimea⁸ and the war in Donbas⁹. Tensions continued over the following years, until the end of February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which remains an ongoing conflict. Unlike the Women in Black who were active in Serbia in the 1990s, a territory where no war was taking place, the women of Ukraine find themselves in a situation where an armed conflict is currently being waged on their territory. Thus, due to the newly emerged political and social circumstances, Ukrainian women have developed the view that defending the country is a prerequisite for preserving women's rights. They believe that a Russian victory means the

8 Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea occurred after the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, which involved a rapid military operation by Russian forces that led to international condemnation and the beginning of the broader Russo-Ukrainian conflict

9 The War in Donbas, or the War in Eastern Ukraine, began in 2014 after the Russian annexation of Crimea, pitting pro-Russian separatists against Ukrainian forces in a protracted armed conflict that has resulted in thousands of casualties and displaced civilians.

end of human rights and feminist achievements in Ukraine, and therefore, defence (which includes both men and women) is necessary.

Conclusion

The analysis of the work of the organisation Women in Black in Serbia and the role of women in the nonviolent phase of Euromaidan in Ukraine confirms the thesis that women's engagement in nonviolent resistance movements serves as a crucial corrective to their systemic social invisibility. Although these movements arose in different historical circumstances, both examples bear witness to the transformative power of women's presence in the public sphere. Women in Black and the women during the nonviolent phase of Euromaidan have shown that it is possible to "take to the streets" in a strictly controlled regime. In doing so, both groups fight against an external enemy - the state or regime - but also against an internal enemy: the patriarchy within their own people. Women in Black are the most consistent and longest-lasting example of nonviolent resistance in this region. With their continuous concept of "vigils", they proved that nonviolent resistance was possible while Serbia was carrying out military aggression against neighbouring countries.

On the other hand, during the nonviolent phase of the Euromaidan protests, women broke with the tradition of being considered exclusively "helpers" in revolutions through a wide range of actions - from logistics and legal aid to the establishment of women's battalions. Both cases show that women, faced with repression and physical risks, succeeded in redefining public space as a space for nonviolent action and gender equality. The connection between the activists of the

1990s and the female students protesting on the streets of Serbia today points to a continuity of nonviolent struggle. The connection between the women of Euromaidan and women today in Ukraine indicates that the struggle has changed in accordance with political and social influences, as military conflicts have taken place on the territory of the Ukrainian state. Women in Serbia and Ukraine have proven that a nonviolent movement can become a “moral compass” for society, ensuring that a critical voice is heard even in moments of greatest silence (until an insurmountable military barrier separates them).

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“I write for Balkan Talks because I believe that words are among the most powerful tools in the pursuit of a more just society and that critical writing can create space for dialogue, challenge injustice, and give a voice to those who are too often unheard.”

Letters Across a Vanishing Country: Epistolary Exchange as a Site of Feminist Transnational Counter-discourse in the Dissolution of Yugoslavia

Author: Ema Selimović

The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s represented not only a political and territorial rupture but also a profound transformation of cultural and identity patterns. At a moment when nationalist discourses became the dominant frameworks through which community, belonging, and the past were interpreted, literature and the cultural field became among the spaces in which such narratives were produced and legitimised. Against these homogenising narratives, various forms of resistance emerged, seeking to preserve spaces of individual experience, critical thought, and solidarity across newly established borders.

One such example is the collection of letters *Vjetar ide na jug i obrće se na sjever* [The Wind Blows South and Turns North] by Biljana Jovanović, Rada Iveković, Maruša Krese, and Radmila Lazić, written between 1991 and 1992, during the dissolution of the common Yugoslav space and the outbreak of wars. This epistolary exchange represents more than private communication between the authors; it constitutes a form of intellectual and political intervention, as the letters become a space in which anti-war, feminist, and transnational positions are articulated in opposition to dominant nationalist representations of war and identity.

This article argues that the collection *Vjetar ide na jug i obrće se na sjever* constructs a feminist transnational counter-discourse in opposition to the national, militaristic, and patriarchal discourses of the 1990s. In this context, counter-

discourse does not refer merely to a thematic opposition to dominant ideologies, but also to an alternative mode of producing knowledge about war, community, and identity. While nationalist narratives rely on homogenization and the division between “us” and “them”, these letters establish a space of plurality, dialogue, and solidarity.

Particular attention is given to the epistolary form as a literary genre that enables the emergence of such a counter-discourse. As a genre situated between the private and the public, the literary and the documentary, the autobiographical and the political, the letter allows intimate experience to become a form of public testimony and intellectual intervention. Its dialogical structure, hybridity, and orientation toward the Other create the possibility of a different model of community, one based not on national belonging but on the exchange of experiences and an ethics of solidarity. The feminist dimension of this intervention is also inscribed in the very process of textual production: collective authorship and the egalitarian exchange of voices embed the principles of feminist politics into the structure of the work itself.

The first part of this article examines the theoretical potential of the epistolary form as a space of feminist counter-discourse, focusing particularly on the relationship between the private and the public, generic hybridity, and the collective character of writing. The second part analyses the central themes addressed by the authors – nationalism, war, identity, borders, and the transformation of the role of the intellectual – as sites of resistance to dominant ideological narratives.

The Epistolary Form Between the Private, the Literary, and the Political: Theoretical Potentials of the Letter in Articulating Counter-discourse

The counter-discursive potential of the collection *Vjetar ide na jug i obrće se na sjever* does not derive solely from its thematic focus on the critique of war, nationalism, and patriarchal structures, but also from the very epistolary form through which this discourse is articulated. The letter does not appear here merely as a neutral medium for the transmission of experience, but as a specific space for the production of alternative forms of knowledge, alternative relations, and alternative models of subjectivity. Its ability to simultaneously function as an intimate record, a literary text, and a public intervention enables the authors to articulate a position that escapes dominant representations of war and national belonging.

In this sense, the letter emerges as a form that fundamentally disrupts the logic of dominant wartime discourses. Nationalist narratives of the 1990s were based on the principle of homogenization: they spoke on behalf of collectives, produced clear boundaries between “us” and “them”, and subordinated individual experiences to grand narratives of nation, territory, and historical necessity. In contrast, the epistolary mode is grounded in a relation to the Other. A letter cannot exist without an addressee; by its very structure, it is dialogical, directed toward another, and open to response. It is precisely this relational nature of the letter that enables the creation of a space not based on a singular voice and collective identification, but on an encounter between different experiences and perspectives.

In the case of *Vjetar ide na jug i obrće se na sjever*, this

dialogical function of the letter acquires a concrete political significance: the letters physically cross newly established borders, connecting authors who inhabit different geographical and political spaces. At a moment when the dissolution of Yugoslavia produces both physical and symbolic divisions, the very practice of correspondence becomes an act of maintaining broken connections and resisting the logic of separation. The borders established by war as supposedly insurmountable are crossed through epistolary exchange, creating an alternative space of communication and solidarity that is not determined by national belonging.

This characteristic gains particular significance within a feminist context, in which the very act of women's writing represents an intervention into the sphere of public discourse, traditionally privileged as a masculine domain. In this way, the authors "redefine the presence of women in both text and culture" (Omeragić, 2023: 60), producing an alternative position from which war can be articulated. While dominant political representations of war were shaped through the language of state interests, military strategies, and national collectives, this correspondence establishes a different epistemological perspective – the perspective of individual women whose experience of war is inseparable from the body, everyday life, relations of care, and affective bonds.

The transformation of private experience into a public statement represents one of the fundamental feminist interventions of this correspondence. The private is not understood here as a sphere outside politics, but as the very space in which the political manifests itself most directly. Fear, loss, a sense of unbelonging, care for others, or the experience of living under the pressure of newly established borders do not represent merely intimate reflections of the authors;

rather, they become ways of understanding broader social processes. As Omeragić argues, the letters in this collection simultaneously represent “intimate experience” and “the political and public framework in which women’s experience is situated” (Omeragić 2023: 53). In this way, the epistolary text transcends the traditional boundary between the private and the public: what had been relegated to the sphere of the personal becomes a relevant form of historical and political knowledge, affirming the feminist insight that the private, indeed, is always political.

The particular significance of this correspondence also lies in the fact that such knowledge is not produced individually, but collectively. The book is not the result of a single authoritative voice that retrospectively transforms experience into a closed interpretation, but rather a process of thinking that emerges through exchange, response, and dialogue. The text thus does not appear as a finished product, but as an ongoing process of negotiating the meaning of war events, identities, and political responsibility. Feminist values of solidarity, reciprocity, and equality are inscribed into the very process of textual production, since authorship is not based on the hierarchy of an individual voice, but on polyphony.

Such a model of collective authorship represents a direct opposition to the logic of nationalist narratives, which demand belonging to unified and closed identity categories. The community established through these letters is not a national community, but a community created through acts of communication and solidarity. It is not based on shared origin or territory, but on a shared ethical position towards violence. In this sense, epistolary exchange does not merely thematise the dissolution of one community; it simultaneously produces an alternative form of community.

The counterdiscursive potential of the letter further derives from its generic hybridity. As Janet Gurkin Altman argues, “the basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter, far from being merely ornamental or secondary, significantly influence the ways in which authors and readers of epistolary texts consciously and unconsciously produce (construct) meaning” (Altman, 1982, p. 4). For this reason, the epistolary form cannot be understood merely as a framework within which the authors’ political positions are expressed, but rather as one of the elements through which this alternative discourse itself is produced.

The epistolary form enables the simultaneous presence of different registers that are often separated within traditional divisions between the literary and the non-literary. Formally structured as a sequence of addressed letters, the correspondence functions, in terms of content, as a hybrid textual space in which essayistic analysis, political commentary, autobiographical reflection, documentary material, newspaper excerpts, testimonies of anti-war activities, and literary elements such as poetry intersect. It is precisely this openness of form that allows the authors to occupy multiple positions at once: as witnesses, analysts, and literary authors.

Such hybridity is not merely an aesthetic feature, but also a political potential. It enables the questioning of dominant models of knowledge that privilege objectified, institutional, and authoritative forms of discourse while marginalising experiential and affective modes of understanding. In these letters, emotion is not opposed to political analysis; rather, affective experience becomes a means of interpreting political violence. Fear, grief, and solidarity are not private additions to the historical analysis of war, but its essential elements.

Therefore, the epistolary form in this collection cannot

be understood merely as a means of organising the text, but rather as an alternative model of communication and meaning production. Where nationalist discourse establishes borders, the letter crosses them; where political discourse produces collective identities, epistolary exchange preserves the singularity of individual experiences; where war fragments community, it creates a space of reconnection. It is precisely in this capacity to simultaneously connect private experience and public intervention, intimate expression and political analysis, individual voices and collective thought that the counterdiscursive potential of this correspondence lies. The letters of Rada Iveković, Biljana Jovanović, Maruša Krese, and Radmila Lazić do not represent merely an alternative testimony about the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed, but establish a different way of understanding this historical moment.

In this article, feminist counterdiscourse is therefore understood not only as a substantive critique of nationalism, war, and patriarchal structures, but also as an alternative mode of knowledge production grounded in experience, affectivity, mutual listening, and the rejection of hierarchical models of speech. The authors' opposition to dominant discourses does not emerge solely from the themes they address, but also from the very structure of the text itself: while nationalist and militarist narratives rely on the homogenization of the collective, the division between "us" and "them", and the suppression of individual experience, this correspondence establishes a space of plurality, dialogue, and solidarity across newly created borders. The authors thus do not merely engage in a polemic with dominant representations of war in the political and media discourses of the 1990s; they produce their own interpretative space in which private experience becomes a

relevant category for understanding history.

This counterdiscourse takes shape through several interconnected thematic strands. First and foremost, the letters represent a critical response to the process of nationalising everyday life and the establishment of new borders that disrupted earlier forms of cultural and personal connection. At the same time, they develop an anti-war perspective that does not represent war through the logic of political projects and military strategies, but through experiences of fear, loss, violence, and ontological insecurity. Finally, the correspondence opens questions of identity at the moment of the dissolution of a shared space, as well as the question of intellectual responsibility among those who participated in the production of new nationalist narratives.

Mechanisms of the Nationalisation of Everyday Life

The authors understand war and nationalism as processes whose effects gradually become inscribed into everyday life. Because the letters function simultaneously as private records and testimonies of a public historical moment, they provide insight into how large political processes become experiences of everyday existence. The letters thus function as testimonies to the gradual process of the nationalisation of everyday life. This transformation is first visible in the way nationalism inscribes itself into public space, turning city streets into places of political representation and identification.

Describing Zagreb, Jovanović observes that “June seems not to be June, and Zagreb seems not to be Zagreb” (Jovanović, 1994, p. 15), thereby suggesting from the very beginning a sense of displacement and the loss of a familiar space. According to her testimony, the new political reality is first felt

precisely in the streets, where “every bookstore, shop of this or that kind, pastry shop and glassmaker’s shop has huge Tuđman portraits, with a sash, without a sash, the ‘collected works’ of the same person” (ibid), while “where there are no large photographs, there are small ones; and badges, emblems of the newly proclaimed state on socks and shirts” (ibid).

The author connects this description of Zagreb with her earlier experience of Belgrade, where several years before she had witnessed a similar transformation of public space: “there was no shop window in front of which you could stop without seeing that face on the left and right, in front and behind you” (ibid) – “Milošević’s pictures were carried by taxi drivers (...) and they were stuck in such a way that throughout the entire ride you had to look at that face” (ibid). By establishing this parallel between Zagreb and Belgrade, Jovanović rejects a nationally selective critique of nationalism. The repetition of the same patterns in different centres of former Yugoslavia reveals the logic of nationalist mobilisation itself: regardless of its specific national signifier, it produces similar mechanisms of homogenisation and the subordination of everyday life to political identity.

The process of the nationalisation of everyday life takes place on several levels: visual, spatial, psychological, linguistic, and cultural. One striking example of the spatial transformation of everyday life is the experience of newly established state borders. Iveković describes travelling between Slovenia and Croatia: “We are returning by car to Slovenia; they no longer accept dinars. We are forced to give them foreign currency; they return to us the proud independent ‘tolars’ with which we do not know what to do. Between Slovenia and Croatia, borders are being played with” (Iveković, 1994, p. 86). In this scene, the border appears as a political performance: it symbolically

confirms the new statehood while simultaneously producing practical confusion and a feeling of alienation.

As the war progresses, the process of nationalisation of everyday life develops into its militarisation. Rada Iveković describes Zagreb as a city that shares the fate of all wartime cities: “militarised, simplified, with heavily armed civilians and occasional soldiers walking through it” (Iveković, 1994, p. 88). War does not only change the political structure of space but also the very perception of everyday life: the city ceases to be a place of encounter and becomes a space of constant mobilisation, surveillance, and threat.

Alongside its spatial dimension, the nationalisation of everyday life also has a strong psychological dimension. Fear in the letters does not appear merely as a consequence of violence, but as one of the key mechanisms through which nationalist discourse sustains itself. Nationalism is not a natural category; it is produced, while fear is not merely its consequence but one of its instruments, and therefore has a political function. As Iveković observes, the population “driven into basements” (Iveković, 1994, p. 88) under the pressure of fear begins to accept chauvinistic patterns of thought: “the psychological effect is exactly the same, regardless of whether the attacks are real or imagined” (ibid). As “the population is consciously frightened and thereby successfully nationally homogenised” (ibid), the author argues that “citizens, in fear, accepted the militarisation of everyday life” (Iveković, 1994, p. 89), so that even “some among friends and people who under normal circumstances were not nationalists succumbed to national hysteria” (ibid).

The media and culture play a particularly important role in this process of national mobilisation: the radio on which “the most disgusting kitschy Croatian battle songs are roaring,

ugly and unintelligent, but apparently already calibrated to the lowered I.Q. system of a systematically stupefied people” (Iveković, 1994, p. 91), and propaganda television programmes that are “beneath human dignity, together with their contents, the lowest degree of information, with the main and only message being that we are good and they are attacking us, and therefore we should kill them” (ibid). The consequence of such a mediated image of the world is what the author calls the “narrowing of the human horizon” (ibid), in which a person is reduced “only to one dimension – the nation” (ibid), while culture, instrumentalised and impoverished, is reduced “to limited and hastily invented national symbols” (ibid).

We have all become short-sighted; they have closed us within narrow borders that we had never known before, and now, as we are suffocating culturally (...) from such a national, nationalist discourse (whether Serbian, Croatian, or any other), it will never be possible to move forward. We will never be able to build anything upon it; we have been thrown backwards into infinity. (Iveković 1994, p. 91)

The critique is also directed at the language through which nationalist discourse shapes reality and produces new value hierarchies in which certain concepts no longer function descriptively but evaluatively. Nationalisation also takes place through changes in the meanings of words: political and ethical categories that previously denoted certain values become stigmatised. Such is the case with the word “leftist”, which, as Jovanović observes, has “for some time now been derogatory” (Jovanović, 1994, p. 12).

However, the letters simultaneously reveal the cracks between nationalist categories and actual social relations, namely the fact that the new identities nationalism seeks to create according to principles of belonging do not correspond

to lived experiences. In one scene, the author describes a boy who proudly tells her that his family did not go down to the shelter because “a friend whose father is an officer in Belgrade” (Jovanović, 1994, p. 26) told them that “there would be no bombing” (ibid). Precisely this small scene, in which friendship with someone connected to Belgrade becomes a source of security at the very moment when Belgrade is represented in dominant discourse as a space of threat, reveals what nationalist discourse attempts to erase: the fact that everyday lives of people remained interconnected across borders that political discourse sought to make insurmountable, both before and during the war.

Feminist Critique of Militarised Masculinity

In the letters, war and nationalist mobilisation are also represented through their gendered dimension. The author connects the fear of violence with the emergence of “barbaric, primitive, bloated, overheated, nationalist and, of course, male ‘wisdom’” (Iveković, 1994, p. 17), thereby revealing war discourse as a space of affirmation of a particular model of masculinity, namely militarised masculinity based on aggression, domination, and readiness for violence.

Against such a logic, the author positions the female perspective as an anti-war position, expressed through the claim that “women are natural pacifists” (ibid) and that “no woman is so miserable as to polish a revolver” (ibid). The choice of the verb “polish” is particularly significant, as it suggests a relationship toward weapons that goes beyond their practical function: the weapon becomes an object of symbolic value, a sign of belonging and identification. In this sense, the rejection of fascination with weapons becomes a rejection of the entire

system of values that transforms violence into a means of political and gender affirmation.

However, this claim about an inherently female pacifism cannot be accepted without reservation. In later letters, the author herself rejects the possibility of a simple identification between women's experience and anti-nationalism, emphasising that women, including feminists, can also become nationalists and chauvinists. This shift should not be understood as inconsistency, but rather as a consequence of wartime experience that leads the author to abandon an essentialist understanding of gender and develop a more complex analysis of the relationship between nationalism, patriarchy, and political subjectivity. The epistolary form itself enables such a development of thought. Since the letters emerge alongside the ongoing experience of war, they do not record completed theoretical positions but rather the process through which these positions are formed. Therefore, what is more important than the statement about "female peacefulness" itself, is to trace the way in which the letters reveal the connection between nationalism and patriarchal structures of power.

In this context, the author's observation is particularly significant: "I am afraid of the rule of that petty crowd of men (in the democratically elected parliament there are fewer women than there have ever been during socialism)" (Iveković, 1994, p. 69). This sentence does not only express criticism of the absence of women from the political sphere, but also identifies the paradox of the transitional period: while the new society presents itself as more democratic, it simultaneously produces a regression in women's political position.

Maruša Krese connects war with the crisis of a particular model of masculinity, describing it as "the support of the

neurotic crisis of little middle-aged men, men who have always been afraid of life” (Krese, 1994, p. 72). This formulation moves nationalism away from the sphere of alleged historical necessity and places it within the sphere of power relations, suggesting that war is not merely a conflict between collectives but also a consequence of patriarchal patterns that construct political power through domination, fear, and violence.

In one of the theoretically most significant letters, Rada Iveković further develops this argument by connecting nationalism and war with the history of Western political subjectivity, which has been shaped as masculine. War thus ceases to be understood exclusively as the result of ethnic and territorial conflicts and becomes a symptom of deeper patriarchal structures. Iveković warns that the violence manifested in war does not emerge outside the social order, but rather radicalizes patterns of domination already present in peacetime social relations, arguing that “it is necessary to see war and extermination in their natural continuity with violence against women and children, beatings, rape, and various forms of hooliganism” (Iveković, 1994, p. 206), because “male violence in war cannot but be connected with other, traditionally male forms of violence against those who are physically and socially weaker or different” (ibid). Feminist critique here is not separate from the anti-nationalist position; rather, it emerges from it: rejecting nationalist logic simultaneously means rejecting the patriarchal model of political power upon which it is based.

Between Berlin and Belgrade: Different Modalities of Exile

The particular value of the collection lies in the fact that the authors write from different geographical and political positions, through which war is not represented as a single, unified experience, but rather as a network of different forms of existential displacement. The epistolary exchange connects spaces that war seeks to separate, demonstrating that the experience of war is not determined exclusively by physical proximity or distance from the battlefield.

Writing from Berlin, Rada Iveković paradoxically concludes that “it is even worse for me to be far away than to be close” (Iveković, 1994, p. 18), thereby questioning the assumption that physical distance also implies emotional distance from war. On the contrary, exile appears as a state of heightened awareness of one’s own powerlessness: distance does not liberate one from war but deepens the feeling of exclusion from the space to which the subject still belongs. Physically displaced, the author remains emotionally and politically immersed in the events unfolding in Yugoslavia, transforming exile into an experience of simultaneous absence and enduring presence.

In contrast, Radmila Lazić, writing from Belgrade, describes her own everyday life as a life “in a ghetto”, a space in which “one does not live, one does not exist, one merely endures” (Lazić, 1994, p. 293). Here, war no longer appears merely as an armed conflict but as a condition that suspends ordinary categories of space, time, and everyday existence. Particularly significant is her statement that she “does not live her own life, she lives images and news” (*ibid*), which demonstrates that war colonises not only public space but also the inner

world of the individual. Media images of violence become the dominant form through which reality is experienced, erasing the boundary between directly lived and mediated experience. Although they write from different locations, both authors share an experience of existential disorientation: one through the feeling of helpless distance, the other through confinement within the space of war. Exile thus does not appear in the collection solely as a geographical fact, but as a condition of disrupted belonging, in which the subject loses the possibility of establishing a stable relationship with space, community, and their own experience. Precisely through the difference between their positions, it becomes evident that war produces different forms of displacement, but the same fundamental impossibility of finding a place outside its reach.

It is precisely in this situation that the epistolary exchange becomes a means of overcoming forcibly established borders. While war fragments the shared space, the letters continue to sustain communication among the authors, producing a symbolic space of togetherness that can no longer be achieved through physical encounter.

Society as an Accomplice to Nationalism

In their letters, the authors do not confine their critique to political elites but also recognise broader patterns of social behaviour as contributing to the rise of nationalism. Their correspondence bears witness to a profound disappointment with a society that, instead of critically examining its own reality, cultivates a sense of self-satisfaction, collective self-sufficiency, and an illusion of normality, thereby indirectly enabling nationalism. In this sense, nationalism is not presented as an imposed ideology but as a phenomenon

consolidated through social conformism, the erosion of critical consciousness, and an unwillingness to confront society's own contradictions.

The author illustrates this social atmosphere through her description of Ljubljana, which, in her view, is becoming "an ever greater province" (Krese, 1994, p. 20), not in a geographical but in a cultural and mental sense. Particularly striking is the contrast between visible poverty and the display of material prosperity through luxury cars. While "poverty hits you over the head" (ibid), the author remarks that she "tries harder and harder each time to squeeze her Toyota between parked Volvos, Mercedeses, and 'modest' Passats" (ibid), which Krese interprets as revealing the gap between the actual condition of society and the image it constructs of itself. She identifies a similar mechanism in the growth of national self-confidence: people are, she writes, "increasingly satisfied with themselves, and most of all with their Slovenianness" (ibid). National identity thus assumes a compensatory function, becoming a substitute for confronting economic, cultural, and political crisis.

The social critique then extends to the cultural and intellectual sphere. Ironically invoking Lenin's statement that "every cook can become the president of the state" (Krese, 1994, p. 30), the author demonstrates how the emancipatory ideal of social equality was, in the post-socialist context, distorted into the collapse of standards of expertise, responsibility, and public authority. Yet with the concluding remark "I mean male cooks, just so we're clear" (ibid), she ironically redirects her argument, directing her criticism toward men who appropriate positions of political, cultural, and intellectual authority without possessing genuine competence. In doing so, the author simultaneously introduces a gendered dimension to her social

critique, suggesting that even after the collapse of the socialist system, the public sphere continues to be organised as a space of male domination, where authority derives from social power rather than knowledge or responsibility.

An equally sharp critique is directed at the phenomenon of social apoliticism. Recalling the proclamation of the new Serbian constitution alongside the killing of twenty-two people in Kosovo, Jovanović remembers that, at the same time, celebrations were taking place in Belgrade: “‘Apolitical’ young people were dancing over there by the Student Cultural Centre” (Jovanović, 1994, p. 132). It is precisely in this contradiction that the paradox of apoliticism is exposed - while rejecting politics as something that does not concern them, these young people “go to a concert organised by the authorities to celebrate the new constitution (the state)” (ibid), thereby participating in public events staged by the very government whose political decisions produce violence. Apoliticism thus emerges as an illusory category, representing not the absence of politics but the absence of critical awareness of one’s own participation in dominant political structures.

This critique gains additional force through the author’s observation that “the twenty-two dead were their peers” (ibid), reminding readers that political decisions are never abstract but directly shape human lives. At the same time, she exposes a disturbing lack of empathy: the fact that the deaths of their contemporaries fail to disrupt the sense of normality demonstrates how profoundly society has already become desensitised to the suffering of others. Apoliticism therefore manifests itself not only as the absence of political engagement but also as moral indifference – the inability to relate one’s own everyday life to the violence unfolding directly before one’s eyes.

Taken together, these letters demonstrate that the authors locate the causes of nationalist mobilisation not exclusively in the actions of political elites but also in the social mechanisms that enable its normalisation. Self-satisfaction, provincialization, the illusion of success, the erosion of critical standards, and declarative apoliticism are presented as different forms of social passivity that create fertile ground for the consolidation of nationalist ideologies. The social critique articulated in the letters is therefore directed not only against nationalism as a political project but also against the everyday patterns of thought and behaviour that sustain it, while simultaneously calling for the restoration of individual moral responsibility within the community.

Betrayal as an Ethical Position

One of the most important experiential positions from which the authors speak is precisely the position of the traitor. In the context of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, in which political loyalty increasingly became equated with national belonging, pacifism, anti-nationalism, and public criticism of one's own community came to be perceived as forms of betrayal. The label of the traitor was therefore not merely an external social stigma, but an experience that the authors gradually accepted as the price of ethical consistency.

This becomes particularly evident in Rada Iveković's letter, in which she describes the reactions to a text published in the Belgrade-based anti-war weekly *Vreme*, "the only anti-war and non-national, and especially non-nationalist, weekly" (Iveković, 1994, p. 89). "In Croatia", the author writes, "the text was understood as a hostile text against Croatia, as a text that accepted aggression" (ibid), whereby nationalist logic

operates according to a simple principle: “whoever is not with us is against us” (ibid).

However, the author does not address only her own public discrediting, although she notes that she is “attacked in the Croatian press almost every week by the ranks of self-appointed guardians of Croatian identity” (ibid), but also the silence of the liberal and non-nationalist intellectual scene, which remains silent because “none of the friends from the famous non-nationalist opposition found it appropriate to write a principled letter to the newspapers against this witch hunt” (ibid).

Such experiences simultaneously evoke a broader pattern of public persecution of anti-nationalist intellectual women in the early 1990s, when the national community functioned as a space of coercion. Among these cases, the persecution of Mira Furlan, the Croatian actress who continued performing in Belgrade at the beginning of the war, became one of the most recognisable examples. Furlan insisted that “it was the duty of her profession to build bridges” (Furlan, 1994, p. 102) and “not to give up cooperation and togetherness. But not national togetherness. Professional. Human.” (ibid).

Quoting her public letter, the author also cites a rhetorical question that reverses the usual moral hierarchy:

How many friends will we betray in order not to commit the great, only recognised, national betrayal? How many small human betrayals, how many petty acts of dishonesty must one commit in order to remain ‘pure before the nation’? (Furlan, 1994, p. 104).

In order for an individual to remain “pure before the nation” (ibid), they are forced to accept a series of everyday human betrayals: the betrayal of friendship, solidarity, professional responsibility, and their own convictions. National loyalty thus

reveals itself as a form of moral coercion.

The letters therefore radically reconsider the meaning of betrayal itself. Instead of understanding betrayal as abandonment of one's own community, the authors suggest that true betrayal occurs when, in the name of the collective, one abandons elementary ethical principles. This produces a complete reversal of the value system: the person labelled as a "traitor" becomes the bearer of moral consistency, while unconditional loyalty to the nation is exposed as a renunciation of responsibility toward others.

The figure of the traitor thus becomes one of the key ethical and political positions of the collection. Precisely because they accept the risk of public disqualification, the authors are able to articulate a counter-discourse that rejects national divisions and insists on individual responsibility. The position of the traitor is therefore not merely an experience of political marginalisation, but also a precondition for the possibility of a different kind of speech. Paradoxically, it is only outside the national consensus that it becomes possible to defend universalist values of peace, solidarity, and human rights.

The Greatest Sin of All Ten Deadly Sins: Yugonostalgia

The authors' attitude toward Yugoslavia could be summarised through several value categories that reconstruct the horizon of values that disappeared with its dissolution. In the letters, Yugoslavia does not primarily appear as a political entity, but as a space in which, despite the numerous contradictions of the socialist system, certain civic, cultural, and existential freedoms were possible. Reflecting on that period, Iveković emphasises that "the borders were open"

(Iveković, 1994, p. 65), that “one could live, one could write, one could speak” (ibid), directly opposing the dominant nationalist interpretation according to which the dissolution of Yugoslavia represented an act of liberation. In contrast to the rhetoric of national emancipation, the letters suggest that the dissolution of the common state simultaneously meant the narrowing of political, cultural, and symbolic space.

Yugoslavia also becomes a space of moral memory. Iveković recalls that the anti-fascist tradition represented one of its fundamental identity foundations and bitterly asks how “those people who lost their best years freezing, starving, and wounded” (Iveković, 1994, p. 67) feel today – those who sacrificed their lives in the struggle against fascism – when they witness the rehabilitation of ideologies and political figures that had opposed precisely those values. The nostalgia present in the letters is therefore not directed toward the state as such, but toward a moral horizon in which anti-fascism, solidarity, and coexistence represented socially desirable values.

A similar function is fulfilled by the reflection on the socialist experience. Ironising the accusation that she is a “child of communism” (Iveković, 1994, p. 68), Iveković responds that “everyone was a child of communism, or, better said, of reformed socialism” (ibid), reminding readers that this was an experience shared by an entire generation. The statement that “everyone was doing well” (ibid) – “so well that we became tired of that security” (ibid) – does not represent an uncritical apology of the socialist system, but rather a critique of the paradox according to which society only becomes aware of the value of certain things after their disappearance.

In this sense, Biljana Jovanović’s ironic anxiety is particularly significant: “Is some evil spirit awakening within me, the

greatest sin of all ten deadly sins: 'Yugonostalgia'?" (Jovanović, 1994, p. 240). Through this statement, she demonstrates that the new nationalist paradigm does not seek only to shape the present and the future, but also to establish control over legitimate ways of remembering the past. Yugonostalgia thus ceases to be merely an individual emotional response and becomes a politically discredited category.

The culmination of this reflection lies in the realisation that the value of a former way of life becomes visible only after its disappearance. Following Aleksa Đilas's thought that "it seems that all paradises are only lost paradises" (Lazić, 1994, p. 301), Lazić writes: "it seems to me now that everything was more beautiful before" (ibid), while simultaneously asking: "did everything really have to pass, or did all these horrors have to come, so that I/we could understand that it had been better, more beautiful, easier" (ibid).

It seemed to me as if I had been in paradise, but through my own fault I did not know that it was paradise, so I did not enjoy it. And now my hell is precisely this knowledge (Đilas, 1994, p. 301).

Precisely for this reason, the metaphor of the "lost paradise" in the letters emerges through memory: it is not an expression of a previously imagined utopia, but rather a retrospective construction shaped by the experience of loss, through which the value of shared life becomes most clearly revealed only when returning to it is no longer possible.

Deconstruction of the Nationalist Narrative

The letters, while bearing witness to the consequences of nationalism, simultaneously develop a theoretical critique of it. Nationalism is defined as an explicitly regressive phenomenon,

“on which we will never be able to build anything”, because of which society is “thrown endlessly backwards” (Iveković, 1994, p. 91), and from which, as such, “from this national, nationalist discourse (...) it will never be possible to move forward” (ibid).

One of the fundamental mechanisms of nationalist discourse identified by the authors is the binary opposition between “us” and “them”, in which one’s own community is always constructed as the victim, while responsibility for violence, within a nationalism based on the projection of guilt, is consistently attributed to the other. This is precisely why they insist that “disarmament, mentally and effectively, must begin with oneself and one’s own. Because beginning disarmament with the other means war, we all fell into this trap, because everyone thinks that only the other one is guilty” (Iveković, 1994, p. 93). This reverses the dominant logic of nationalism: peace is not possible through changing the other, but only through critically examining one’s own community. Self-criticism thus becomes a prerequisite for anti-nationalist politics.

The authors also expose the paradoxical logic of nationalist ideology, which presents violence as a necessary path toward a higher goal. Through an ironic sequence of questions – “Was it really necessary to destroy for that? To destroy in order to build, to kill in order to live, to wage war in order to achieve peace – what cynicism!” (Lazić, 1994, p. 100) – they demonstrate how nationalism relies on a rhetorical reversal in which destruction becomes a means of supposed renewal, and death becomes a prerequisite for life. It is precisely in this inversion of moral values that the authors recognise one of its most dangerous characteristics.

Subordinating all other interests to an abstract national interest meant “the realisation of the ‘national dream’ that

all Serbs should live in one state, even at the cost of our disappearance” (Lazić, 1994, p. 112). Therefore, the author ironically questions official rhetoric by asking: “As if literature and literary questions were not of general national interest. As if peace were not of general national interest” (ibid), and whether the general national interest consists of “tens of thousands of dead Serbs, hundreds of thousands of refugees, millions of mutilated souls” (ibid). In doing so, she exposes the internal contradiction of nationalist politics, which sacrifices its own population in the name of its supposed salvation.

The authors thus reveal the paradox of nationalist thinking: it claims to protect the collective while simultaneously producing conditions in which individuals themselves become its greatest victims. Their counter-discourse emerges precisely from the rejection of nationalist logic, which reduces complex realities to simple oppositions, places abstract collective goals above concrete human lives, and, in the name of the future, returns to destructive patterns of the past.

Ontological Groundlessness as a Consequence of the Loss of Homeland

In the letters, the dissolution of Yugoslavia is not presented primarily as the dissolution of a state, but as the dissolution of the existential coordinates through which the authors understand themselves and their own place in the world. The disappearance of the state is not understood merely as a historical event, but as an experience of ontological insecurity – a moment in which fundamental forms of belonging, continuity, and self-understanding are called into question.

This is most clearly expressed in the letter in which the author compares the loss of homeland to the loss of a parent:

“The loss of homeland, which is now becoming quite visible and perhaps even irreversible, personally belongs to me in the same category of events as my mother’s death” (Iveković, 1994, p. 18). Although she explicitly rejects and “despises every form of attachment to the contingency of one’s ethnic birth” (ibid), she does not understand homeland as a national category, but rather as an “anchor and security, a foundation without which we would not exist” (ibid). Therefore, losing one’s homeland, one’s ontological foundation, as well as losing one’s parents, means “being left without ground beneath one’s feet” (ibid) and experiencing “radical ontological insecurity and groundlessness” (ibid).

However, it is significant that Maruša Krese does not connect the feeling of belonging with national identity, but instead constructs it through a network of small everyday experiences. While watching images of the war on television from Berlin, she feels that she has been “deprived of everything that shaped me in life” (Krese, 1994, p. 144) – “the little things that meant something, the little things that made me who I am” (ibid). These include hours spent sitting on her rock by the sea, the pomegranate tree in the seaside garden planted by her father, the Albanian ice-cream seller, the market in Ljubljana, the fish at the market fish stall, and piles of watermelons from the south; her life space also included Sarajevo, which “always made me humble and complete” (ibid), Belgrade, which “filled me with energy and the joy of living” (ibid), and Ohrid, where she experienced her first love.

Against the homeland that she had “always felt and imagined as a whole” (ibid), the author rejects the violent reduction of a complex life experience – transnational and Yugoslav – to a single imposed national label: “And now I am Slovenian! To whose honour? Not mine” (ibid). Such a

label is incapable of replacing the entire biographical and emotional geography composed of different cities, people, and experiences.

We were always trans-republicans, transnationals; at that time, this was called being Yugoslav (Iveković, 1994, p. 18).

It is precisely through this understanding of identity that one of the fundamental elements of the counter-discourse of the letters is formed. In opposition to the nationalist logic that reduces identity to a single, inherited, and supposedly natural belonging, the author establishes a different model of subjectivity: identity as a network of experiences, relationships, and memories.

In this sense, the sentence “Goran is still my only homeland” (Iveković, 1994, p. 273) rewrites the concept of belonging by relocating homeland from the space of the nation to the space of relationships, producing a counter-discourse to the nationalist idea of belonging. Within this space of groundlessness, epistolary exchange becomes an attempt to restore, or rather maintain, continuity of transnational belonging and mutual recognition. Communication itself thus becomes a counter-discursive practice, testifying that, although a common state no longer exists, the values upon which it was once founded continue to exist.

Between the Individual and the Collective

Epistolary exchange functions by persistently returning to the collective what nationalist discourse erases: the face, the name, the biography, and the voice of the individual. Speaking about the process of nationalist homogenization, Iveković warns that “the pronoun we, terrifying when it takes on ethnic content, will become the most frequent pronoun, and the word

people (in constructions such as ‘the Serbian people,’ but also ‘the Croatian people,’ or any other people) will become the most frequent noun” (Iveković 1994: 257).

My dear Maruša, I am full of fears. For quite some time now, all speeches here have begun with: Brothers Serbs and sisters Serbs (or the other way around). It makes me sick. I hate the plural. I love you, Katica, Zdenka, Biljana... not Serb women, Croat women... (Lazić, 1994, p. 244)

The crucial point is that the problem does not lie in the idea of community itself, but in the moment when community is reduced to ethnic belonging and becomes a means of exclusion. The authors do not oppose individuality to every form of collectivity; rather, they oppose the nationalised collective that demands the complete identification of the individual with a predetermined category. Their letters simultaneously reject such homogenisation and affirm a different form of togetherness – one based on relationships, solidarity, and the recognition of difference.

It is precisely in this that the counter-discursive nature of their epistolary practice becomes evident: against the national “we” that erases the individual, they establish a plural “we” that emerges from a multitude of individual voices.

In this sense, nationalism appears not only as a political ideology but also as a mechanism for disciplining subjectivity. In a nationalised space, one “cannot be an individual” (Jovanović, 1994, p. 125): while “here individuality cannot scream, shout, laugh foolishly, or act silly” (ibid), it can “withdraw into itself”, but “if it steps outside itself, then it must be careful: the collective must preserve itself” (ibid).

The moment an individual speaks publicly and challenges the dominant collective narrative, the collective reacts in order to protect its own homogeneity. As in the case of the label

“traitor”, this reveals that the nationalist community demands not only belonging, but also obedience.

Counter-memory of the War: An Archive of Anti-War Resistance

Letters challenge the dominant national narratives according to which the societies of the former Yugoslavia were, at the moment of its dissolution, homogenously mobilised around national goals. Instead of producing an image of a universally accepted war and collective national solidarity, they create counter-memory: they preserve traces of demonstrations, petitions, civil disobedience, women’s initiatives, anti-war performances, and alternative political movements that existed alongside nationalist mobilization, and which represent “not only an important foundation for historical confrontation and re-examination, but also the basis of every further anti-war engagement and struggle for human rights in this region” (Veselinović, 2023, p. 311).

By documenting peace actions from different cities of former Yugoslavia – from Belgrade and Zagreb to Tuzla and Podgorica – the authors create a kind of alternative archive of resistance. In one of the letters, they note that “peace actions are spreading” (Lazić, 1994, p. 46): in Belgrade, protests are organised under the slogan “For negotiations instead of war”, in Zagreb, anti-war appeals are published, while in Tuzla there is a rebellion of reservists and the demobilization of two military units, after which “that Tuzla virus spread to Pančevo and some other cities in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina” (ibid). Such enumeration is not merely informative; it establishes a map of a different Yugoslavia – one that is not organised around national belonging, but around an ethical refusal of violence.

The particular value of these records lies in the authors' desire to rescue from oblivion the fact that "against the cynicism and shamelessness of Serbian and Croatian military commanders, in the midst of a merciless slaughter, where individual human lives are taken in the name of the entire national spirit" (Jovanović, 1994, p. 94), there nevertheless exist people "who have compassion for every person killed, regardless of which side they belonged to" (ibid).

The authors of the letters do not write only as witnesses of these processes; they are also their active participants and political actors. A particularly important place belongs to the establishment of the Civil Resistance Movement, whose initiators and signatories were partly connected with the circle of the authors. This movement represented an attempt to create an alternative political community based not on ethnic belonging, but on the protection of those who did not fit into the new national categories: people from mixed families, nationally unaffiliated individuals, Yugoslavs, members of minorities, and all those who refused to equalise national identity with state interests.

The epistolary exchange is particularly significant because it preserves not only private experiences but also documents of collective action. The letters transmit poems, declarations, open letters, petitions, newspaper clippings, protest slogans¹⁰, and reports from the streets. In this way, they cease to be merely communication between individuals and become a space where different forms of anti-war discourse circulate. Epistolary writing enables ephemeral traces of resistance –

¹⁰ Of particular importance in this regard are the student protests. Lazić and Jovanović note that "on the Wailing Wall (the glass side of the Faculty of Philosophy), messages and slogans were being posted and written: 'From the cradle to the grave, Sloba leads us there the fastest', 'Finish A Time of Death', 'Turn off the televisions, open your eyes' (...)" (Lazić & Jovanović, 1994, p. 234).

actions that could have been suppressed or forgotten within dominant national narratives – to remain preserved as part of an alternative political memory.

The letters also convey the content of specific anti-war actions. Among them is the proclamation “Black Mourning Ribbon through Belgrade”, which called on citizens to silently wear “one thousand three hundred meters of black ribbon” (...) as a sign of mourning for the thousands of deaths in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Lazić & Jovanović, 1994, p. 173). Alongside it, the authors include the Appeal–Demand addressed to Radovan Karadžić, Alija Izetbegović, and Stjepan Kljuić, in which citizens “guided by their conscience and elementary humanity” (Lazić & Jovanović, 1994, p. 173), demanded the cessation of the suffering of Sarajevo, the delivery of food and medicine, and even offered to “replace with their own lives those suffering in Sarajevo” (Lazić & Jovanović, 1994, p. 176). By incorporating such texts, the epistolary exchange moves beyond the boundaries of private correspondence and becomes a space for the circulation of public anti-war interventions.

The intermedial character of the epistolary exchange is particularly evident in the inclusion of newspaper texts within the very structure of the letters. The authors do not merely recount news about the war; they incorporate entire newspaper articles into their correspondence, such as Tontić’s open letter “To Belgrade, from Sarajevo”¹¹ published in *Književna reč*. In

11 “Immortal Belgrade! The citizens of Sarajevo are dying, dying in the most terrible suffering known to the world. From the old part of the city, where Sima Milutinović Sarajlija was born, to the Sarajevo Field, from which the ancestors of Ivo Andrić came, the city was completely engulfed in flames last night (May 28/29). Dozens and dozens of apartments, public buildings, and even places of worship have been destroyed and burned. What is being done to the city of Sarajevo and its inhabitants with mortars, cannons, and sniper rifles escapes human comprehension. Spiritually and intellectually, human beings have limited capacity to grasp and endure all this hell, this demonism of

this way, the epistolary text opens itself toward other media and exceeds the boundaries of private correspondence. The letter is no longer only a space of personal testimony but also a place of collecting, preserving, and redistributing public anti-war voices. By including the newspaper article, the authors simultaneously confirm its documentary value and ensure its circulation within a transnational network of resistance.

The letters also include public anti-war texts such as the open letter “Beloved Sarajevo”¹², broadcast on Radio 99 and

destruction.

Dear Belgrade! There is no Serbian republic, even if it stretched from the Atlantic to the Urals, for the sake of which the leveling of this unique city to the ground could ever be justified! And there are no anti-Serbian schemes of the ruling Muslim-Croat coalition - whatever they may be, and whatever we may know about them - that could justify this destruction of a shared civilization, this amount of suffering, blood, and death among the civilian population. (...)

Everything that is happening is incomprehensible, even if we were to assume something most absurd: that our blood, spiritual, and linguistic brothers - Muslims, the people of Skender Kulenović and Meša Selimović - are Martians whom it is permissible to torture and kill. But here still live, if they do not perish, around 150,000 Serbs and Serbian Yugoslavs, who are not only under suspicion and even terror from certain zealous regime supporters, but also under the same terror of the powerful attackers of Sarajevo. Isn't the paroxysmal meaning of the poorest sentence in contemporary aphoristic literature and journalism of our people precisely this: 'A Serb is a Serb to a Serb.' (...)

And I spent this night with my neighbors in the basement as well. Jesus Christ was with me. It seemed to me that we were forming a small republic, one measured by the size of the heart and love!

Immortal Belgrade! I beg you, with the tears of half a million citizens of Sarajevo, to decide immediately, at this very moment, to save the city of Sarajevo. If the city of Sarajevo perishes, dear Belgrade, the noose of hatred and destruction will tighten around you as well.

Sarajevo, 29 May 1992. Stevan Tontić (published in Književna reč) (Tontić, 1994, p 179)”

12 “To Stevan, Duška, Abdulah, Semezdin, Marko, Izet, Zdravko, Dževad... Belgrade is full of the shadows of all the destroyed cities, and the largest, darkest shadows are those of Sarajevo: the shadows of Death, as the three of us walk through the city, separately and together, a city that is sometimes alive - with street demonstrations - and sometimes dead: ours and no one's city anymore. The shadows of Sarajevo have been sitting and crouching inside us since April; nothing is done anymore except moving

published in Oslobođenje and Književna reč. By incorporating it, the epistolary exchange once again demonstrates its intermediality: the private letter becomes a medium that takes over, archives, and redistributes texts created in other public spaces. In this way, it preserves the continuity of anti-war communication across the borders of states, media, and national communities.

Precisely because of its ability to collect, connect, and preserve different voices, the epistolary form transcends its traditional boundaries and becomes a transnational archive of counter-discourse: it does not merely record alternative perspectives on the war, but preserves traces of concrete political, civic, and feminist practices that sought to maintain forms of community in the very places where nationalist policies were producing their destruction.

from the hell of the night into the hell of the day. Our life, once filled with shame and fear, has become an endless and destructive nightmare. Not a single piece of news from Grbavica, not a single one from Marindvor...

One night, the third among us, Jelena, says: Gather all your thoughts, everything warm from your soul and body, everything filled with love, and send it to Sarajevo! Pray for them! Pray for the City. For the City that is being killed with such enemy-like cruelty. Tiny points of this city here and there were collapsing into delirium and despair: when we made the Black Mourning Ribbon, in order to dress the city in black, and when we – Primož Bebler, Emir Geljo, and a few of us – intended to carry the great bells from destroyed churches through the city! In the end, we rang small bells and read Abdullah's Nightmare. Our shared nightmare. And the city, dear friends - the city is gone! The noose around it was tightened long ago, and the blades of hatred cut swiftly and mercilessly like the edge and point of a knife. And even if the buildings and structures remain, and even if we continue walking through the streets while imagining Sarajevo before us, we will be walking through a city of shadows. A city that has killed its own soul – by itself, out of fear, out of dark stupidity, out of dull indifference – who knows!? So terribly dead is the "immortal" Belgrade that everything happening now, even the anti-regime demonstrations, resembles life after death. April has slipped into May, May into June... the days descend into a beastly abyss, into a chasm where we leave one another – alive and dead, dead and alive.

In the dead Belgrade, June 1992" (Lazić, Jovanović & Trpković, 1994, p. 181)

Critique of Intellectuals: The Responsibility of Literature and Culture in the Production of Nationalism

The authors reject the dominant understanding of the intellectual as a moral authority. On the contrary, the letters argue that precisely a part of the literary and intellectual elite actively participates in the production of nationalist narratives or legitimises them through its silence. The critique is therefore directed not only at political elites, but also at writers, academics, and cultural workers who place their own symbolic capital in the service of national projects.

A particularly important place is given to the critique of the opportunism of intellectual elites. Recalling the shared Yugoslav cultural space, the author points out that many Slovenian artists achieved international recognition precisely thanks to Belgrade publishers, galleries, and literary networks. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the same space is erased from their biographies in order to construct a new national narrative, through which nationalism reveals itself as a form of historical forgetting. The author recognizes a similar logic at the writers' gathering in Vilenica, where she witnesses "Slovenian nationalism", "Slovenian chauvinism", and "Slovenian lack of solidarity with Kosovo writers" (Iveković, 1994, p. 66), who at the same time were being arrested, while their colleagues "did not spend a single word" on the matter (Iveković, 1994, p. 66).

At the same time, the author questions their subsequent reinterpretation of the socialist past: while speaking about the "dark" communist regime and the period when "life was narrowed and restricted" (Iveković, 1994, p. 66), and expressing joy that the time had finally come for "writers to crawl out of their holes" (Iveković, 1994, p. 66), they conceal the fact that precisely during that period they had published "as many as

twenty books each" (Iveković, 1994, p. 66), received significant fees, and held editorial positions in publishing houses. Their self-representation exclusively as victims of communism is therefore not an expression of historical truth, but rather an adaptation to a new ideological framework. The critique is not directed against Slovenian artists as a national group, but against the willingness of intellectual elites to erase their own cultural and professional past in accordance with changed political circumstances.

The most radical critique is directed toward the transformation of the public role of the intellectual. Lazić openly claims that "a large part of the responsibility for what is happening to us lies with writers as well" (Lazić, 1994, p. 112), calling them "fathers of the nation", "saviours of Serbia", and new messiahs. She interprets the dissolution of the Writers' Union as a kind of model for the dissolution of the state itself: the language of blackmail, accomplished facts, and national homogenization was first established within the cultural field and then became the dominant political pattern. Instead of a space in which people fought "for human rights, for individual civil freedoms, for artistic freedoms, the first in Yugoslavia, for everyone in Yugoslavia", where "over time the individual was replaced by the collective", "national rhetoric, mythomania and ethnomania began to flourish" - "peacemakers were replaced by death-makers", and "myth-makers became death-makers!". (Lazić, 1994, p. 113)

Through this statement, the author points to the transformation of the intellectual's function: instead of maintaining critical distance from political power and advocating universal rights, writers assume the role of producers of national narratives and guardians of collective identities. Particularly significant is the opposition "peacemakers – myth-

makers“, which summarizes the transition from the ethical and emancipatory role of literature toward its instrumentalization in the service of national homogenization. Referring to Sartre¹³, the author does not limit responsibility only to direct political action, but extends it to silence and passivity as well. Thus, responsibility for war and social catastrophe is not attributed exclusively to political elites, but is placed within the broader sphere of culture and intellectual activity.

This critique gains particular weight from the fact that Iveković defines intellectuals as “thinking people by profession“ (Iveković, 1994, p. 256). Precisely because of this, their failure does not represent merely a political mistake, but a moral and professional collapse: they are expected to possess the ability to think critically, question dominant narratives, and resist ideological simplifications. Instead of questioning dominant narratives, they “lined up in choirs, not to say hordes, howled together, repeated the national, if not nationalist, discourse, searched for a ‘theory’ to justify it, and listened to and praised the speeches of their national leaders“ (Iveković, 1994, p. 256).

Nationalism is thus revealed also as a form of moral corruption: many, as she writes, “paid with their own intellectual freedom for small privileges“ (Iveković, 1994, p. 258), exchanging their intellectual autonomy for social privileges and a sense of security. It is particularly important that she does not name money as the price, but intellectual freedom, suggesting that nationalism primarily destroys the possibility of independent thought.

13 “This ‘story’ was also meant to show that there are accomplices and co-perpetrators among us as well, or, as Sartre would say: ‘People of the same era from the same community, who experienced the same events, who ask themselves the same questions, or avoid answering the same questions, have the same taste in their mouths; in a certain way, they are accomplices, co-perpetrators among whom the same corpses lie.’” (Lazić, 1994, p. 113)

The letters also show that nationalism does not remain at the level of individual beliefs, but becomes an institutional practice within the cultural field. When the Croatian journal *Filozofska istraživanja* refuses to publish texts by authors from Belgrade, the author speaks of “ethnic cleansing in philosophy” (Iveković, 1994, p. 290), demonstrating how the logic of war is transferred into academic institutions as well. Ethnic belonging becomes more important than scholarly or literary value, whereby cultural institutions reproduce the same mechanisms of exclusion that operate in the political sphere. The Croatian editorial board, the author concludes, is “an editorial board of cowards and state sycophants and obvious nationalists, since it accepts this” (Iveković, 1994, p. 291).

The symbolic culmination of this critique is represented by the contrast between two poets – Vladimir Srebrov and Radovan Karadžić. The poet Vladimir Srebrov was arrested “for hostile activity” (Lazić, 1994, p. 294) because he “went from Sarajevo to Ilidža, as a Serb, to negotiate with Serbs: about a ceasefire, about supplying Sarajevo” (Lazić, 1994, p. 294). The opposition between the two poets functions almost as an allegory of the collapse of literature itself. On one side stands the poet who attempts to negotiate and stop violence; on the other stands the poet who participates in its organisation. Through this contrast, the author demonstrates that literature itself does not guarantee an ethical position: a poet can become both a peacemaker and a war criminal.

Precisely for this reason, the counter-discourse created by the authors is directed not only against political power but also against its cultural mediators. By opposing writers who produce national myths, they attempt to restore the original social function of the intellectual as someone who critically questions authority, rejects collective dogmas, and assumes

responsibility for the public word. In this sense, the letters represent not only a critique of the intellectual elite but also an attempt to redefine the very ethics of intellectual engagement.

Conclusion

The analysis of the collection *The Wind Goes South and Turns North* demonstrates that this correspondence represents a space in which a feminist and transnational counter-discourse is formed in opposition to the dominant nationalist, militaristic, and patriarchal narratives of the 1990s. The counter-discursive potential of the collection emerges from the symbiosis between the epistolary form and the themes articulated by the authors through it: from the letter's ability to connect the intimate and the public, the individual and the collective, the experiential and the political, as well as from the content that challenges dominant interpretations of war, nation, and identity.

Through experiences of ontological groundlessness, the loss of belonging, and the transformation of identity foundations, the authors demonstrate that the dissolution of Yugoslavia did not take place only on the political level but also within the sphere of personal lives. However, precisely through the act of writing and maintaining a transnational network of communication, they establish an alternative space of community, based on dialogue, solidarity, and the mutual recognition of different experiences, in opposition to national models of belonging that were shaped through exclusion.

The correspondence simultaneously represents a critique of the ways in which nationalism and war transformed the cultural field, particularly through the role of intellectuals and writers in the production of national narratives. By opposing

individual voices to homogenising collective ideologies, the authors reveal how mechanisms of nationalisation penetrated everyday life, literature, and public space. The documentary dimension of the letters is particularly significant in this regard, as it preserves the memory of anti-war movements and forms of solidarity that have been suppressed from dominant historical narratives.

The feminist dimension of the collection is visible not only in the themes the authors explore but also in the very process through which the text was created. Collective authorship, dialogical structure, and mutual support among the correspondents inscribe feminist values of solidarity and equality into the very structure of the work. Private communication thus transcends into a public intellectual act, while experiences of fear, loss, and everyday life become legitimate forms of knowledge about war.

In this sense, *Vjetar ide na jug i obrće se na sjever* is not merely a testimony to the dissolution of a political community but also a literary space of resistance in which alternative understandings of war, identity, and belonging are produced. By combining the epistolary form with feminist-oriented content, the authors create a counter-discourse that, instead of homogeneity, affirms plurality; instead of borders, solidarity; and instead of collective myths, individual experiences and responsibility.

Source

Jovanović, B., Iveković, R., Krese, M. & Lazić, R. 1994. *Vjetar ide na jug i obrće se na sjever*. Radio B92.

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“I write for Balkan Talks because I value its commitment to fostering critical discussions on the social, cultural, and political issues shaping the Western Balkans, while openly addressing the challenges that have marked the region for decades.”

“Biological Predisposition” and Media Pressure on Motherhood: An Analysis of Journalistic Code Violations in Serbia Based on Digital Portals

Author: Teodora Milovanović

When I observe the phenomenon of promoting childbirth, I notice that states and elites throughout history tend to intensify pressure on women's bodies whenever a crisis of resources or labour force emerges. One of the most obvious historical examples of such instrumentalisation is the Soviet “Order of the Mother Heroine” – a model through which the state awarded women with many children, thereby stripping motherhood of its status as a private choice and redefining it as a state function (Frejka & Zakharov, 2013).

Although we live in the digital age today, I observe that the essence of this matrix has not changed; only the channels of communication have shifted. Contemporary technological progress has provided new sources of information, but the mechanisms of pressure have remained the same, as the same narrative continues to be promoted in line with the interests of dominant political and social actors.

My thesis is that in today's Serbia, this mechanism no longer relies on state decorations, but has instead moved into the digital sphere: high-circulation online portals have taken over the role of instruments of moral pressure, where, through sensationalism and aggressive framing, women who choose to postpone motherhood are being disciplined.

For this reason, in this paper I aim to demonstrate that leading digital portals in Serbia deliberately and systematically violate the ethical standard of “due professional care” by reducing the complex sociological and economic reality of

declining birth rates to the alleged “selfishness” and “egoism” of women.

Through the lens of media ethics, I analyse how these portals misuse the concept of “biological predisposition” and promote the myth of the “biological clock” that is portrayed as ticking exclusively for women, while male infertility is deliberately omitted or ignored (World Health Organisation, 2023).

My research aims to dismantle the mechanisms through which women's personal and autonomous choices are pathologised and transformed into a public health crisis and a national emergency, thereby directly violating the Journalistic Code of Serbia (Journalists' Association of Serbia & Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, 2013).

Code of Journalists of Serbia

In search of an ethical and professional foundation for this research, I find a key point of reference in the Code of Journalists of Serbia, particularly in the sections regulating truthfulness in reporting and journalistic responsibility. When analysing aggressive narratives about birth rates on digital portals, I observe a deliberate and systematic disregard for three fundamental principles of this document.

First, the Code explicitly states that “a journalist is obliged to approach their work with due professional care”, along with a clear guideline that they “must not blindly trust sources of information”, as they often act in accordance with their own interests or the interests of the social groups they belong to. (Journalists' Association of Serbia & Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, 2013)

In the context of my research, I find that online portals

completely neglect this obligation. When they report statements by politicians, religious leaders, or conservative analysts who blame women for the “white plague”, tabloids treat these sources as absolute truths. I argue that the media here deliberately omit the immediate benefit and political interest behind these sources – namely, the shifting of responsibility from unsuccessful state demographic policies onto the private sphere of individuals.

Second, I identify as the most severe form of ethical violation the provision stating that “the omission of facts that could significantly influence the public’s perception of an event is equivalent to their intentional distortion or presentation of falsehoods” (Journalists’ Association of Serbia & Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia, 2013).

My argument is based precisely on this principle. When digital portals report on declining birth rates, they selectively remove key facts: data on the high rate of male infertility is omitted, thereby creating a misleading scientific picture in which the problem is presented as exclusively female; similarly, the socio-economic context in Serbia is ignored – such as the difficulty of obtaining housing loans and the dismissal of women after maternity leave.

Therefore, starting from the Code itself, I demonstrate that this media reasoning is not the result of ignorance or coincidence. The equation of omission with intentional falsehood provides a clear ethical basis for concluding that domestic portals do not merely inform the public, but actively construct a propaganda of pressure, thereby violating the professional imperative of objectivity in favour of ruling elite interests.

“The Biological Clock” as a Media Construct

It is particularly interesting how media manipulation becomes even more visible when contrasted with contemporary medical facts that online portals tend to omit deliberately. This observation has, in fact, led me to define the core problem within the media space in Serbia.

While the public discourse is saturated with panic about the “ticking female biological clock”, official data from the World Health Organisation indicate that infertility is not exclusively a female issue and that male reproductive factors play a significant role in fertility outcomes (World Health Organisation, 2023). Furthermore, biomedical research shows that male age is associated with a progressive decline in sperm quality and motility, with potential consequences for fertility and offspring health (Sharma et al., 2015).

By selectively omitting widely available scientific findings and focusing exclusively on women, domestic media outlets fail to provide balanced and comprehensive reporting. Data from international health organisations and biomedical studies on male reproductive health are publicly accessible and easily verifiable, which makes their absence from media narratives particularly significant.

From the perspective of the Journalistic Code of Serbia, journalists are required to ensure due professional care and to verify information from multiple relevant sources. The absence of male reproductive health data in reporting on fertility therefore suggests either a lack of adequate research or the omission of relevant information that could significantly influence public understanding of the issue. In both cases, such practices are not in line with the principles of balanced reporting.

As a result, scientific knowledge is reduced to a simplified and one-sided narrative in which biological factors are primarily used in relation to women, while the male contribution to reproductive health is largely absent from public discourse.

This deliberate reduction of scientific and medical discourse into gender-polarised propaganda does not remain hidden within the deeper layers of media texts, but is most explicitly revealed on the surface level – in the headlines of digital tabloids. Instead of functioning as neutral informational guides, these headlines operate as autonomous ideological instruments and primary generators of moral panic. Their role is to, through the deliberate creation of affective shock in just a few words, encode guilt and direct social anger toward a clearly defined demographic group – women who postpone motherhood.

To deconstruct this mechanism, the following section of the paper will analyse two representative examples from the portals *Informer* and *Alo*. Through a detailed examination of their tone, lexical choices, and pragmatic function, the analysis will demonstrate how the media pathologisation of women's reproductive choices is implemented in practice. To avoid a limited sample restricted solely to pro-government tabloids, it is also important to briefly consider how similar discursive patterns appear in non-tabloid and lifestyle-oriented media outlets. For instance, an article published on the Nova S women's portal "*Zadovoljna*" also relies on the concept of the "biological clock", although in a different context and with a more lifestyle-oriented framing (Nova S, 2024).

While this type of content does not employ nationalist or explicitly political narratives, it still reinforces problematic representations of female ageing and reproductive value. The emphasis on maintaining youthfulness and attractiveness,

even in older age, contributes to the normalisation of the idea that a woman's value remains closely tied to her reproductive potential and physical appearance. In this sense, the discourse shifts from demographic anxiety to aesthetic and lifestyle anxiety, but continues to reproduce gendered expectations.

Such representations can also be interpreted through the lens of ageism and the objectification of women's bodies, where ageing is constructed as a loss of value unless it is visually "reversed" or disguised. Although less overtly ideological than tabloid discourse, this form of framing still participates in the broader media construction of femininity as something that must be managed, controlled, and made visually acceptable.

Sensationalism as a Mechanism of Pressure

When I analyse the way domestic digital tabloids report on birth rates and women's reproductive decisions, it becomes clear to me that sensationalism is not merely a stylistic feature of their journalism. Its function goes far beyond simply attracting audience attention. I observe that sensationalist patterns serve as an effective mechanism for directing public opinion, shaping social values, and reproducing socially desirable models of behaviour.

In traditional understandings of journalism, the role of the media is to inform the public by providing accurate, verifiable, and contextualised information (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). In contrast, tabloid media shift their focus toward eliciting emotional responses from the audience (Postman, 1985; Bird, 1992). Instead of argumentation and explanation, they prioritise shock, fear, anxiety, and a sense of urgency. In this way, complex social issues cease to be subjects of rational discussion and become triggers for emotional reaction.

I believe that this is precisely why sensationalism is particularly suited to topics related to reproduction and parenthood. Unlike economic indicators or statistical data, issues of childbirth and family are deeply connected to identity, moral values, and social expectations. When such topics are presented through alarmist formulations, the audience does not perceive them as neutral information but as warnings of an alleged social threat.

It is especially important that sensationalism operates through simplification. Instead of presenting the decline in birth rates as the result of a complex interplay of economic, political, and cultural factors, the issue is reduced to a clearly identifiable scapegoat. In the analysed examples, this role is assigned to women who postpone motherhood. Such a strategy allows the media to translate complex processes into a simplified moral narrative in which there are clear culprits and clear victims.

In this sense, sensationalism does not only serve to increase readership or audience engagement, but is also widely understood in media theory as a mechanism of emotionalisation and audience mobilisation (Postman, 1985; Bird, 1992). Its function also involves disciplining behaviour through the creation of social pressure. Through the continuous repetition of the same messages, the audience becomes accustomed to certain patterns of thinking and begins to perceive them as natural and self-evident.

From this perspective, the problem of sensationalism is not limited to questions of professional journalistic standards. Its significance is much broader, as it affects the formation of social norms and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour (Entman, 1993). When certain choices are continuously presented as socially irresponsible, unnatural, or dangerous, the media

cease to function merely as intermediaries of information and instead become active participants in the construction of social reality.

Analysis of the headline of the portal Informer:
“ALARMING! SERBIAN WOMEN DO NOT WANT TO GIVE BIRTH, THEY ARE WAITING FOR THE PERFECT ONE” („ALARMANTNO! SRPKINJE NEĆE DA RAĐAJU, ČEKAJU IDEALNOG!”) (Informer, 2023)

At first glance, the headline functions as a simple piece of information about demographic trends. However, upon closer analysis, I demonstrate that this is not an informative statement, but rather an ideologically constructed narrative whose purpose is to individualise and personalise responsibility for a complex social problem.

The very first element of the headline – the exclamation “ALARMING!” („ALARMANTNO!”) – represents a typical example of sensationalist framing. Robert Entman argues that the media never presents reality in its entirety. Instead, they select certain aspects of reality, emphasise them, while simultaneously downplaying or completely omitting others. This process is known as framing.

In his most influential work, *Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm* (1993), Entman defines framing as a process of selecting and highlighting certain aspects of reality in order to promote a particular interpretation of events. According to him, a media frame performs four main functions: defining problems, identifying causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies.

Applied to this analysis, the functions can be outlined as follows: the problem is defined as low birth rates; the cause is

attributed to women who “do not want to give birth”; the moral judgment frames women as selfish and as having unrealistic expectations; and the proposed solution implies that women should start forming families at an earlier age.

Instead of allowing the reader to assess the significance of the information independently, the portal imposes an emotional framework through which the news must be interpreted in advance. The term “ALARMING!” („ALARMANTNO”) belongs to the language of crisis and emergency situations. Its function is not to inform, but to generate a sense of urgency, concern, and perceived social threat. This results in the reader entering the text already primed to interpret the issue as a serious social problem requiring the identification of a culprit.

Had the same data been presented differently, the interpretive frame would also have changed significantly. Research in demographic and social policy studies consistently shows that delayed childbearing is strongly associated with economic instability, housing affordability, labour market insecurity, and broader structural uncertainties faced by young adults (OECD, 2024; Eurostat, 2023). For example: “Young couples are postponing parenthood due to rising living costs and housing insecurity.” In this alternative framing, the problem would still be low birth rates, but the cause would be located in economic conditions, the moral evaluation would shift toward structural factors, and the proposed solution would imply state-level support measures.

From a lexical perspective, the headline begins with the exclamation „ALARMANTNO!”, written in capital letters, which in the digital environment functions as a visual scream. This lexical choice is designed to momentarily suspend rational reflection and activate basic fears related to existential insecurity and national decline (Postman, 1985; van Dijk,

1988).

The selection of the verb form “do not want to give birth” carries a strong moral implication. Instead of using formulations that would suggest inability, postponement, or economic barriers, the tabloid deliberately opts for an expression that implies mere whim, conscious refusal, and active rejection of a perceived social duty.

The second part of the headline – “waiting for the ideal one” – represents a key mechanism of trivialization and psychologisation of a structural social issue. Through this phrase, the tabloid reduces a complex decision regarding parenthood (which in reality depends on housing conditions, employment stability, partner relationships, and other factors) to a superficial, almost Hollywood-like fantasy of modern women seeking a “perfect man.”

The term “ideal” carries a strong evaluative connotation, as it suggests excessive demands and unrealistic expectations. In this way, women are infantilised and portrayed as immature, unrealistic, and selective individuals whose emotional illusions are framed as a threat to the demographic stability of the state.

This is followed by the central part of the headline: “Serbian women do not want to give birth.” From a linguistic perspective, the use of the verbal construction “do not want to” is particularly significant. Such phrasing does not describe objective circumstances, but instead implies a conscious and intentional decision. In other words, the decline in birth rates is not presented as a consequence of economic, social, or institutional factors, but rather as the result of women’s individual will (Entman, 1993; van Dijk, 1993; Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

In this way, a process of personalisation of responsibility

takes place. The social problem is depoliticised and transformed into a matter of the character of a specific group of people (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Elements such as unemployment, high real estate prices, precarious forms of work, youth migration, and insufficient institutional support for families disappear from the discourse. Instead, the reader is offered a simplified explanation in which the cause of the demographic crisis is the alleged unwillingness of women to fulfil their reproductive role, which is often described in sources as a “duty” of every woman.

Particularly significant is the use of the ethnonational marker “Serbian women”. Had the headline read “women in Serbia”, the focus would have remained on residents of a specific country. However, by using the term “Serbian women”, the issue is given a national dimension. A woman’s reproductive decision is no longer presented as a private matter of the individual, but as a question of national importance. In this way, an implicit link is created between the individual female body and the survival of the nation, which represents a characteristic element of pronatalist discourse.

In this context, digital tabloids in Serbia do not generate pressure on women in an ideological vacuum; rather, they function as media conduits and a kind of transmission belt for official demographic narratives coming from political leadership and religious authorities. When political leaders publicly frame declining birth rates as an issue of national survival, and religious officials equate reproductive choices with moral decline, tabloids translate these messages into the language of everyday sensationalism. They transform abstract political and theological agendas into direct, unambiguous targeting of individual women.

In this way, a synergy is created between institutional

power and the media space, where women's bodies are mapped as a national resource subject to public scrutiny, while responsibility for deep structural crises is successfully shifted away from state institutions (Entman, 1993; van Dijk, 1993).

Such a structure corresponds to a classic model of media construction of social scapegoats. Media scapegoating refers to the process by which complex social or structural problems are simplified and attributed to a specific group, which is then constructed as responsible for collective anxieties or crises, often without empirical justification.

From the perspective of the Code of Journalists of Serbia, this headline can be critically examined through the principle of due professional care. No relevant facts are provided to support the claims being made. The headline contains no data, statistics, research findings, or expert sources that would substantiate the claim that women postpone childbirth primarily due to the search for an "ideal" partner.

At the same time, numerous factors that could significantly contribute to understanding the issue are omitted. For this reason, the headline represents an example of reducing a complex social reality to a stereotypical and moralising narrative.

Analysis of the headline: “WOMEN IN SERBIA ARE GIVING BIRTH LATER AND LATER! Doctors in despair...” („ŽENE U SRBIJI RAĐAJU SVE KASNIJE! Lekari u očaju...”) (Alo, 2024)

In contrast to the Informer headline, which is based on direct blaming of women, the headline of the Alo portal employs a more sophisticated strategy of fear-induction that relies on the authority of the medical profession.

The first part of the headline – “Women in Serbia are giving birth later and later!” – formally presents a factual claim. However, the way it is framed already suggests a negative interpretation. The increase in the average age of first-time mothers is not inherently positive or negative; its meaning depends on context. Nevertheless, the exclamation mark at the end of the sentence signals that the phenomenon should be interpreted as problematic and alarming.

The key manipulative element appears in the second part of the headline: “Doctors in despair...”. The expression “in despair” represents an emotionally extreme formulation that does not function as a professional assessment but rather as an affective statement. In medical communication, terms implying panic or hopelessness are rarely used in this manner. For this reason, the phrase operates as a tool of dramatisation.

At the same time, the headline employs a strategy of appeal to authority. The reader is not told which doctors, from which institutions, or based on which studies and indicators are expressing concern. Instead, the vague category “doctors” is used as a guarantee of truthfulness. This is a classic example of one of the oldest and most effective propaganda techniques – testimony.

The key mechanism of this technique is authority transfer.

Testimony aims to transfer the authority, popularity, or expertise of a given figure - in this case, onto an idea - in order to generate automatic trust from the audience and encourage acceptance of the message without deeper critical evaluation (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019; Bernays, 1928). In this way, an effect of scientific legitimacy is created. The reader is given the impression that the statement reflects the position of the entire medical community, although no evidence is provided in the headline to support such a claim.

Particularly notable is the use of the ellipsis ("..."). In tabloid discourse, this punctuation mark functions as a device for creating suspense and additional dramatisation. It suggests that even more serious information will be revealed inside the article, thereby increasing curiosity and encouraging clicks.

When the headline is viewed through the theory of moral panic, several characteristic elements become visible. First, a social phenomenon is identified - postponed motherhood. This phenomenon is then framed as a serious threat to societal values. After that, an authority figure is introduced to confirm the severity of the problem. Finally, a sense of urgency and the need for reaction is produced among the audience.

What is particularly problematic is the fact that, in this case as well, no explanations are provided for why women postpone childbirth. Factors such as economic insecurity, extended education, changes in the labour market, housing policy, or shifts in patterns of partnership formation are once again excluded from the discourse. Instead, the focus remains on the mere fact of postponed motherhood, which is implicitly presented as a deviation from socially desirable behaviour.

From the perspective of media ethics, such a headline is problematic because it blurs the boundary between informing and emotional manipulation. Instead of providing context and

relevant facts, the audience is confronted with fear-based rhetoric that translates a complex social phenomenon into a simplified narrative of immediate danger.

Another detail that drew my attention during the analysis of this headline is the complete absence of men from the narrative. Although reproduction is a process that necessarily involves both sexes, the headline defines the issue exclusively through women. There is no mention of couples who are increasingly postponing the formation of families, nor of young people who delay parenthood due to various social and economic circumstances. Instead, the focus is placed solely on women and their reproductive decisions.

I consider this choice not to be accidental. By making women the only explicitly mentioned actors, responsibility for demographic changes is symbolically transferred onto them, while men are entirely removed from the public discussion on parenthood. As a consequence, the issue of birth rates is constructed as primarily a “women’s issue”, even though contemporary medical research clearly shows that reproductive health, fertility, and decisions about parenthood equally involve both partners.

In this way, media discourse not only simplifies a complex social problem, but also reproduces a traditional pattern in which responsibility for family and childbirth is almost exclusively attributed to women.

Multimodal Analysis

While analysing headlines in domestic tabloids, I realised that manipulation does not remain limited to text alone. In fact, a headline almost never functions independently. In digital media, it is nearly always paired with an image, and it is precisely through this combination of image and text that a much stronger message is created than either element could produce on its own.

For this reason, I believe that understanding how the media exert pressure on women requires attention to the visual dimension of their reporting as well. Ignoring images would mean overlooking one of the most important mechanisms of media influence. While text primarily operates on the level of conscious interpretation, visual content often functions much more subtly, shaping emotions, associations, and value judgments before the reader even begins to engage in rational reflection on the topic.

Because of this, images can reinforce, confirm, or direct the meaning of a headline, creating a perception that is later easily accepted as natural and self-evident (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Hall, 1997). In this way, visual elements are not merely illustrations of text, but an integral part of the process through which attitudes are formed, and social stereotypes are reproduced (Mulvey, 1975).

I have noticed that portals publishing texts about birth rates, the “biological clock”, or delayed parenthood very often rely on the same types of photographs. One of the most common patterns is the depiction of a young woman sitting alone, looking thoughtfully out of a window, or appearing emotionally burdened and distressed (Gill, 2007; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). A widely used example of this visual trope

can also be found in stock photography databases such as Getty Images or Shutterstock, where “lonely woman thinking” or “sad woman at window” are recurring motifs frequently used to illustrate articles about relationships, fertility, and ageing.

At first glance, such images may seem harmless, but their effect is far from neutral. They create the impression that women who have not become mothers are lonely, unhappy, or experiencing some form of personal crisis. In this way, visual content begins to suggest that the absence of motherhood is a problem inevitably leading to dissatisfaction and regret.

On the other hand, one can often see images of women travelling, drinking cocktails, enjoying luxury, or placed in aesthetically idealised life situations. When such visuals are combined with headlines about declining birth rates or women’s “irresponsibility” regarding reproduction, a very different message is formed. The reader is implicitly led to believe that women are consciously choosing pleasure, career, or a comfortable lifestyle over family and children. Although such claims are rarely stated explicitly in the text, they become visible through the way images and headlines are linked.

While the headline defines the problem and directs the reader’s attention, the image adds an emotional dimension to it and encourages a particular type of response. In this way, visuals reinforce the meaning of the headline and participate in shaping how the audience interprets a given social phenomenon.

Social Consequences of Media Pressure on Women

Looking at the broader picture, I believe that the greatest danger of such media narratives does not lie in individual headlines, but in their long-term and continuous repetition. When messages are repeatedly circulated over the years

suggesting that women are responsible for the demographic crisis, that they are “waiting too long”, or that they are selfish, selective, or overly focused on their careers, these ideas gradually stop being perceived as media constructions and begin to function as socially accepted truths. This is where I see the power of the media: not only in influencing public opinion, but also in shaping the issues people consider important and how they interpret social phenomena.

One of the most significant consequences of such reporting is the gradual narrowing of personal freedom and autonomy. Although, formally speaking, women still have the right to decide whether they want children, when, and under what conditions, the constant framing of certain choices as socially undesirable or even threatening to the “survival of the nation” makes that freedom increasingly symbolic rather than real. In this way, decisions that belong to the private sphere become subject to public evaluation and moral judgment.

I also believe that such narratives contribute to the strengthening of traditional gender roles. Instead of viewing women as complex social individuals with diverse identities and life goals, they are often reduced to their reproductive function. Their value is implicitly tied to motherhood, while other aspects of their identity are pushed into the background.

I find it particularly problematic that issues of birth rates are linked to patriotism and national responsibility. In the analysed examples, women’s reproductive decisions are often presented as a matter of national importance, creating the impression that a woman is not only deciding about her own life, but also about the “fate of the state”. Such discourse transforms a private choice into a patriotic obligation and may lead to women who do not fulfil the expected reproductive role being perceived as insufficiently responsible toward the

community.

At the same time, these narratives divert attention away from the real structural causes of demographic problems. Instead of discussing economic living conditions, employment insecurity, high housing prices, youth migration, or insufficient institutional support for families, the focus is shifted toward individual behaviour. In this way, responsibility for systemic issues is transferred from institutions to citizens, and particularly to women.

For all the reasons mentioned above, I conclude that the consequences of such media reporting go beyond questions of professional ethics and extend into the very structure of social relations. Through the continuous repetition of the same patterns, the idea that women's bodies and reproductive decisions are legitimate subjects of public control and evaluation is normalised.

In the long term, such discourse does not contribute to solving demographic problems, but instead produces an atmosphere of pressure and guilt, while simultaneously narrowing the space of individual freedom as one of the key values of contemporary society.

Conclusion

Qualitative discourse analysis and case studies of selected headlines indicate that sensationalism in tabloid practice is not merely a stylistic or commercial choice, but also a mechanism for producing moral panic. In this way, the phenomenon of declining birth rates is detached from its structural context. Instead of addressing factors such as employment insecurity, discrimination after maternity leave, economic instability, or lack of housing security, media discourse frequently reduces

the issue to individual characteristics of women, such as “selfishness”, “conformism”, or “hedonism.”

A particularly problematic aspect concerns the use of scientific and medical authority in media reporting. Through the technique of testimony, online portals often employ figures of doctors or vaguely defined medical communities (e.g., expressions such as “doctors in despair”) in order to present women’s private decisions as a matter of public health concern. In doing so, scientific facts are selectively and often one-sidedly interpreted, which deviates from established ethical standards in journalism.

In the same context, the emphasis on the narrative of the “biological clock”, alongside the simultaneous neglect of issues related to male reproductive health, contributes to the construction of an unbalanced and pseudoscientific framework.

The visual component of these texts further reinforces the described patterns. Contrasting visual representations - ranging from scenes of loneliness to idealised depictions of luxury - are used in a way that intensifies the emotional effect and may contribute to feelings of guilt and social pressure. In this manner, the influence of digital media is not limited to attracting attention; it also extends to shaping perceptions of social roles.

The results of the research indicate the need for more consistent adherence to media ethics and the strengthening of professional reporting standards, in order to bring the public sphere closer to a model of balanced and responsible information. This would reduce the space for sensationalism and the production of moral panic.

In conclusion, demographic processes cannot be reduced to simplified media narratives or individualised responsibility. It is

necessary to acknowledge the broader social context in which decisions about parenthood are made. In this sense, creating a stable, secure, and just social environment represents a fundamental prerequisite for free and responsible choice, as well as for more effective public demographic policies.

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“I write for Balkan Talks because I believe that freedom, open dialogue, and access to reliable information are essential if we want to move forward as a society. We cannot break deeply rooted stereotypes and prejudice unless we are willing to question what we have been taught and engage in honest conversations. I want to help make knowledge something people value again and be part of a space where facts matter more than propaganda. Most of all, I want people who sometimes feel alone because they think differently to know that they are not. There are many of us who believe in curiosity, empathy, and learning from one another, and I think our voices deserve to be heard.”



**Balkan Talkers Talk
Change: *Opinion Pieces***

The Limits of Justice: Wartime Sexual Violence After the Yugoslav Wars

Author: Jana Krstić

Over the past few months, the world has witnessed the exposure of several cases of horrific sexual violence. Following the shocking case of Gisèle Pelicot, whose husband subjected her to years of orchestrated sexual abuse (BBC News, 2025), and the release of the Epstein files, which shed light on the involvement of some of the world's most powerful figures in the exploitation of underage girls (U.S. Department of Justice, 2025), the public is now confronted with yet another disturbing revelation: CNN's investigation into a network dubbed the "global rape academy", where users exchange advice and content that encourages sexual violence. In just one month, the network recorded around 62 million visits (CNN, 2026). For comparison, BBC News received 41.2 million visits during the same month (February 2026).

Each of these cases has reignited conversations about rape culture, not least because the same types of comments appear beneath virtually every news report. First come the familiar accusations that the victim "asked for it" or somehow "provoked" her attackers. Then there are those who are not fundamentally different from the first group, those who turn sexual violence into a joke. But there is also another form of response: denial. Many insist that these crimes are merely symptoms of a world where "the good old values have disappeared", that "the younger generations have ruined everything", and that "things used to be different". Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth.

Romanticising the past, particularly when discussing

women's rights, women's experiences, and women's everyday lives, can be deeply dangerous. By denying women's experiences in the past, we risk becoming blind to women's experiences in the present. According to the World Health Organisation, one in three women worldwide, roughly 750 million women, will experience physical or sexual violence during their lifetime (World Health Organisation, 2021). This is not a new phenomenon. It only appears that way because it is only in recent generations that enough women have felt empowered to speak openly about it.

In humanitarian crises such as armed conflicts, the situation becomes even more alarming. United Nations research indicates that up to 70% of women and girls may be exposed to gender-based violence during war (UN Women, 2022). Where can they turn for support? Who can protect them? And can justice ever be truly achieved in such circumstances? Judging by the difficulties survivors already face in obtaining justice for sexual violence committed in times of peace, it is reasonable to assume that accountability is even more elusive when these crimes occur during war. Are we right to think so?

Wartime Sexual Violence Is Not Just a War Crime, Nor Is It Just Sexual Violence

Wartime sexual violence is neither an inevitable by-product of war nor a private tragedy unfolding somewhere on the sidelines while the “real” war is fought on the battlefield. It is an instrument of power exercised over the body, over the community, over memory, and over who is allowed to speak and who is expected to remain silent (Enloe, 2000). It is precisely there, in that struggle over whose voices are heard, that the problem begins with the way the law often

approaches wartime sexual violence: as merely one of many crimes committed against civilians, formally comparable to other forms of abuse, yet in practice frequently marginalised, diluted, or reduced to a matter of evidentiary risk.

In the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars, accountability for these crimes across the region has been slow and selective. In Serbia, for example, documentation by the Humanitarian Law Centre shows that the sentences imposed for the rape of three Romani women from Skočić were further reduced on appeal, revealing a striking disparity compared to the harsher punishment of rape cases involving non-Romani victims, as well as a broader pattern of impunity when the victims are Romani women (Humanitarian Law Centre, 2024). When it comes to reparations, Bosnia and Herzegovina has established important legal precedents. In several cases, courts awarded survivors of wartime rape financial compensation alongside prison sentences for the perpetrators (TRIAL International, 2022). Yet the enforcement system continues to produce secondary victimisation: survivors often wait for years, with little realistic prospect of ever receiving the compensation they have been awarded (*ibid*).

Viewed purely through legal categories, wartime sexual violence falls within the framework of war crimes and serious violations of international humanitarian law and, depending on the context, the pattern, and the widespread or systematic nature of the attack, may also constitute a crime against humanity. In domestic proceedings, however, sexual violence is often prosecuted under the broad offence of war crimes against the civilian population, alongside other acts such as persecution, unlawful detention, or physical abuse (Rome Statute, 1998, arts. 7–8; ICTY Prosecutor v. Kunarac et al., 2001).

The problem is not simply that domestic legal systems fail to address sexual violence. It is also that they too often address it reductively. Sexual violence is treated as one item on a list, another act to be proven, weighed against the evidence, compared with other offences, and ultimately folded into the overall judgment. In doing so, the law loses sight of what cannot be neatly accounted for: the specific consequences that sexual violence has for the survivor's life, her social position, the way her community perceives her, and the enduring stigma that does not disappear with the judge's signature on a verdict. This is the reality that feminist legal scholars have long argued cannot be adequately understood through formal legal categories alone (MacKinnon, 1994; Copelon, 1995).

There is yet another legal irony at play. The law is built on the principle of formal equality: a crime is a crime, a civilian is a civilian. Yet wartime sexual violence is rarely experienced as violence inflicted on only one individual. It is also experienced as a message directed at a family, an ethnic community, a neighbourhood, an entire village. It is a declaration of power over the body, and ultimately, over who is permitted to exist, rather than merely an assault against an individual victim (Enloe, 2000; MacKinnon, 1994). This dimension has been recognised in numerous reports on the wars in the former Yugoslavia, where rape is explicitly identified as a method of ethnic cleansing (ICTY).

Post-War Justice After the Yugoslav Wars

According to estimates by international organisations, the wars in the former Yugoslavia left behind approximately 30,000 women and 3,000 men who survived conflict-related sexual violence (UN Secretary-General, 1995; OSRSG-SVC, 2021). In the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars, the institutional response to wartime sexual violence across the region largely revolved around three questions: (1) whether these crimes would be prosecuted at all, (2) how long those proceedings would take, and (3) whom the law would recognise as a victim “visible enough” to deserve justice.

Over time, Serbia’s domestic judiciary has developed the institutional framework necessary to prosecute war crimes. Yet conflict-related sexual violence has remained significantly under-prosecuted, often incorporated into indictments only at later stages and burdened by lengthy judicial proceedings. One case highlighted in the Humanitarian Law Centre’s annual report on war crimes trials in Serbia has now dragged on for more than a decade, with the indictment repeatedly amended over the years, including the addition of allegations concerning the rape of a minor, while the proceedings themselves continue to be delayed (HLC, 2026). At the same time, the Humanitarian Law Centre’s analysis of the position of survivors of wartime rape concludes that Serbia has failed for years to provide adequate recognition and reparations for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (*ibid*). Among the key obstacles are restrictive conditions for obtaining the status of a civilian victim of war and the strikingly low number of domestic convictions for wartime sexual violence compared to the scale of the crimes committed.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the number of documented

cases and survivors is exceptionally high, has made important progress by allowing courts to award compensation to survivors within criminal proceedings rather than forcing them into separate civil litigation (TRIAL International, 2022). This development has rightly been recognised as a significant legal precedent. Yet progress should not be mistaken for justice. Even when compensation is awarded, survivors' ability to receive it often depends on the perpetrator's financial circumstances and on whether the state is willing to assume responsibility when the perpetrator cannot, or refuses to, pay. It is precisely here that institutional humiliation emerges. Justice exists on paper, but not in practice – not in access to therapy, not in social protection, and not in the survivor's sense that the state has truly stood behind them.

What Can We Do?

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this issue is not only that sexual violence was used as a weapon of war, but that post-war societies have so often accepted its intended consequences: silence, avoidance, the insistence that we should not disturb “our own”, the expectation that survivors should simply accept that “it's over”, while perpetrators are allowed to resume ordinary lives, sometimes even respectable ones.

That is why this article must end on a practical note, without sentimentality or moral grandstanding. Instead, it ends with a list of things that become necessary once you realise that “Never again” is little more than an empty slogan unless it is followed by action.

First, we must insist that wartime sexual violence be treated in public discourse as a matter of justice, not of shame. Shame

is not a legal category. It is a social mechanism for controlling survivors.

Second, we must resist the comfort of selective memory. We need to speak not only about what happened to “our grandmothers”, but also about our mothers, women who are still alive today, often living in the very same communities, still without legal status, without reparations, and without recognition.

Third, we must continue to pressure institutions to prosecute perpetrators who still live among us, in Serbia and throughout the region: prosecutors’ offices, courts, the political actors who determine budgets and institutional capacity, and the states that continue to choose the protection of war criminals over accountability. Endless proceedings, infrequent hearings, and cases that drag on for decades are not neutral bureaucratic failures. They are conscious institutional choices that allow justice to be delayed, and, ultimately, denied.

Fourth, we must recognise the unequal treatment of victims as a political issue. If sentences are lighter when the victims are Romani women, this is not merely a matter of “judicial practice”. It is a social hierarchy disguised as justice. It reveals whose suffering the system considers worthy of recognition – and whose lives it treats as disposable.

Fifth, we should build upon a social resource that already exists. Compared to previous generations, many young people today have a far deeper understanding of what rape and other forms of sexual violence mean, how trauma shapes survivors’ lives, and why “there is no evidence” is not the same as “it never happened”. That awareness is not a fashionable gesture. It is a potential source of political pressure for meaningful change.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must draw a clear line against the normalisation of perpetrators in public

life. When credible reports emerge that individuals with records of wartime crimes continue to circulate within political and para-political spaces (for example: Ćacilend, BIRN, 2025), the message sent to women is unmistakable: safety is conditional, and justice is negotiable. If we dismiss that as mere background noise, we become part of the very system that protects perpetrators instead of survivors.

This article, then, is not a call for sympathy. Sympathy is not enough. It is a call to action: to remember precisely, to speak responsibly, and to push institutions to stop protecting perpetrators of sexual violence and finally confront the legacy of the past. There will be no lasting peace in the Balkans until every war crime has been acknowledged, prosecuted, and brought to justice.

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Kindred or Succession: Sex-selective abortions in Montenegro

Author: Dunja Stojanović

Sex-selective abortions are an ongoing problem in the country of Montenegro. Meaning that because of deeply rooted patriarchal values in its people, couples who are trying to have a child often abuse the woman's reproductive right to abortion, using it to terminate a female fetus because they deem that the life of a female child is substantially less valuable than that of a male successor.

As said, the reasoning for this recurring problem is the country's heavy warrior history, consisting of families often referred to as "bratstva" or simply clans. Families functioned as part of bigger communities, with men as providers and leaders and women as wives who bore children. Male children would have to become leaders like their fathers, while female children would often be used as a tool for making connections with another clan through arranged marriages.

Although the patriarchy has lost this normative function in the meantime, due to progressive laws, it is still very prominent in the mindset of both men and women. In underdeveloped regions, both sexes still function in the same manner, continuing the "traditional way of living", and the mindset of "an inferior woman" is still very noticeable in a social construct of areas seemingly practising progressiveness. In order to understand the clear picture as to why sex-selective abortions are happening and who is committing them, it is important to understand the social construct of Montenegro.

Why would a woman oppose her own bodily autonomy?

A large number of women who commit sex-selective abortions are either born into this mindset that they must serve a man ("the head of the house") and have a male heir to continue his lineage, meaning they are far more caring and connected to sons than daughters, for sons are seen as more valuable to their family. So it is their own choice to commit "a crime against their own bodies", as they were taught that this is the right thing to do. Or, in more progressive areas of Montenegro, where women have more access to education, they are forced to commit sex-selective abortions against their will by her husband or members of her family. For if she doesn't, she might face either shame or abuse by said family. Thus, sex-selective abortions are an infringement of reproductive rights that allow for the abortion of a fetus based on its gender.

Notably, this problem is not only a Montenegrin phenomenon; male preference has been a global problem for centuries, and sex-selective abortion is also noticeable in countries like India, China, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, as well as in such former Soviet Bloc countries in the Caucasus like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and in the Balkans, with Serbia as an example (Barot, 2012). In Montenegro, since 2012, the UN Population Fund has documented a trend that is still ongoing: for every 100 female children born, 108-110 male children are born. It is believed that if, for every 100 children of a certain gender, 106 are born of the other, it must be human interference (UNFPA, 2026).

According to the Law on the Conditions and Procedure for the Termination of Pregnancy (Official Gazette of Montenegro, 2009), every woman of Montenegro has the right to abortion

before the fetus surpasses 10 weeks and up to twenty weeks, if the woman's life is in danger. On the other hand, the Law was amended in 2012, explicitly adding the prohibition against sex-selective abortion, along with the ban against using prenatal tests to determine the sex of the child (Law on the Conditions and Procedure for the termination of pregnancy, article 18). Therefore, pregnancy termination is legal in the first ten weeks, but the means to determine the sex of the baby and therefore use it as a reason for abortion are illegal. However, the real reason for the abortion is easily concealable from medical experts, and the general culture helps. Despite the very patriarchal traditions of the country, throughout history, termination of the fetus was very accessible, for it was one of the most prominent ways of "contraception".

The statistics show that there was a lack of knowledge regarding the usage of modern contraception and a reluctance towards hormonal contraception, resulting in a rising number of unwanted pregnancies (Nikolić and Banović, 2023). This was essentially a catalyst for the normalisation of abortion in Montenegro, despite the rigid patriarchal norms. Although this normalisation is not inherently negative, using it without proper prior education can lead to the misuse of this reproductive right.

A vivid example of this paradox is the country's parliament issuing a public apology to every woman in 2021 after its member, Dragan Ivanović, gave the controversial statement saying that "Every parent has the right to control the gender of their child" (Šćepanović, 2021). Only after the statement was publicly condemned by Aida Petrović from **the Montenegrin women's lobby** (Crnogorskog ženskog lobija), calling it inhumane and discriminatory, did the said member of the parliament apologise to the public (Šćepanović, 2021). This

apology showcases the contradiction between the country's law and its social norms. Fourteen years have passed since the legal prohibition of sex-selective abortion and abuse of medical procedures to determine the gender of the fetus for these purposes. And for all those years, the ratio of female and male children has not yet stabilised, and Montenegro suffers as one of the countries at the top of the list for the highest imbalance in the ratio of female and male children and the largest number of abortions for termination of the female fetus.

Since the implementation of the Law and its subsequent amendments, **the Council of Europe** has consistently highlighted how serious this problem is and how, in the future, it will be almost impossible to reach a balance. In 2012, they called for an investigation into this problem because of the first alarming results from the **UN Population Fund** mentioned above. The Government of Montenegro has given no response, so in 2017, **the Centre for Women's Rights** (Centar za ženska prava) started the campaign called "Unwanted" (Neželjena), which accumulated 6.000 signatures. Citizens demanded mandatory control over and a stop to the usage of prenatal tests for sex confirmation that will be used for sex-selective abortion if it is determined that the baby's gender is female.

Sex-selective abortions are a weapon against the female gender in every sense of it. It violates the rights of the mother, forcing her into aborting the female child she is carrying, but also violates the rights of female children to satisfy the needs of the patriarchal viewpoint that the male child is superior. Every woman needs to have her own free right to abortion, due to her personal reasons. But, in this case, these couples do want to have a child. They do not abort it because, for example, their material situation is not satisfactory, or the parents have some medical problems, and they can not successfully bring

their child into the right living conditions. They use abortion as a tool to “pick & choose” what correlates with their harmful beliefs.

It is a very harsh reality where patriarchal values are being intertwined with progressive rights of every woman. Even with women legally having the right over their own bodies, this law is being abused against the mother and the female child that is deemed less worthy of life just because of the sex it hasn't chosen.

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How many women must die in North Macedonia before institutions act?

Author: Lora Zaharievska

This is the question we all seem to ask ourselves every time there is a new femicide in North Macedonia.

After the tragic cases of Rosica Koceva and Ivana Jovanovska, you cannot help but feel the frustration of Macedonian women in the air. You cannot ignore the fear that slowly settles inside you. Because, deep down, you know. You know you could be next, and there might be no one there to protect you. How many more women must die before we stop pointing the finger at the victim and finding ways to blame her, as if she must have provoked her killer?

One day, I was sitting in a police station waiting for my friend to report an incident. Just minutes earlier, a man had attacked her in a parking lot. As I waited, my eyes wandered to a poster on the wall encouraging women to report gender-based violence. It spoke about the importance of reporting, about how little women in my country report violence.

For a moment, I thought about how reassuring it must look to someone walking into that station. It creates the impression that our institutions are ready to protect women, that reporting violence is the first step towards safety. But what really happens after a woman reports violence?

North Macedonia ranks third in Europe for femicides per capita (Euronews, 2025). Third, let that sink in. Every day, like reading the morning newspaper, I check the Ministry of Interior's Facebook page to see how many cases of domestic violence were reported the previous day. And for months, almost not a single day has passed without at least one

reported case.

Before Rosica Koceva was killed, she had reported her ex-boyfriend to the police several times. He had stalked her, threatened her and her family, and in the end killed Rosica, her father and himself.

Prizma reported that her killer was a well-known figure in Skopje's urban and creative circles, with a public image that concealed a long history of violence against women. His behaviour was known to former partners, friends and parts of the community. Yet this knowledge never translated into effective institutional protection. Prizma further reported that several former partners had accused him of stalking, distributing their intimate photographs without consent and engaging in repeated abusive behaviour. There were also allegations that he abused his pets (Gagovska, 2025).

And this is the part I struggle to understand. If so many people knew who he was, why was he still welcomed into social circles and invited to events? How does someone with such a well-known pattern of abusive behaviour continue to enjoy the trust and admiration of so many people?

We Macedonians have an opinion about everything. We involve ourselves in our neighbours' lives, comment on what women wear, where they go, who they date and how they choose to live. Yet when a woman says she is being abused, stalked or threatened, we suddenly decide it is "a private matter". We become silent the moment our voices would matter most.

Following Rosica's death, the Ministry of Interior's Internal Control Department identified irregularities in the handling of her case and proposed disciplinary proceedings against 11 employees (Deutsche Welle, 2025). Eleven missed chances to recognise the danger. Eleven opportunities to intervene

before Rosica became another statistic. How did they all fail to recognise the violence? Or did they simply turn a blind eye to it? Was it apathy? Was it misogyny? I truly need to understand what causes people to ignore someone so desperately in need of help.

Then came Ivana Jovanovska. She and her daughter died by suicide just days before the annual Women's Rights March on the 8th of March.

The violence that Ivana had experienced was reported several times. She asked for help. Her neighbours also reported it. She trusted that the institutions responsible for protecting her would do exactly that. They did not. Following her death, the Ministry of Interior's Internal Control Department identified irregularities in the conduct of 39 police officers who had handled previous reports of domestic violence (Deutsche Welle, 2026). Not one, not two, but thirty-nine officers who, in one way or another, failed to respond appropriately to warning signs that ultimately ended in a woman and her young daughter's death.

The failures did not end with the police. An inspection of the Centre for Social Work also identified irregularities in the way Ivana's case had been handled, leading the Public Prosecutor's Office to examine whether the responsible social workers had committed a criminal offence (Deutsche Welle, 2026).

Ivana's case resulted in a landmark judgment. Her husband was convicted of continuous domestic violence, endangering her security, and incitement to suicide following years of abuse. That judgment did not happen because the system suddenly worked. It happened because of relentless public pressure. Because women's rights organisations, journalists, activists and ordinary citizens refused to let Ivana's death become just another statistic. Justice should never depend on how loudly

the public demands it.

And I cannot write this text without also mentioning Ramajana Asan, a 36-year-old Romani woman from Šuto Orizari, killed by her partner in her own home in front of her five-year-old daughter. According to Romani women's organisations and human rights groups, Ramajana had previously reported domestic violence, yet the protection she needed never came. Her death was not only another case of intimate partner violence. It was also a reminder that Romani women often experience violence at the intersection of sexism, racism, poverty and institutional neglect (European Roma Rights Centre, 2025).

Recent amendments to the Criminal Code strengthened the possibility for the state to prosecute domestic violence offences ex officio, reducing victims' dependence on pursuing proceedings themselves.

North Macedonia has adopted legislation largely aligned with the Istanbul Convention. GREVIO has acknowledged these legislative developments while repeatedly warning that the greatest challenge lies in implementation. Effective protection requires timely risk assessment, coordinated institutional responses and due diligence by all authorities.

In other words, laws cannot prevent femicide if they remain words on paper. Women in my country are not failed because legislation does not exist. They are failed because institutions too often do not act when the law requires them to.

An analysis on women's access to justice published by the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association concludes that legal rights alone do not guarantee effective protection. Women continue to face institutional barriers, delays, inadequate responses, gender stereotypes and inconsistent implementation of the law when seeking justice (Macedonian

Young Lawyers Association, 2016). For women from marginalised communities, these barriers become even greater. Access to justice depends not only on what the law promises, but also on whether institutions respond rapidly and without delay, effectively and without discrimination. When they fail to do so, the consequences can be fatal.

Ramajana's name belongs in this article because institutional failure does not affect all women in the same way. Some women are ignored more easily and mourned less loudly. That is why any conversation about femicide in North Macedonia must also be a conversation that includes all women from all races, ethnicities and religions.

And thus, I have reached the end of my text, but I still wonder how many warning signs institutions need before they act? How many reports, how many complaints, how many frightened women, neighbours or witnesses must come forward before a woman's safety is treated as an emergency rather than another file on a desk?

We keep hearing the same sentence after every tragedy: "The institutions are investigating". But why do investigations so often begin only after a woman has already been killed? Justice after death following institutional neglect is not justice.

Rosica. Tankica. Ivana. Ramajana...

So many women I could write about, but my hands are tired from typing their names, and my heart is tired from knowing that behind every name was a woman who asked for help, feared for her life, or should have been protected before it was too late.

The question is no longer whether institutions are failing women. We already know the answer. The real question is how many more names we will have to add to this list before protecting women becomes something other than another

promise made after another femicide.

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“I write for Balkan Talks because young Balkan women’s voices deserve to be heard, and because I believe in the power of Balkan solidarity and mutual aid.”

The Reality of Femicide in Serbia – The Crime That Hurts Everyone

Author: Milica Marković

I'm starting to write this paper with a rock in my belly. The rock I feel represents the injustice that has already ossified in us as long as we have been fighting it. The world took the term "female rage" and made it meaningless with TikTok trends that focus on banal first-world problems. The world forgot that the real "female rage" is an unending wave of anger that crashes into our hearts because of the powerlessness we feel when we look directly into the eyes of the system. When the system is stripped of its romanticised traditionalism, the twisted desire for control lies beneath it.

In the Balkans, we seem to have unconsciously embedded the patriarchy and internalised misogyny as a standard; starting from the trivial things and upping to the serious subjects of womanhood. Women are expected to have and sustain a family and children, but when they plan to do something do contribute to those goals - such as getting a job, employers at job interviews are mostly interested in whether a woman has finished with giving birth or is still planning a family; or, we see many cases of woman employees that are dismissed and fired from work when they go on maternity leave after getting pregnant.

At the same time, we glorify the hells and miseries our female ancestors had to go through throughout their lives. For instance, we have all heard the infamous sayings that "our grandmothers and great-grandmothers gave birth to children in the fields with no doctor and they just dealt with it like real troopers", with the intention of minimising the agony

of said situations and ignoring the dangers it brought for the women and the children. We have been taught to stay silent on violence, because it's "family business" and "it shouldn't concern us". And consequently, our silence often leads to waking up to the news of another woman being murdered. The media sensationalises femicide as a "family tragedy" rather than gender-based violence and a hate crime.

In a patriarchal-capitalist society, the narrative that women are subordinate to men is realised in a variety of ways. Starting from the most banal situations, such as the fact that it is a "shame" that a woman does not take her husband's last name when getting married, to the fact that as a society we have become almost desensitised to the violence that is systematically perpetrated against women. Misogyny has been ubiquitous, in a milder or more severe form, since the beginning of time. Looking at the course of history, the concentration of misogyny and crimes against women is truly terrifying and heartbreaking.

In the Middle Ages, we were burned at the stake, accused of witchcraft for a variety of reasons; in the new century, they wouldn't allow us to go to school and become literate because they thought that women weren't meant to be educated; in modern times, we still feel misogyny on our skin, only now we have more possibilities at our hands and the ability to build our freedom. However, there is one evil of the human race that cannot be eradicated. That evil represents murder - the greatest manifestation of hatred directed from one human being to another. When we add hatred directed specifically towards women to that formula, we then get femicide. Femicide is the most severe form of hatred and violence against women. Femicide, in its essence, is an extreme and radical manifestation of misogyny, which is motivated by a perverted

sense of the superiority of men over women. This phenomenon can be viewed from many aspects - psychological, sociological, political, anthropological. However, the focus of this paper will be on the legal aspect of femicide. More specifically, we will analyse the occurrence of femicide in the Republic of Serbia from a criminal law and criminological point of view; all in order to better inform about this extremely negative social phenomenon.

Femicide from a criminal law perspective

Femicide, as a separate crime, does not exist in the Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia. Still, this type of murder is indirectly criminalised in several different places in the law. Primarily, through certain qualified forms of the crime of aggravated murder (Article 114 of the Criminal Code of the RS), specifically through: taking the life of a pregnant woman, taking the life of a family member who was previously abused, taking the life in reckless revenge with base motives, etc. Taking the life of a pregnant woman is the form of the crime most closely related to the general concept of femicide, as the only victim of this crime is a woman; this criminal offence is not applicable to anyone other than a woman. Depriving the life of a family member who was previously abused is the most common form of femicide in practice, but it is necessary to prove the continuity of violence against the victim in order to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the violence and the subsequent murder with direct intent. There are problems in practice with proving the continuity of violence, mostly due to the victim's fear of repression by the abuser, or the non-reaction of the competent institutions. Deprivation of life out of wanton revenge or other base motives occurs when

the perpetrator of the crime deprives the victim of life out of revenge, jealousy, possessiveness or similar reasons. Reckless revenge exists when the killing is committed out of selfish, narcissistic and dishonourable motives. In judicial practice, there is a stance that jealousy must be pathological, abnormal, based on selfish reasons.

However, when it comes to femicide, it is especially noticeable that the motive of jealousy is based on the patriarchal belief that a woman is a "man's property". A woman is seen as an object of appropriation, domination and control. Murder committed for these reasons only further indicates the deep presence of misogyny in the perpetrator and the treatment of women as their own property. When it comes to hatred as a motive, it should be pointed out that there are also special circumstances for determining the punishment for a criminal offense committed out of hatred (Article 54a of the Criminal Code of the RS), which stipulates that if the criminal offense is committed out of hatred because of race and religion, national or ethnic affiliation, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity of another person, the court will evaluate that circumstance as an aggravating one. In most cases of femicide in practice, this aggravating circumstance is more difficult to prove in court and is more often present in murders of members of marginalised groups. It is also important to mention that in some cases of femicide, the qualifying circumstance of taking someone's life in a cruel and insidious manner is also present. A cruel way means inflicting excessive physical or psychological suffering on the victim before or during the commission of the crime, or cruel treatment of the victim after the murder has been committed (eg, murder committed by inflicting an abnormally large number of stab wounds with a cold weapon). An insidious manner refers to an act carried out by deception or

by taking advantage of the victim's helplessness (eg, murder while sleeping). For all mentioned forms of aggravated murder, the law prescribes a prison sentence of at least ten years or life imprisonment.

The criminal offense of domestic violence (Article 194, paragraph 4 of the Criminal Code of the RS) is also one of the criminal offenses that indirectly incriminates femicide, if the death of a family member occurred as a result of the use of violence, by threatening to attack life or body, by insolent or reckless behaviour endangering the tranquility, physical integrity or mental state of one's family member and if a weapon, dangerous tool or other means suitable for causing serious injury was used during the commission of this criminal offense injuries or serious damage to health.

However, for the qualification of the act performed according to this article of the law, it is necessary to prove that there was no direct intention to kill the victim, but that the victim's death occurred negligently, without the direct intention of the perpetrator to cause it, and as a consequence of the incriminated acts (attack on life and body/threatening bodily integrity, etc.). Although this form of femicide is the one that occurs the most frequently in Serbian society, the seriousness of this crime is often relativised by qualifying the committed acts as domestic violence with a fatal outcome instead of aggravated murder, which leads to a milder punishment and less intense repression, thus "relieving" the perpetrator's responsibility. It is especially important to emphasise that this criminal offence is different from the aggravated murder of a family member who was previously abused, because in that criminal offence, the consequence of death is a result of intentional action, whereas in family violence, the consequence of death is a result of negligent action.

Femicide is indirectly regulated through the qualified form of the criminal offence of rape (Article 178, paragraph 4 of the Criminal Code of the RS), which prescribes a prison sentence of at least ten years to life imprisonment if the consequence of this criminal offence is the death of the person against whom the crime was committed or if the crime was committed against a child. The prison sentence for this offence has been increased by amendments to the Criminal Code of 2019, where the prison sentence of thirty to forty years in prison is changed to life imprisonment.

By listing the given legal regulations, the criminal law framework that protects women from femicide is presented in detail. It is necessary to adequately supplement the regulations in accordance with the obvious tendency of an increasing number of femicides in Serbia and the region. At the same time, attention must be paid to the problem of proving the continuity of abuse and the existence of base, dishonourable motives and hatred on the part of the perpetrator, in order to contribute to the efficient implementation of criminal proceedings and the imposition of an appropriate sentence on the perpetrator. Precisely because of insufficient or erroneously established evidence, the judiciary finds itself in a situation where it reclassifies a worse crime into a milder criminal offence, which greatly contributes to the deterioration of the judiciary's effectiveness in protecting women. In addition, the lack of response from competent institutions, or insufficient efficiency in the actions of internal affairs bodies or guardianship authorities, contributes not only to the legal insecurity of women, but also to real insecurity and distrust in institutions.

When it comes to introducing femicide as a separate criminal offence, there are several currents and arguments.

One side of the profession, analysts and legislators believe that constitutional and legislative acts equalise women and men and because of such reasons, it is not necessary to specifically incriminate the murder of women. The majority of states and their legislators adhere to this position, and so does the Republic of Serbia. In our country, Article 15 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia directly guarantees the equality of women and men and develops a policy of equal opportunities. Moreover, Article 21, which bans discrimination, indirectly guarantees equal rights between the sexes by prohibiting any discrimination, direct or indirect, on any grounds, and especially on the grounds of race, gender, nationality, etc. Therefore, if the legislator incriminated femicide as a separate criminal offence, it would be required by current constitutional logic also to incriminate androicide as a separate criminal offence. In comparative criminal legislation, similar to ours, gender-motivated murders are sanctioned with stricter prohibitions, and gender motivation affects the increase in penalties when determining them.

When it comes to the other side of the argument, there are opinions that the introduction of femicide would be of enormous importance for society. Women would feel safer, and a stronger prevention of the possible commission of femicide would be ensured; criminals would be less likely to commit this monstrous crime based on hate due to stricter regulations. In comparative law, we see examples of the special incrimination of femicide as a separate criminal offence - the criminal legislation of Latin American countries prescribes femicide as a special form of aggravated murder in an explicit manner, and not indirectly like other legislation. Although there are certain variations in determining the nature of the criminal offence (some specific circumstances and the profile of the

perpetrator), the essence is the same, and the penalties are certainly much stricter than for ordinary murder.

Finally, it is important to point out the discussions about whether femicide should be introduced as a separate criminal offence in Serbia. As already mentioned, the Constitution guarantees gender equality and the prohibition of discrimination. However, the question arises as to how much women are really protected in practice and on the real social stage, when we take into account all the violence committed against women and the femicide that is on the front pages of daily newspapers. Therefore, the existing legal solutions must be constantly reviewed and re-examined, following the increasing occurrences of femicide. If femicide were to be hypothetically introduced as a separate criminal offence, it is necessary to carry out reforms in the legal and political sphere of society. In order to introduce this legal innovation, it is necessary to ensure a solid institutional foundation and the credibility of judicial and administrative bodies. At the same time, the introduction of femicide as a separate criminal offence would contribute to the dilution of the deeply rooted patriarchal consciousness in our society. This would raise awareness of misogyny in an appropriate way, and give a desperately needed voice to all victims of violence.

Criminological aspect of femicide

Although there is no direct incrimination of femicide as a separate crime, its criminological importance is unfortunately extremely relevant. There is often controversy in the public that, due to the frequency of this phenomenon, femicide should be introduced as a separate crime in practice. One part of the public believes that this move is necessary and

urgent, while the other believes that this problem is sufficiently solved by indirect regulation. Whatever someone's opinion on incriminating femicide as a separate crime may be, it is undeniable that this form of gender-based murder deserves a much more detailed analysis and a greater dedication to finding adequate prevention and protection mechanisms, as well as adequate response from institutions and sanctioning of perpetrators.

Femicide also comes in various forms. At the same time, the most common form, which is also the most common subject of criminological and criminal law analysis, is intimate partner femicide. Perpetrators of intimate partner femicide are most often husbands/ex-husbands, lovers/ex-lovers, or emotional partners/ex-emotional partners. Behind this type of femicide lies jealousy and possessiveness of the perpetrator. There is also family femicide, in which the perpetrators are the father or stepfather, brothers, grandfathers, father-in-law or brother-in-law. Family femicide is most often the result of the deviant, twisted authoritarianism of the male figure in the family. In different parts of the world, femicide exists due to accusations of witchcraft and magic, mainly present in some African and Asian cultures. Although it was a relic of the past, this form of femicide is present in tribal communities with more primitive understandings. A specific form of femicide occurs during armed conflicts, where women are exposed to particularly severe danger and vulnerability. War crimes committed against women are in most cases accompanied by sexual, physical and psychological violence.

In court judgments, femicide is most often qualified as aggravated murder, and in a slightly smaller percentage as ordinary murder. The crime was also recorded as manslaughter, grievous bodily harm with fatal outcome, or domestic violence

with fatal outcome. Femicide is more frequent in cities than in the countryside, and in most cases, it is executed in the homes of the victims. This fact unfortunately refutes the widespread platitude “that a woman’s safe place is their home”, because the largest number of femicides takes place precisely in the homes of victims. It is devastating that a place that should be a safe harbour for a woman, where she feels the warmth of home, becomes a place where she suffers from violence and ultimately loses her life. Even if a woman wants to escape from the abuser, there is a great fear of persecution and endangerment, or in the worst case, revenge killing. Most femicides were committed with cold weapons or the use of physical force, and often through a combination of the two.

The available data speaks of the disturbing creativity of the perpetrators of the crime when choosing the means of committing the murder: some use “common means” such as sticks, bars, laths, rods and other heavy metal objects (hammers, axes, knives); while some criminals pour gasoline on their victims and set them on fire, or force their victims to consume poisonous substances, acids and other dangerous chemical compounds that destroy the human body. When it comes to the sanctions imposed on the perpetrators, the most commonly imposed sanction is a prison sentence. In cases where the perpetrator of the criminal act is an insane person unable to understand the significance of his act and manage his actions due to a mental illness or serious mental disorder, then a security measure of mandatory psychiatric treatment and custody in a health institution is imposed. Security measures can be imposed with a prison sentence, or independently, depending on the specific case, and all in accordance with legal regulations.

When paying attention to the profiles of femicide victims, it

is clear that the circle of victims is not entirely specific, but varies by many factors. It is also of great importance to note that data on victims is somewhat scarce. There are many reasons for this, and they vary in nature. Primarily, women do not report violence in a large number of cases. Such occurrences result in the scarcity of data for the institutions, which leads to them being unable to take necessary actions in the prevention and sanction of femicide. Subsequently, circumstances during the hearing of the defendants show that witnesses' and other people's statements in the criminal proceedings are not sufficient for obtaining completely objective data about the victim. Then, the very fact that femicide is not a separate crime leads to the fact that more detailed criminological analyses are not conducted, which helps to keep it in the "dark number of criminality". What is known is that the age of the victims varies from the youngest age of life (the victims were girls and even babies) to the elderly; the victims are married or cohabiting partners or were in an intimate partnership with the perpetrator. In most cases, they were also victims of all kinds of violence, and femicide represented only the culmination and final act of that violence.

Analysing the profile of the perpetrators, it was discovered that the perpetrators of femicide are almost always men. Although very rarely seen in practice, there are cases when women were perpetrators of femicide out of hatred for women; most often in South Asian provinces, when mothers-in-law would kill their daughters-in-law because of the insufficient dowry that a woman brings into the house (dowry femicide). The educational profile of the perpetrators consists of completed primary or secondary school, and there is very little information available about the perpetrators' occupations and workplaces. Often, they have already been convicted of

a criminal offence (ordinary recidivists), or more than once for the same offence (special recidivists), which indicates a mentality that tends toward a high degree of asociality and social disorder. The causes of specific cases of femicide mostly lie in disturbed relationships with traces of violence or with already existing verbal, psychological, physical, or sexual violence. The motives of femicide are reflected in pathological jealousy, the desire for revenge, hatred of women and the sick desire to possess and control the partner and her life.

Criminological analysis of femicide is based on empirical data, statistical calculations and estimates. It is characteristic of gender-based crimes that they belong to the so-called “dark number of crime”, because a huge number of crimes remain unreported, and due to the fact that these crimes remain in the shadows, criminological research remains largely incomplete. Femicide, precisely because of its unregulated nature, is impossible to fully analyse in detail and collect all adequate data. Research indicates that judicial authorities’ databases do not include gender as a search criterion. Due to the more difficult access to data, i.e. the insufficient availability of data, the collection of it is difficult, and therefore the statistical assessment is also difficult. The opinions of the professional public indicate that it is necessary to establish a systematic collection of empirical data on femicide. The most precise reports are brought by activists and organisations for the protection of women’s rights (Women Against Violence Network, Autonomous Women’s Centre, FemPlatz, etc.), who at the same time continuously appeal to institutions to more accurately record gender-based violence and femicide, and thus improve the systemic protection of women.

Instead of a conclusion

From a common sense point of view, it is expected that the progress of history will lead to radical changes in the social order. It is, surely, an evident phenomenon and a tangible experience - each generation has a more developed social awareness and more innovative ideas compared to the previous generation. However, there are always traces of what should be discarded as baggage, what hinders further progress. Femicide is a very serious social problem that requires an urgent increase in repression against murderers and the eradication of this phenomenon at the level of the entire society. Femicide is the most cancerous consequence of patriarchy and a reflection of all its flaws. In this sense, we must not turn a blind eye to the patriarchy that still lives around us and in us, especially in the Balkans.

Patriarchy lives around us because in the capitalist system powerful people profit from human suffering; and it lives in us as long as we hold ourselves to double standards, as long as we drown in internalised misogyny, and as long as we believe that "a woman is a wolf to a woman". It teaches us that emotions are weakness, that the point of life is only material security, that one gender is worth less than the other - female than male, or male than female. Patriarchy teaches us that it is better to suppress emotions if you are a man, to clench your teeth and never shed a tear if it is difficult for you, and to remain silent and suffer because "it can be worse" if you are a woman. Again, if you are a woman, it teaches you that you have to be good enough for everyone, even at the cost of putting yourself and your needs last place. If you are a man, it teaches you excessive and harmful harshness that leads to nothing but pain for you and the people around you. One thing

is for sure - all norms that are imposed without explanation will backfire. The backfire is already happening to all of us, but we are all still silent about it; and that silence is also an effect of patriarchy. We must also not allow any ideology to divide us and push us towards hatred and intolerance, no matter what we believe in. Feminism, in my opinion, represents the struggle and battle for elementary equality and basic justice between the sexes, and not anything less or more. If feminism is misused to manifest any form of intolerance and unfounded exclusivity, it is only going to deepen the existing irreconcilability between the sexes. It is essential to improve education on the importance of gender equality in society and eradicate discrimination of any form. The awareness that men and women are beings of equal importance and value must be instilled, and every form of superiority of one sex over the other must be eliminated; only then can we expect social peace. Absence of understanding leads only to a deeper gap of division, and it will never lead to a better social climate and a more peaceful life. We are all tired and breathing heavily because of the injustice and crime around us. Therefore, the traumas that patriarchy has inflicted on the whole world must be healed and left in the past, where they belong.

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When the System Pulls the Trigger: The Femicide of Aldina Jahić and Institutional Failure in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Author: Almin Šemić

One gunshot does not take only one life.
It exposes everything that society has ignored for years.

Or was it the system all along?

The case of Aldina Jahić from Mostar shocked Bosnia and Herzegovina and once again raised the question of how safe women in the country truly are. Behind every crime like this, there is a grieving family, friends searching for answers, and a society that briefly unites in condemnation before moving on. However, femicide is neither an isolated incident nor a “family tragedy.” It is the most extreme form of gender-based violence and a serious social issue that demands a systemic response.

According to data from the Gender Equality Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 56 women were killed between 2015 and 2020. Between 2021 and 2022, another 16 women lost their lives, while 35 women were killed between 2023 and 2024. Particularly alarming is the fact that a significant number of victims were murdered by their current or former partners, confirming that femicide most often occurs in the very place that should be the safest - a woman’s own home or within an intimate relationship.

Behind every number is a name, a family, and a life that could have been saved. That is why femicide must never be reduced to statistics. When institutions fail to recognise the seriousness of threats, when reports of violence are treated

as administrative procedures rather than urgent warnings, the risk of a fatal outcome increases dramatically. Every case demonstrates how essential it is for the police, the judiciary, social welfare centres, and other competent institutions to act swiftly, in coordination, and with determination.

Many perpetrators were already known to the police and the Prosecutor's Office because of previous threats, violent behaviour, or attempted murder. Yet, far too often, they are released within 24 hours and return to the same cycle of violence. This raises an uncomfortable but necessary question: how many warning signs must be ignored before another woman loses her life?

This is why it is crucial for the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina to fulfil their responsibilities effectively and to address the systemic failures that continue to place women at risk.

The fight against femicide does not end with the adoption of laws. It requires a change in social attitudes, education about gender-based violence, greater support for safe houses, more effective prosecution of abusers, and stronger protection for women who report threats. No woman should lose her life because she decided to leave an abusive relationship or because she told someone "no."

As long as femicide is discussed only after a tragedy has occurred, rather than before it happens, there is a real danger that another woman's name will be added to the list of those who have already become victims.

Almin Šemić is a 24-year-old from Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. He is currently studying Journalism and Public Relations. Alongside his studies, he writes poetry for Librum and serves as a member of the PR team at the humanitarian organisation Ruku na Srce. His work explores society, culture, and everyday life through both journalism and creative writing.

“I write for Balkan Talks because it gives me the freedom to write about social issues that many other media outlets choose not to cover. For me, Balkan Talks is a place where I can truly enjoy writing while contributing to meaningful public dialogue.”

Women in Slovenian Politics

Author: Nina Anžič

Today, hardly anyone has not heard of climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 5 is dedicated to Gender Equality. In Slovenia, we demonstrated certain achievements in gender equality when we elected our first female President of the Republic in the history of our independent state in 2022. Even before electing the president, we also welcomed a woman to head the legislative branch of power - the Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia, Mag. Urška Klakočar Zupančič.

But what happened after they took office, especially in the case of the latter? On the day of the constitutive session, the now former Speaker of the National Assembly wore red high heels. The entire country and the Slovenian opposition talked about it as an inappropriate choice of footwear. Thus, red high heels quickly became a symbol of women in politics, as well as the former Speaker's signature trademark. Once the high heels were forgotten, judgment shifted to her mental health, her behaviour, and her manner of expression, with everything quickly being spun into a scandal. The Slovenian opposition and media of that time allowed themselves to use the lowest possible manouvres to insult her.

Now, let us turn to the President. In Slovenia, the rule is that the President of the Republic - today Dr Nataša Pirc Musar - is the official "head of state". Yet, the paradox of this office is that within the Slovenian constitutional system, it carries very few actual powers. Despite this, the President carries the weight of a strong moral authority, being the only politician in the country directly elected by the citizens. From the very

beginning of her election campaign, the President emphasised that she would not remain silent, regardless of daily politics. As expected, this stance frequently led to sharp disputes and periods of cold silence with the former Prime Minister.

Today, after the parliamentary elections in March brought a new right-wing coalition to power in Slovenia, the disrespect toward the President was on full display at the state ceremony celebrating the country's 35th anniversary. Our "moral leader", Dr Pirc Musar, was loudly booed right in the middle of her speech. The logical and necessary question is: why? Because in her address, she dared to mention the crucial pillars of a functioning democracy: civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and a public, independent Radio and Television Slovenia.

After the ceremony, the President stated: "This says more about them than it does about me". Despite the tolerance expressed by the President, as a young woman, I view this as a clear attempt to discredit women who dare to speak their minds. She spoke on the very same square where the first President, Milan Kučan, uttered the iconic words in 1991: "Today dreams are permitted, tomorrow is a new day".

Slovenia also had its first female Prime Minister in 2013, though only for a single year. Alenka Bratušek, much like the previously mentioned former Speaker of the National Assembly, was subjected to constant comments about her skirts and shoes. The length of her mandate was mockingly judged to be as short as the length of her skirt.

Although Slovenia has already seen women hold all of the country's most prominent leadership positions, the public and certain political currents since 2013 still prefer to criticise the clothing choices and mental health of these women, rather than respecting their hard work and substance. Gender

equality is not just about having a woman in office; it is about respecting her work and her authority.

Nina Anžič is a 23-year-old from Slovenia. She graduated from the Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security at the University of Maribor.

“I write for Balkan Talks because it’s important for young people to have a platform where we can share our views and thoughts.”

Women, Tobacco and Smoking in Bulgaria

Author: Tao Romevo

It might not be visible today, but Bulgaria was the first tobacco producer and exporter in the 1980s. Before that, tobacco cultivation in Bulgaria started in the 18th century when Bulgaria was still a part of the Ottoman Empire. Up until the Second World War, Bulgaria expanded this cultivation further, making it an important part of the country's economy. During communist Bulgaria, tobacco cultivation and exportation exploded to the point that "half the population smoked and a fourth worked in the tobacco industry" in 1982. Thus, tobacco is intrinsically linked to Bulgaria's society, economy, and politics.

This article proposes a focus on the history of women, tobacco cultivation, and smoking in Bulgaria since the 19th century. It is based on the wonderful work of Mary C. Neuburger: *Balkan Smoke: Tobacco and the Making of Modern Bulgaria*, published in 2013 by Cornell University Press.

I. Women and Smoking in Bulgaria: from the 19th Century to the Second World War

A. Tobacco entering Bulgaria and women's life

Bulgaria, after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 and its partial liberation, was still de jure a part of the Ottoman Empire. Nonetheless, it was already functioning independently de facto after 1878 and even more after the Unification in 1885, until it declared its independence in 1908. Tobacco was introduced in the Ottoman Empire more than two centuries earlier, but it began to be cultivated more widely in Bulgaria in the 19th century. Smoking first started among Muslim men,

then Muslim women in the 17th century, but not in public spaces. Women were gathering and smoking only “in the baths, at fashionable parties, or in the salons of elite Ottoman or foreign homes”.

It then slowly entered Christians' lives, both men and women, almost at the same time, becoming common in the mid-19th century. Same as for Muslim women, smoking for Christian women was restricted to domestic space “behind closed doors or high garden walls”, while men were gathering and smoking in the kafene (coffeehouse) and the kruchma (tavern), places of socialisation reserved to men.

A woman herself, though not Bulgarian, documented smoking among Bulgarian women in the 19th century: Fanny Blunt (1839-1926). She was a diplomat's wife and spent years in the Ottoman Balkans where she observed and reported smoking among women.

B. Emancipation and Female Figures

Slowly and scarcely, a handful of women started smoking in public in the 19th century and a bit more until the Second World War. They even started entering the kafene and European-style cafés, but later, only after World War I. There were only a few of them, because being a woman in a public space without being accompanied by a man was almost impossible in society at that time. Learning about their profile, one can see that they were all quite strong and independent. But it has to be mentioned that most of them could be allowed this behaviour because they were part of the Westernised elites and were claiming, directly or indirectly, more freedom and more modern values.

Another type of women smoking in public were women

of “questionable repute”, such as prostitutes, and women dancing and singing. Among these women from intellectual and cultural elites, the most famous and noticeable ones are Baba Nedelya Petkova, Vela Blagoeva, and Raina Kostensteva.

Baba Nedeliya Petkova (1826-1894), an important figure of the Bulgarian National Revival and pioneer for girls’ education in the 19th century, “was known to have scandalised Bulgarian sensibilities with her public smoking habit”.

Vela Blagoeva (1858-1921), writer and founder of the women’s socialist movement, was the wife of Dimitur Blagoev, the founder of the Bulgarian socialist movement at the end of the 19th century. Vela “was a well-known smoker and one of Bulgaria’s first modern girls”.

Raina Kostensteva (1885-1967) was a literary figure of the early 20th century and interwar period. She was often seen in the kafena and the kafene-sladkarnitsi (café-pastry shops). She was also the woman who wrote and denounced, even criticised, the situation of women and smoking in Bulgaria, as being slowed and limited because of the Orthodox Christian values.

II. Fallen Women and Abstinence

A. Fallen Women

As seen above, smoking women in public was extremely rare. They were either “westernised” or “women of questionable morals” (singers, dancers, prostitutes). In both cases, they were seen by the vast majority of society as morally compromised women acting against traditional values, impersonating the symptoms of moral decline and depravity. They represented social decay and were suspicious. They were seen and categorised as “fallen women”. But, from today’s point of view,

they were a small expression of the changes happening more widely in society at that time: women getting a little bit more liberty and rights.

B. Abstinence

In opposition to smoking in Bulgaria appeared abstinence movements. They were initially influenced by American Protestant missionaries who started their activity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and led those campaigns at that time and during the interwar period. Their anti-smoking (and anti-alcohol) campaigns aimed at keeping traditional family values and targeted both men and women. Among the actors of those campaigns, we could find women, even women as leaders.

Vera Zlatareva (1905-1977) and Ianka Tosheva were such figures. But they were not against smoking in itself, only regarding tobacco. They were writing, especially in *Vestnik na zhenata* [Journal of the Woman] and fighting for more rights for all women, and wanted them to “become modern [women] only by being both abstinent and socially conscious”. In this way, they knew Bulgarian women had been emancipated in different ways in the last decades, but they had to keep being respectable and responsible, and off smoking in this regard.

III. Tobacco Work, Harvest and Women

A. Workers and Wars

The tobacco industry started to hold a major importance in Bulgaria's economy in the early 20th century. Thousands of people were working in the cultivation and harvest of tobacco. Among those workers, women were far from absent

in cultivating and processing the “gold of Bulgaria”. Their role and work were even more important during the Balkan Wars and the two World Wars. Men were fighting at the front, and women had to keep running one of the country’s primary economic resources, replacing men. They also had to increase production and harvest for national consumption and expectations, especially in Germany.

Even if women had a major role in those times and in this side of the economy, their conditions as workers did not improve, nor were they acknowledged. They had to work even harder to keep their families, the economy, and the country running. They were not thanked, nor was their hard work appreciated.

B. Protestations

Women in tobacco cultivation, in addition to their work, also called for peace in 1917, as was the case more generally in Europe. “By December, around ten thousand workers, many tobacco workers among them, swarmed the streets calling for peace and revolution. The upheavals rapidly snowballed into antiwar protests across the country and on the front and led to mass desertions”. These demonstrations highlighted women’s increasing assertiveness in public life, challenging both economic exploitation and societal norms.

During the interwar decades, tobacco workers were among the most vocal labour groups and advocated for improved rights and conditions. Despite these efforts, the industry continued to rely on cheap female labour, perpetuating cycles of inequality. Change was about to happen only after the Second World War.

IV. Smoking and Women during Communism

A. Smoking expanded massively among women

Communist Bulgaria (1944-1989) marked a significant shift in attitudes toward both women and smoking. The country developed tobacco cultivation, harvest, and export as one of its main economic fields and was under the monopoly of Bulgartabak. This importance can be seen in the following: “Half the population smoked and a fourth worked in the tobacco industry” in 1982. Women working in the tobacco industry and smoking can be seen during this period as a growing phenomenon. This time, women were finally acknowledged and praised: “Today tobacco is the gold of Bulgaria, and women are its creators”. Women even appeared on a map in the movie *Balgarski Tiutiun* [Bulgarian Tobacco] in 1979. There were more and more women consuming tobacco and “by the late 1970s and 1980s, [...] the number of women smokers skyrocketed”.

The State relied on its exports of tobacco to the East Bloc and especially the USSR, but it also promoted national tobacco consumption. Through various campaigns, it promoted smoking as a modern way of life and of expression, including among women. Women’s literature, ads, and brands were also created: the “Femina” brand of cigarettes, for example, especially targeted women, playing on independence, progress, and sophistication to sell to their targeted public. Modern women and, even more, smoking women, embodied new society’s values and habits: “Women played important roles in the visible discarding of rural backwardness in favour of a modern material life”.

B. Anti-Smoking and Women

Despite all this progress, movements and campaigns against smoking, women still prevailed in this habit. One of the media of such campaigns was the journal *Trezvenost* [Sobriety] in which one could see images of people, both men and women, smoking, and pictured in a bad way. Those campaigns in different layers of society asked women to stop smoking for two main reasons: for moral (sexual) aspects, and for health aspects.

The moral (sexual) aspects denounced women smokers as manly, and the sexual (phallic) evocation of a cigarette in the mouth of women made them less desirable in bed. They directly linked this second aspect to one of the two health aspects: since they were less attractive, women were having fewer babies. In that sense, “smoking women [...] posed a concerted threat to the Bulgarian nation itself because of issues related to reproduction and child-bearing”. Those narratives were stronger in the late 1970s and the 1980s when traditional values made their comeback in Bulgarian society.

The State was thus torn between promoting smoking for women as a marker of emancipation, modernisation, and equality, but also for them to buy and help the economy; and refraining women from smoking because it endangered the demographic future of Bulgaria.

Conclusion

The history of women, smoking, and tobacco in Bulgaria reflects the interplay of gender, culture, and politics. From private indulgences to public controversies, tobacco has served as both a tool of emancipation and a source of societal

tension. Women's roles in the tobacco industry and their evolving relationship with smoking offer valuable insights into Bulgaria's and Bulgarian women's journey through modernity, war, socialism, and global phenomena.

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"I write for Balkan Talks because I profoundly believe that by sharing our thoughts and experiences, we can better understand each other and realise that, in the end, despite our apparent alterity, we are more alike than we are different."

Flattery or Erasure: Recognising Unhealthy Admiration

Author: Stamena Kozić

In many areas of life, we unconsciously mirror the people we admire – a phenomenon psychologists often refer to as the Chameleon Effect. Over time, this imitation can be harmless, even flattering, and often helps us connect or feel understood. But in relationships, the rules are quite different. When it happens too quickly, before you truly know each other, admiration can cross a line. What starts as flattery can almost imperceptibly turn into something else entirely, an erasure.

Take, for example, someone you've just started dating – a new person entering your life. Weeks in, they begin changing themselves to mirror you, adopting your style, your tastes, even life decisions of great importance they once resisted or opposed. They may switch their hair colour, modify their wardrobe, or suddenly embrace hobbies and opinions they previously dismissed. At first, it might seem flattering, like they're captivated by you, eager to connect, to be close. But when admiration moves faster than the relationship itself, the unease sets in. There's something disorienting about watching someone erase their own preferences and bend their identity around yours – especially when the choices they make now reflect you, and not the person you thought you were falling for. Admiration starts morphing into a warning sign, signalling that something deeper, more concerning, is unfolding.

Many philosophers throughout history have emphasised the importance of individuality. Socrates once encouraged people to think for themselves rather than simply follow the crowd. In the context of relationships, this advice becomes

even more relevant. To maintain connection without losing oneself, we must define our desires and resist the pull to mirror someone else blindly.

And yet, the phenomenon persists. French anthropologist René Girard, famous for his work on desire and imitation, developed what he called the theory of mimetic desire: the idea that we often want people not for who they truly are, but because someone else desires them. Desire is contagious, and admiration can be less about the person and more about the reflection they inspire in us. In relationships, this can appear as someone bending themselves – intensely and unexpectedly – to match your preferences and life choices before the connection has had a chance to form naturally.

So, why does this happen? Quite often, it stems from insecurity, fear of rejection, or even borderline tendencies, where validation from others feels essential to one's sense of self. Jealousy and a desire to keep up with perceived standards or to secure affection can accelerate this imitation, making admiration feel too urgent and overwhelming. In these cases, the person isn't connecting with you; instead, they're seeking approval, safety, or identity in your reflection, erasing the boundaries between desire and obsession.

The healthiest relationships don't demand transformation. They invite it, slowly, over time, with respect for boundaries and selfhood. True connection encourages curiosity, growth and exploration on both sides, rather than bending to fit someone's reflection. To navigate intimacy without losing yourself, pay attention to subtle signs: Are boundaries respected, or quietly dissolved? Are choices made freely, or to please? Admiration feels uplifting, inspiring one to become their true self without fear or pressure. When desire becomes imitation, it's easy to mistake intensity for connection, but connection that truly

matters doesn't erase identity. In the end, the most lasting connection isn't the one that mirrors us perfectly, but the one that is built on contrast, the one that can fill the gaps without erasing individuality.

Stamena Kozić is an 18-year-old from Serbia. She is a recent graduate of Grammar School Svetozar Marković in Niš, a FLEX alumna, and a prospective student of English Language and Literature.

“I write for Balkan Talks because it empowers young voices by creating a space where aspiring writers and individuals with meaningful perspectives can share their ideas, challenge assumptions, and contribute to conversations that raise awareness and encourage understanding.”

Generative AI cannot be feminist

Author: Jovana Petković

AI is everywhere, literally everywhere on the internet. Even while I write this article in a Google document, Gemini is inside of it, suggesting that I write a prompt: “Write a paragraph about...”, “Create a story about...” and it feels like you can’t be alone with a blank page anymore. And you can’t, not if you are using a tool that is created by large corporations that invest huge amounts of money in Generative AI. To be precise, the 15 biggest investors in AI have spent a total of 1.5 trillion dollars since the beginning of AI development (Is AI profitable, 2026). Google alone has lost over 277 billion dollars and is losing hundreds of thousands of dollars every second (Ibid).

In which way is that related to feminism? When you type “feminism and AI” into your search engine, you will find an extensive list of articles concerning gender equality in generative AI. They will tell you that just as we have a glass ceiling limiting women in the business environment, we now have the same disparity in the use of AI tools. Women don’t use generative AI as frequently as men, says a new Oxford study, because they are concerned about ethics, internet safety, and potential mental health problems artificial intelligence could bring (Stephany, F., & Duszynski, J., 2026). The gap between men and women in AI usage is the largest (45,3%) for respondents who have high AI literacy and see AI as a mental health risk. Also, the gender gap is the smallest (29,4%) in using generative AI for work (Ibid). The research mainly follows the narrative that we should make women less afraid of AI or that we should make AI more feminist and intersectional. At least they are partially aware of the underlying problem –

artificial intelligence is a whole new territory for oppression and misogyny. But we should be aware that AI is not only a feminist issue, although we are going to focus on the feminist perspective in this article; to merely dwell on it would assume remaining on empty, neoliberal criticism. First, we will discuss a feminist perspective and some of the real problems women have with unregulated generative content and AI “inventions”; then we will explain why liberal feminism is not able to go deep enough in looking at the problem of artificial intelligence.

The evolution of misogyny with deepfake pornography

Technology develops far faster than the laws and the people in positions of power are willing or able to catch up. Even before the invention of AI, being a woman on the Internet was risky, and today the situation is incomparably worse. Did you know that 95% of deepfakes are non-consensual pornography? Also, 99% of all non-consensual deepfakes use women’s pictures of faces and bodies (United Nations, 2025). It is clear that people who use AI want to generate deepfake pornography to harm women. AI is a tool that can strip naked women just by using a photo they published on their social media profile. There is no way any woman can protect themselves from becoming a victim of deepfake pornography unless she has never posted your picture online, and no other person has ever posted their photo. You may ask yourself, are men safer regarding this technological invention? Yes, of course they are. AI apps that are used for deepfake pornography are available on Google and Apple stores, and many of them won’t even work on male bodies. These apps, a new report finds, have been downloaded more than 705

million times worldwide. For comparison, Netflix has half as many subscribers. Also, Google and Apple are profiting from downloading deepfake pornography apps even though apps that generate sexual and pornographic material go against their policies. Some of these apps are taken down and banned by Google and Apple, but not all of them.

The thing is, you don't even have to go that far to search for AI deepfake pornography apps and install them on your mobile phone. You can just ask Grok on X to do it for you. Some women can publish their photo on Musk's social network, and you can just comment: "Grok, take her clothes off", and Grok will gladly do it for you. What did X do to stop this? On January 9th, X started requiring a subscription to post image-generation responses. Then on March 19th, they restricted this "service" only to paid subscribers. In July 2026, you can still take clothes off and make pornographic content with anyone you want with Grok; you just have to pay for it. This tells us that Big Tech absolutely has no ethical qualms about preventing deepfake pornography; instead, they are perfectly content to profit from the misuse of AI tools, even as representatives from various countries call for legal restrictions on the use of Grok.

Deepfake pornography is a type of sexual assault. It's violating, dehumanising, degrading and nonconsensual. AI-generated pornography can have very real and serious repercussions for the victim, and the perpetrator usually has none. It takes only a few minutes to take photos from the internet without consent and turn them into deepfakes; if published online, these photos can have severe consequences for the victim. Feminist Laura Bates is a victim of deepfake pornography. Someone took her published photographs and videos on the internet and made a deepfake porn video of her as revenge, after she published a book, *Men Who*

Hate Women. In her other book, *The New Age of Sexism*, she describes her experience with deepfake pornography: It's hard to describe why, except to say that it feels like you. It feels like someone has taken you and done something to you and there is nothing you can do about it (Bates, 2025). Deepfake pornography and revenge pornography share the same intent of the perpetrators – which is to completely dehumanise the victim, reduce them to a sexual object, and strip them of control over decisions regarding their body. It's all about control; in patriarchy, it always has been – only now in this modern age we have new ways of taking control away from women. The psychological harm can be severe; victims of deepfake pornography can develop anxiety, depression and even suicidal intentions (Pascale, 2023).

Do not be misled into thinking that AI-generated pornographic images and videos have no consequences if they are never published online and remain private to the person who created them. Even if the victim never finds out about that type of pornography, it is no less problematic, because the fundamental issue remains the same: someone did something to a woman's body that she did not want and did not consent to, and there is absolutely nothing she can do about it. That is why all deepfake pornography is about control, and wanting to control women is nothing new in this patriarchal world, which has no problem taking things by force.

We live in a world where many men will say that women nowadays have all rights, but that's not entirely true. Women have fought for their rights, and now they can speak up about the abuse. But the abuser did not stop abusing; the abuser found a way to continue abusing using technology. He found a new way to avoid asking for consent. Now, the abuser is not alone; he has AI by his side. This way of thinking, that you

can do anything with anybody's picture or video, has the same root as rape and sexual assault. The difference is that now you do not need to be touched to be sexually assaulted. We now have multiple ways of sexually assaulting women, and not every one of them leaves some kind of trace on the body, as if manipulating and catcalling wasn't enough. The very act of AI-generating another person's body in a manner that suits the perpetrator constitutes a violent taking of control. The thing is, the consumers of this kind of pornography don't really think they did anything wrong, because it's fake; it's not real. As much as 74% of people who have consumed deepfake pornography do not feel any guilt, Security Hero research says (Security Hero, 2023).

It can be a silly little joke for them, but they are not the ones suffering real consequences. In countries of Southwest Asia, where religious laws dictate how a woman dresses, a single deepfake photo showing her unclothed can mean arrest, violence, rape, and death (Bates, 2025). It can be obvious that a deepfake photo or video is fake; nonetheless, women will face ramifications. And men are aware of that, so they will use AI to get revenge on women who speak up, who are loud, who have rejected their courting. Even women who escaped autocratic regimes, such as Iran, are not safe outside the borders. The regime targets Iranian women who speak publicly about the situation in their homeland, and makes deepfake pornography of those women. In these cases, the abuser is not one man, but the state itself. Iran has state hackers, people who are paid to make campaigns against anyone who speaks about human rights in Iran – NGOs, and of course, activists (News Lines Magazine, 2025).

Using AI technology to make deepfake pornography is not something that is happening only to women; it happens to

children as well - who are not even old enough to be able to give consent. According to the IWF (Europe's largest hotline dedicated to disrupting the spread of child sexual abuse imagery online), in 2025 there was a 14% increase in deepfake child abuse (which is criminal AI content) in comparison with the previous year. In 2025, the IWF found 3,443 videos of deepfake child pornography that contain scenes of rape and sexual torture, which is 260 times more than in 2024 (Internet Watch Foundation, 2026). The same organisation also found over 14,000 AI-generated child pornography images in a single dark-web forum (United Nations, 2026). The other organisation, Inhope, which is also dedicated to tracking and removing child pornography from the depths of the internet, in their 2023 annual report showed that there is a 5% increase in victims aged 14 to 17 (Di Silvestro & Iurissevich, 2024).

Meta Smart Glasses - surveillance and misogyny (on killing two birds with one stone)

Neoliberal capitalism drives innovation. It drives innovation so much that we now have multiple ways we can use women's bodies without their consent and harass them. Kylie Jenner is the face of a brand-new product from Meta in collaboration with Ray-Ban – Meta smart glasses. You can use them to send texts, make calls, listen to music, translate conversations, and take videos and photos. You can just say Hey Meta and ask anything you want. Now you do not even have to pick up your phone, go to the camera app, and point your camera at an object; you can just order your Meta assistant to make a photo or a video, and no one can know. This new product can be misused in many ways, and this isn't only paranoia talking – it's already happening.

A girl named Dilara (21) was approached by a polite man. They started flirting; he asked her if she was heartbroken because of her red hair. They entered the elevator; they continued smiling and talking, then he asked her for her number. She gave it to him. How do I know this? Because it's online. She did not know that she was being filmed with Meta smart glasses. He did not ask for her permission. The man did not only post this video of her on TikTok; he posted her number as well. He got 1.3 million views; she got numerous calls. Men called her in the middle of the night. Someone told her she was stupid and that she is easy (BBC, 2026). And her story is not an exception; it shows us that new unregulated technology is making it easier for men to harass women.

Meta says the glasses blink white when they are recording, but Dilara says she has not noticed any blinking or the camera pointed at her. This means that women (and children) can be recorded secretly. Back in the day when we had analogue cameras, you had to point them at a person to take a picture, and the camera would make a clicking sound. Later, when we got cameras on the phone, we could turn off the sound, but you still had to point the camera, so it was obvious if somebody was recording you. That way it was easier to track if someone was recording, and you could give your consent or not. In 2023 in Japan, it was legally required for phone manufacturers to have the sound on your phone in order for other people to be aware that you are taking pictures. A legal measure that was adopted to prevent “photo voyeurism” (BBC, 2023). Now that option is taken away completely with the Meta Smart Glasses.

Of course, these glasses will increasingly be used to film women and make illicit recordings, and Meta is fully aware of this. Yet, instead of taking any responsibility, Meta hired Kylie Jenner to promote them. This is an obvious attempt to market

and sell unregulated technology as something “girly” and cool – something used by celebrities. It is an attempt to launder the product’s image, completely ignoring the issues surrounding it. Make it cute and fashionable; who cares about privacy?

And speaking of privacy, Meta silently added AI face-recognition technology into Zuckerberg’s smart glasses. They named this AI technology “NameTag” and it can detect faces, crop them, recognise them, and then encode them into biometric data (The Guardian, 2026). All of this data can be used for further AI training and sold to the highest bidder. Is it necessary to say that this product can be dangerous in the hands of a government that flirts with fascism? DHS (United States Department of Homeland Security) has requested the development of smart glasses capable of using biometric identification data (Court House News).

We must understand that the constant development of surveillance-oriented technology does not equate to citizen safety; rather, it amounts to stripping all of us of our privacy and dismantling civil liberties. If AI is using our faces and learning how our faces change when we experience emotions, learning how our faces change when we get old, all that data can be used to manipulate the masses without them even knowing. AI has already been used for political purposes (Lin, Czarnek, Lewis, 2025), and governments and presidential candidates will only get better at it with the development of surveillance technology.

These are the real risks we should be concerned about regarding smart glasses. That’s why it’s a big problem when Kylie Jenner is trying to sell them as something chic; technofascism and mass surveillance are not chic at all. And these two huge problems – the loss of privacy and misogyny – converge in a single product costing over two hundred dollars,

sold by a global celebrity who is an idol to many young people.

Technology is political

We are long past the time when we thought that politics and Silicon Valley have nothing in common. Tech bros are shaping our destiny with their inventions. AI does not have to be a tool of misogyny, racism, eco-disasters, mass surveillance, or a tool for benefiting from the labour of extremely poorly paid workers from the Global South. This data-eating technology cannot be neutral; our society forms it, and it absorbs all its prejudice from society. Furthermore, that technology has not been sufficiently tested; it was simply released for mass use based on the assumption that errors would be fixed in subsequent versions. It was not released to make people's lives easier; it was released to make profit and collect our data for even more profit. And all of that is a result of neoliberal capitalist philosophy that cares neither about human rights nor the protection of natural resources – its only concern is for the rich to become even richer, regardless of the consequences for the entire world. When this kind of worldview is primary, it is not surprising that it leads to a new age of misogyny.

And when we talk about solutions, I would argue that neoliberal feminism is wrong for only wanting to control misogyny through laws and institutions. In practice, liberal laws care more about bureaucracy than actual people. I am not saying that regulating AI usage with laws wouldn't help; I am saying that the real power of regulation is limited. It is also crucial to point out that misogyny is not the only issue associated with AI tools, as problems arise at every turn. We face issues such as the excessive consumption of natural resources by AI data centres, the use of cheap labour to train

AI tools, and the non-consensual use of artworks and online content to create new, low-quality generated content.

Laws could be part of the solution in a world where institutions are not corrupted and in regimes that are not becoming increasingly authoritarian every year. We cannot say that AI will be better only if women had more control over how AI is trained – that is such a one-sided view. Neoliberals think that the parliament would be more equal if we had more women representatives. Let me remind you that we had Ana Brnabić as an openly lesbian Prime Minister, and she did not do anything for either the queer community or women. She was merely a party loyalist. What I want to say is that corrupted people will always find a way to manipulate liberal laws, and that's the limit of neoliberalism. It does not really want to change the system, or the way things are done.

With the rise of the extreme right, neoliberal feminism is no longer enough (if it ever was). The right loves using AI for spreading their narratives; the right relies on the idea of masculine alpha males, who are in control of women. And they see no problem with AI being misused to humiliate women. They want to put women in their place, make us silent and small. Unfortunately, this far-right way of thinking is so widely accepted that it is just seen as a thing a man does. Men have been thrown into the right-wing pipeline since early childhood; they think this is the way it should be and that women deserve it. This is exactly why we should not rely on laws or institutions to regulate AI. Laws didn't stop those men from committing femicide; laws didn't stop those men from raping and sexually abusing women. In practice, many defendants receive rather lenient sentences and their reputations remain untarnished, especially if they are known to the public. That is why it is not enough to simply increase the penalties; it does not solve the

issue systematically.

The solution to the problem of AI misogyny cannot be solved if we just want to solve misogyny. We must address the entire system that has normalised repression. By that, I mean the repression of all minorities, the repression of workers, and the view of natural assets as mere resources for economic progress. Capitalism is rooted in hierarchy; hierarchy is rooted in patriarchy. We cannot legitimately fight misogyny if we are not aware of all other problems which have the same foundation. AI is not created in a vacuum; it is a product of this capitalist-patriarchal system, and AI represents a unique mirror of our society and its flaws.

The best way to fight AI is by creating awareness and educating people on how harmful it can be, how using AI can really hurt some people, and how those people cannot do anything to protect themselves. The government won't protect you from deepfake pornography; it will also not protect you from data centres in your neighbourhood that are stealing your drinkable water. In fact, the government will support those projects because it receives material benefits from them. Technology is political.

Generative AI cannot be feminist, because it's not created in a feminist world with feminist values. We cannot make it more feminist if we put more women in power to regulate it – that's just an ad hoc solution, masking the damage. Rich men create generative AI, and they are the ones controlling which apps or answers to prompts you are going to get. In my opinion, the best way to fight this kind of technology is by boycotting it. Corporations that are investing in AI are losing hundreds of thousands of dollars every second, and that's why AI is pushed down our throats. They know AI is not really functional for mass usage; users know it too. That's why anti-

AI movements are rising and why over a million people have quit ChatGPT (Forbes, 2026). Billionaires and governments change their ways only when their money is threatened.

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“I write for Balkan Talks because it provides a safe space where I can engage in discussion and critical reflection on contemporary social issues, particularly those related to anti-capitalism, techno-fascism, and the anti-AI movement.”

Beyond the Rainbow: Why Visibility Without Solidarity Is Never Enough

Author: Bojana Vuletić

Every June, the world turns rainbow-coloured. Company logos change overnight, limited-edition sneakers and T-shirts decorated with rainbow flags appear in shop windows, streaming platforms promote new queer films, and brands celebrate inclusion through carefully designed advertising campaigns. At least, that was the scenario until this year, when we saw a huge decrease in public support and in campaigns from US-based companies. But that is a completely different topic. As I was saying, for this one month a year, queer identities become highly visible and highly profitable.

Then July arrives. The rainbow logos disappear, the merchandise is discounted, and conversations about equality quietly fade away. Yet the violence remains exactly where it was before the Pride Month began. This contradiction forces us to ask an uncomfortable question: if queer rights have become so visible, why do so many queer people still live in fear?

For Serbia, this question cannot be answered without remembering June 2001. The first Pride Parade ever organised in Belgrade became known as the Bloody Pride after extremist groups brutally attacked participants, while police protection proved inadequate. More than two decades later, Pride marches can take place only under heavy police presence, legal frameworks have not improved, and public discussions are far more common than they once were. Yet visibility has never automatically translated into safety. The forms of violence have changed, but violence itself has not disappeared.

Recent years have once again demonstrated how fragile

those achievements remain. Queer activists and citizens have reported police abuse and overnight detentions during protests. At the same time, hate speech continues to circulate freely in public discourse, coming from both sides – those who support the student uprising and those who support the government. These incidents remind us that violence against queer communities is not only committed by individuals but can also emerge through institutions that fail to protect, or actively intimidate, the very people they are supposed to serve.

There Is No Safe Space

One of the clearest illustrations of this reality occurred in January 2024, when the Pride Info Centre in Belgrade was vandalised on Christmas morning. A masked attacker deliberately shattered the windows of one of the very few places in Serbia dedicated to providing information, support and safety for queer people.

To dismiss this as simple property damage would be to misunderstand its true meaning. Violence against a community rarely begins with attacks on individuals; it often begins with attacks on symbols. The Pride Info Centre used to represent much more than a physical building. It represented the possibility that queer people could create a space for themselves, to exist without fear of judgment or violence.

The timing of the attack made its symbolism even stronger. Christmas is traditionally associated with family, warmth, acceptance and togetherness, all shared within a safe home. Yet for many queer people, holidays often expose precisely the opposite reality. Many conceal their identities at family gatherings, invent fictional partners or avoid celebrations altogether because honesty has already cost them acceptance

within the very communities and spaces where they should feel the safest. Against that backdrop, attacking the Pride Info Centre on Christmas morning was not merely an act of vandalism. It communicated that even spaces created for protection are not beyond the reach of hatred.

Research conducted by LABRIS reinforces this reality. A significant proportion of queer people in Serbia report experiencing violence because of their identity, while many more describe feeling unsafe in everyday life. For countless others, concealment becomes a survival strategy. Ordinary decisions, whether to hold a partner's hand in public, disclose one's identity at work, correct someone's assumptions about their living situation, or simply feel comfortable walking home, become constant calculations of risk.

When Violence Becomes Ordinary

Violence rarely begins with murder. It begins much earlier, when societies gradually accept that some people deserve less protection, less empathy and fewer rights than others. It begins when hate speech is dismissed as “just an opinion”, when discrimination becomes political entertainment and when human rights become negotiable depending on electoral convenience. History repeatedly demonstrates where this process can lead.

In May 2024, four lesbian women sharing a modest rented room in Buenos Aires were attacked with a Molotov cocktail while they slept. According to reports, the perpetrator had previously threatened and harassed them. As the room burned, he reportedly forced the women back into the flames as they attempted to escape. Three women died, while one survived with life-threatening injuries.

The brutality of the attack shocked international audiences, yet its roots were painfully familiar. The victims were targeted not only because they were lesbians, but because they embodied several forms of social vulnerability simultaneously. They were poor, they lived collectively because economic necessity left them few alternatives, and their existence challenged rigid social expectations about gender, sexuality and belonging. Their murders were not isolated acts of hatred. They represented the endpoint of a much longer process of dehumanisation.

From Buenos Aires to Belgrade

Argentina is often celebrated as a pioneer of queer rights. In 2010, it became the first country in Latin America to legalise same-sex marriage, while subsequent legal reforms established the country as a regional leader in protecting sexual and gender minorities. Yet progressive legislation proved incapable of preventing political regression.

Economic crisis, growing inequality and the rise of right-wing populism transformed public discourse. Human rights increasingly came to be portrayed as ideological excesses rather than democratic necessities. As in many societies facing prolonged economic instability, political actors found it easier to channel public frustration toward vulnerable communities than toward structural causes of inequality. This pattern sounds painfully familiar.

Serbia has spent years experiencing deep political polarisation alongside persistent economic insecurity. In such environments, populism thrives by dividing society into “us” and “them”. Someone must always become responsible for collective frustration: migrants, journalists, feminists, Roma

communities, political dissidents or queer people. The identities of these supposed enemies may change, but the political logic remains remarkably consistent.

What happened in Buenos Aires should therefore not be understood as a distant tragedy belonging to another continent. Rather, it serves as a warning of where prolonged dehumanisation can ultimately lead, when hatred is normalised, and institutions fail to respond.

Pride for Sale

Perhaps the greatest paradox of contemporary queer politics is that visibility has become increasingly profitable while equality remains incomplete. Rainbow capitalism has mastered the language of inclusion. Pride-themed collections generate revenue, rainbow branding improves corporate reputations, and diversity has become an attractive marketing strategy. Yet the commercial success of Pride Month should not be confused with social progress.

Selling rainbow sneakers is considerably easier than supporting comprehensive anti-discrimination policies. Producing queer television series demands far less commitment than ensuring that queer youth rejected by their families have access to housing, education or psychological support. Corporations have learned how to monetise queer identities. And Serbian governments, on the other hand, used the community for their political points within the EU enlargement process, by having a lesbian Prime Minister and strictly controlling the violence happening around the Pride Parade in Belgrade from 2015 onward, but doing barely anything to protect the community.

This is not an argument against Pride Month or Pride Parade

itself. Pride remains politically necessary precisely because equality has not yet been achieved. What deserves criticism is the transformation of Pride into a seasonal marketplace where symbols generate profit while structural inequalities remain largely untouched. Visibility without political commitment risks becoming yet another commodity.

The Politics of Solidarity

Ultimately, the question is not what happens during Pride Month, but what remains after it ends. Solidarity is often reduced to an expression of empathy or kindness. In reality, it is a profoundly political practice. It requires recognising that violence directed against one marginalised community inevitably reshapes society as a whole. When a Pride centre is attacked, the consequences extend beyond queer people. When journalists are intimidated, freedom of expression is weakened for everyone. When peaceful protesters are unlawfully detained, democratic participation becomes more fragile for all citizens. Violence never remains confined to its original target. Once exclusion becomes socially acceptable, the circle of those considered disposable inevitably expands.

Democracies are therefore measured not by how comfortably their majorities live, but by whether they protect those whom society finds easiest to marginalise. The true opposite of violence is not silence or tolerance, but solidarity: the everyday willingness to defend the dignity, safety and humanity of others even when doing so offers no personal benefit. Violence does not disappear when Pride Month ends. Neither should solidarity.

Bojana Vuletić is a 31-year-old Serbian woman with Montenegrin roots. She holds a degree in International Relations from the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade. Professionally, she works as an HR expert. Alongside her professional career, she is a queer rights activist and educator, a columnist for Mašina, the President of the Critical Education Centre, and an editor at Balkan Talks.

“I write for Balkan Talks because I believe there is no greater mark one can leave on history than the power of the written word. Young people across the Balkans rarely have safe spaces like Balkan Talks, where they can freely express their criticism not only from their minds, but also from their guts. Hatred shares the same language across the Balkans, but the language of love and peace is always authentic. That is why Balkan Talks matters.”



Balkan Talkers
Talk with Others:
Interviews

Borders of Solidarity: Balkan Women Authors and Their Advocacy for Palestine

Author: Mary Drosopoulos

The Balkans, with its rich mosaic of cultures, histories, and stories, have long been a site of complex political identities and alliances. In this intricate tapestry, Balkan women authors have emerged as powerful voices of dissent, solidarity, and advocacy, often drawing connections between their histories of displacement and the plight of others. Among the many causes that have sparked their literary and activist fervour, Palestine has stood out as a particularly poignant symbol of resistance. After all, the written word is not merely an artefact of aesthetic value, but a political act; a medium through which justice can – and must – be imagined.

This article delves into the stories of two remarkable women authors from the Balkans whose journeys with Palestine have taken unconventional and often challenging paths. One, a writer from North Macedonia, stumbled upon the Palestinian cause not in her homeland but in Germany, where the collision of diasporic identities and political awakenings led her to discover new dimensions of solidarity. The other, a thriving literary voice in Berlin, found her career sabotaged by editorial and publishing circles due to her outspoken stance on Palestine, ultimately forcing her to leave Germany and seek refuge in spaces more accommodating of her convictions.

Through their experiences, one can explore the intersections of literature, activism, and exile, shedding light on how Balkan women writers navigate global struggles for justice while grappling with the unique challenges of their own geopolitical and cultural landscapes.

‘Perfect Chaos’: Crossing Borders, Weaving Narratives

Marina Trajkovska's journey into Palestinian advocacy began not in her homeland of North Macedonia but in Germany, where an entirely new world of narratives and solidarities opened before her. Growing up in a country embroiled in its own political disputes, her exposure to Palestine was shaped by a narrow and heavily filtered media lens: "The only things we heard were about the Gaza Strip and terrorism", she recalls in an interview for Balkan Talks. This limited perspective was further complicated by North Macedonia's gratitude towards Israel for its formal recognition of the country as the "Republic of Macedonia", a politically sensitive acknowledgement that relegated Palestine's story to the margins.

It was only after moving to Berlin that Trajkovska encountered a vibrant Palestinian diaspora and began to unravel the complexities of their culture, history, and struggle. Through her work with the Berlin-based NGO Loesje e.V., she participated in European Commission-funded programs that fostered dialogue and creativity between Israelis and Palestinians. Moreover, her understanding of the Middle East was enriched as a participant and alumna of the Euro-Arab Youth Forum, a longstanding initiative of the Council of Europe in partnership with the League of Arab States, which aims at promoting intercultural dialogue among young people and organisations.

What began as a professional opportunity soon transformed into a deeply personal passion. With subsequent trips, she immersed herself in Palestinian cities, villages, and communities, forging connections that would profoundly influence both her activism and her creative work.

Trajkovska's engagement with Palestine was not confined to observation. Her activism focused on empowering Palestinian youth by integrating them into international initiatives and European projects. Through these efforts, she sought to create opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual understanding. This hands-on approach deeply informed her creative pursuits, particularly her trilogy, *Perfect Chaos*. The first volume, published in late 2017, explores the roles and responsibilities of women across different societies, with a protagonist who is intricately connected to Palestine.

For Trajkovska, the trilogy was more than a work of fiction; it was an act of education and advocacy. North Macedonia, a country without formal diplomatic ties to Palestine and with limited media coverage of the conflict, lacks widespread understanding of the Palestinian struggle. Trajkovska's work sought to bridge this gap, offering readers a nuanced portrayal of Palestinian culture, resilience, and daily life. "Despite the different places where we live, the expectations of women are more or less similar everywhere", she notes, emphasising the universality of human experience amidst diversity. Yet, the author is acutely aware of the political constraints shaping her homeland's stance on Palestine. North Macedonia's dependence on Israeli support in its transitional economy has influenced its foreign policy, often aligning it against Palestinian interests in fora like the United Nations. Despite this, she believes that her people hold a deep empathy for Palestinians, informed by their own historical traumas, thus 'a shared sense of suffering'.

Author, Character and Lived Experience: Principles Beyond the Page

Lana Bastašić, the Zagreb-born Bosnian-Serb author of the acclaimed road trip novel *Catch the Rabbit*, has never shied away from navigating turbulent waters, whether in her fiction or in life. Her novel, originally published in Serbo-Croatian as *Uhvati zeca* (2018), which won the 2020 European Union Prize for Literature, is a poignant meditation on identity, memory, and the fraught landscapes of post-Yugoslav reality. Like the narrator of her celebrated work, who embarks on a chaotic journey through the fissures of history and friendship, Bastašić herself has undertaken a profound ethical reckoning – this time on the front lines of cultural politics.

In a decision that sent ripples through literary circles, Bastašić, who was until recently based in Berlin, announced last January on Instagram the termination of her contract with S. Fischer Verlag, one of Germany's most esteemed publishing houses, citing its silence on the Israeli bombardment of Gaza and the systematic censorship she observed unfolding in Germany. Bastašić was unsparing in her critique of Germany's intellectual climate, accusing it of suppressing Jewish artists, writers, and scholars who have spoken out against Israeli policies. Many, she noted, had been "silenced", lost their livelihoods, or faced public vilification. This silence, she argued, undermined any claims to combating antisemitism. In severing ties with S. Fischer, the author struck a blow against what she sees as a moral void in the German literary establishment, exposing the uncomfortable nexus between cultural prestige and political complacency.

The consequences of this decision were immediate and far-reaching. Bastašić openly acknowledged the financial

losses incurred by walking away from a German translation deal. “The advance that I would have gotten for my next novel in German translation is bigger than all my other nineteen translations combined”, she remarked in an interview with Middle East Eye. For any writer, the German market represents not just income, but visibility: invitations to festivals, readings, and book fairs. For Bastašić, however, the cost of staying silent far outweighed the material gains of compliance. In the months that followed, she announced her intention to leave Berlin.

It is tempting to frame this decision as an act of self-sacrifice, yet this would do a disservice to her resolve. Like her *Catch the Rabbit* protagonist, who refuses the comfort of forgetting, the author herself refuses to disengage from the fractures that define our world. Her choice is not simply a renunciation of privilege but a reminder that the privilege of a voice must be wielded responsibly. In Bastašić’s personal narrative, one finds echoes of her literary work: the same unflinching gaze, the same determination to uncover uncomfortable truths.

Defiance as Creation; feminist activism under the postcolonial solidarity lens

This act of defiance sits at the crossroads of several pressing questions: What does it mean to be an artist in times of moral crisis? How does one navigate the tension between creative autonomy and ethical responsibility? For an artist, the act of defiance is not merely a rejection of oppression; it is the reclamation of agency, the insistence on the autonomy to speak, to create, and to resist. As the philosopher Jacques Rancière argues, “Politics is about what is seen and what can be said about it, about who has the ability to see and the talent

to speak". In this sense, the act of defiance is deeply tied to the very essence of art.

For Marina Trajkovska and Lana Bastašić, defiance has manifested in profoundly different yet equally consequential ways. Their experiences, shaped by their identities as Balkan women writers and their shared advocacy for Palestine, illuminate the tension between the artist's ethical responsibility and the constraints imposed by geopolitics, economics, and institutional power. The city of Berlin, symbolic in itself for its history of division, served as a pivotal stage – offering freedom and opportunity to one, and constraint to the other.

The personal stories of these two authors are not isolated incidents but part of a broader tradition of Balkan women writers whose work transcends the boundaries of art to enter the realm of activism. Emerging from a region historically defined by conflict, marginalization, and political upheaval, these women often embody what Svetlana Slapšak, a prominent feminist scholar from the Balkans, has termed the "double burden" of writing: grappling with both patriarchal oppression and the political demands of a divided and contentious space. For centuries, Balkan women writers have used literature as a tool for resistance, drawing on their own histories of displacement and struggle to advocate for others. Their work often blurs the lines between the personal and the political, reflecting a commitment to justice that is as much lived as it is written. This dual role – artist and activist – positions them uniquely to engage with global struggles.

In Trajkovska's case, her advocacy stems from an empathetic connection between the historical traumas of the Balkans and the contemporary plight of Palestinians. She draws on shared experiences of displacement, colonial meddling, and the erasure of identity, using her literature to

foster understanding and solidarity. Her activism reflects the theoretical framework of postcolonial solidarity (Todorova, 1997; Ugrešić, 1996; Rexhepi, 2018), wherein marginalised groups recognise their interconnected struggles against global systems of power.

Bastašić, on the other hand, exemplifies the feminist ethic of refusal articulated by Sara Ahmed in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017). Ahmed writes, “To refuse to reproduce what you inherit is to refuse to make it easier for a history to keep happening in the same way” (2017:2). Bastašić’s decision to sever ties with her German publisher is a refusal to participate in a system that profits from her voice while silencing others. Her defiance is a feminist act of rupture, a rejection of complicity that forces the cultural establishment to confront its ethical failings.

In a conclusive thought, one could say that for any artist, but especially one whose work and experience are situated in the Balkan context (be it geographically, personally, or academically), resistance is not merely a posture but a relentless reconfiguration of what can be spoken, seen, and endured.

Dr Mary Drosopoulos is from Greece. She is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the COFUND Migration, Diaspora and Citizenship programme at the Institute of Ethnology, University of Münster, Germany.

“I write for Balkan Talks because I believe that stories have the power to cross the borders that politics cannot.”

From Education to Activism: Brisilda Taço's Journey for Roma Women's Empowerment in Albania

Author: Orida Dajko

Brisilda Taço was 14 years old when she saw a Roma girl from her neighborhood get married. They were the same age, but their lives were already taking different paths. While Brisilda continued attending school, the other girl was entering marriage.

"I remember crying that day. I could not understand why she was getting married while I was continuing my education. That moment made me ask why so many Roma girls were leaving school so early."

That experience became the beginning of her commitment to Roma women's rights. At a young age, Taço started conversations with girls in her community, encouraging them to continue their education and think differently about their future.

Today, she is one of Albania's most recognised Roma activists, working on social inclusion, equal opportunities, and the empowerment of Roma women and girls.

Taço's path began with her family's support, at a time when education for Roma girls was often questioned.

"My greatest support has always been my family, who chose to educate me so that I could, in some way, help my community. Even in high school, I tried to empower others by sharing information with them."

In primary school, there were only two Roma girls in her class. By high school, she was the only one who continued her studies.

"Sometimes prejudice comes from within the community

itself: 'Why educate a girl?' But my parents believed otherwise. Education became my greatest asset. My freedom."

Supported by her family and a scholarship, Taço studied Public Relations and Communication. She says her studies helped her understand how she could contribute more effectively to society.

"My studies helped me understand where I could make the greatest contribution and gave me the tools to turn my desire for change into action."

After graduating, she continued working directly with Roma communities across Albania. As a facilitator of the joint European Union and Council of Europe ROMACTED Programme, Taço has worked with local authorities and communities on issues related to participation, housing, documentation, and social inclusion.

"Working in the field has taught me that change does not come only from institutions. It comes from communities' direct participation. People have learned that if you know how to raise your voice and explain your problems, you can find solutions. Change takes time, but communities are more prepared today."

Taço's work has received international recognition. In 2019, she received the second prize of the EU Award for Roma Integration in the Western Balkans and Türkiye – "Unknown Heroes", presented in Brussels by the European Commission and the Council of Europe.

She was also nominated as "Woman of the Year" in Albania for her contribution to civil society and participated in an international programme in the United States through a nomination by the U.S. Embassy in Tirana.

Although she has received offers to enter politics, Taço chose to remain in civil society. "Every election year, I organise

public discussions between Roma communities and political candidates so people can raise their concerns directly.”

For Taço, education remains the most important tool for changing the future of Roma communities. “Without education, our lives would remain the same as those of our grandparents. Education is the key to changing not only one person’s future, but the future of an entire community.”

She believes universities can play an important role by offering scholarships, mentoring, and support to students from marginalised communities. “When a Roma girl sees a university that welcomes her and believes in her potential, she starts believing that higher education is possible for her too.”

Today, Taço continues working with Roma women and girls, encouraging them to study and participate in public life. “For me, empowerment is not just about achieving personal success. It is about returning to your community and helping others create opportunities for themselves.”

Looking back, she says her greatest achievement is seeing that she is no longer alone. “Twenty years ago, I was often the only Roma girl in the classroom or at public meetings. Today, I see more Roma girls attending university, speaking publicly, finding employment, and proudly embracing their identity.”

For Taço, the greatest inheritance she received from her parents was education. “Education became my freedom. My freedom became my power.”

Oriada Dajko is a 29-year-old from Albania. She holds a degree in Cultural Heritage from the University of Tirana.

“I write for Balkan Talks because I believe the Balkans are not defined only by their conflicts, but also by the people who quietly transform their communities through courage, education, and hope.”



**Balkan Talkers
Speak in Verse:
*Poetry (published
in the original
language)***

Pleši

pronlazim sebe

u sutonu zvezda

u magli obećanja

i sva moja gnezda

nisu sama

pronlazim sebe

u bojama sna

nebo koje cveta

kao sa dna

pronlazim sebe

usnula i sama

kažeš ja sam dama

ali nemam srama

da odem bez blama

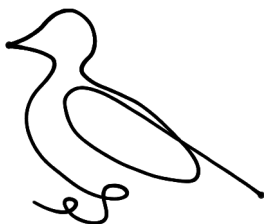
i od usana

eh ima dana
kada je tama
veća od želja
a osmeh se slama
izmedju postelja
i ova rima mi se slila
kao iz šina
nisam promislila
da bi trebalo da ima smisla
a ipak
taj čuperak
se radosno smeši
kao da mi kaže
samo sve to ti lepo reši!
i pleši!



Posmatrač

u trenu vidim sve oblike života
i dete koje radosno pruža ruke ka meni
i golub koji nemilo umire
i stapa se sa večnošću
u jednom trenu osećam strah eona
raspadam se na komade
i ponovo sastavljam
bez nade
a onda
ipak
znam
da mir ne postoji
jer to je balans van sveg haosa
u koji kročiti jos uvek neću



Dan

hiljadu dana i svi staju

u jedan

i da li ćemo taj jedan ikada živeti do kraja

pumpa

grožđe

pena koja se sliva

ukus slatkog na mojim usnama

sok od grožđa koji nije vino?

jesam li ja to izmislila ili je to ovaj dan?

ruke koje padaju iz krem majice kao da sam ih ja pravila

čistoća i vino?

jesam li ja to smislila

i te patosnice sa kojih čistiš blato

sve odjekuje svojom pričom

a u meni vrtlog i misao



da li će ikada išta biti dovoljno sigurno

da me oslobodi tih osećaja?

Aleksandra Đorđević is a 28-year-old from Serbia. She holds a degree in Philosophy from the Faculty of Philosophy, at the University of Niš. She currently works as a Marketing Manager.

“I write for Balkan Talks because I believe young people need more space to express themselves, spread love, and promote equality!”

trans džender

ne možeš da letiš, kazali su.
nemaš krila, imaš samo škrge, ponavljali su.
zna se gde je mesto onima sa škrge, vikao je tata.
nisam razumela.
plavetnilo neba i okeana bilo mi je isto
zato su rekli da moram da odem
jer nisam ptica.
a zaboravili su da je od nas, riba, sve nastalo
pa i ptice.

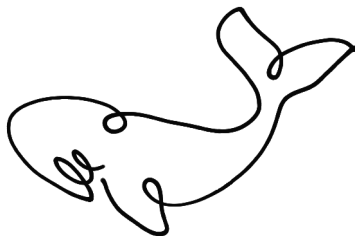
ali otišla sam
izgubila se
videla dubine gde žive ona ogromna bića

plašila sam se

završila sam u utrobi kita.
bilo je mračno i strašno
bilo je užasno.
ali samo na sekund

onda sam prošla kroz gejzir koji ide ka nebu
kroz kitova leđa.
i letela sam
visoko letela.

ja, riba
ja, ptica



brkovi

imala sam neke heroje
sa brkovima.
pravili su od mene sve isto
samo bez brkova.
da budem majstor
da slušam šta mi se kaže
da znam po kući
da znam van nje.

svi moji heroji su mrtvi
sa brkovima.
a ja sam napisala CV
bez brkova.

i sad se ne pronalazi u njemu.



recept

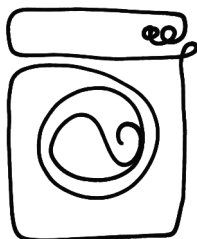
na sedam kofera od kuće.
mama kaže
dve kašike so
i uvek vegetu i zapršku.
u beli veš stavi veniš
da ne bleđi.
baba je umrla.

pita je bolja sa sveži sir
nikako onaj žuti.
tata je bolestan.

preko devedeset kad pereš donji veš
i za posteljinu i peškire.
tata je umro.

meso peci s vodom
da ne gori.
sve osim krilca
i obavezno u beli veš stavi veniš
da ne bleđi.

pasulj ide u tri vode.
štedi pare
skupa nafta zbog rata u Ukrajinu
srećan ti put.
dođi opet na parastos.

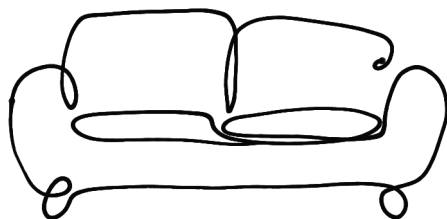


pomen

ne zovi me, majko
kad znaš da mi je teško.
neću ni ja tebe
će si ćutimo.

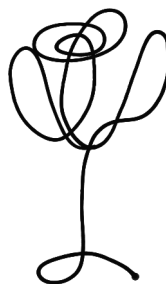
ne piši mi nervozna
smešna si.
neću ni ja tebi
će pominemo.

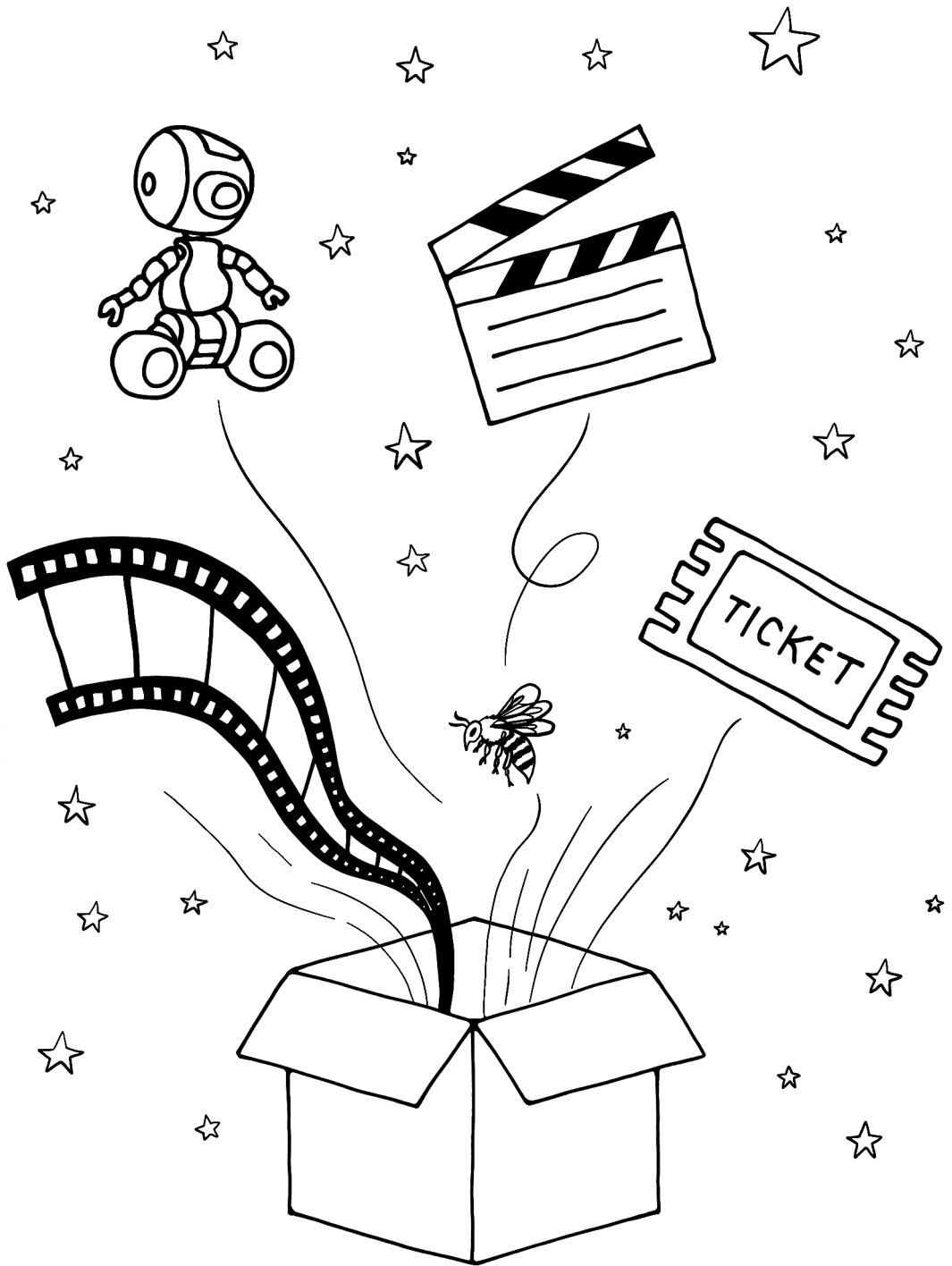
isteraj sve iz kuću, majko
izbaci i kauč na ulicu
zapali suze,
će se snađemo.



Jana Krstić is a 30-year-old from Serbia. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Philosophy at the University of Zagreb. She works as a high school Philosophy teacher, an Associate at Central European University (CEU), the Editor-in-Chief of Balkan Talks, and Program Coordinator at the Critical Education Centre.

“I write for Balkan Talks because I believe that the voices of young people across the Balkans are stronger than hatred, and they deserve to grow louder until hatred is finally silenced.”





Balkan Talkers
Recommend: *Reviews*

Why Every Girl Should Know About Girl Programmers

Author: Milica Jovanov

There's a sound I miss on Saturdays now. The sound of a dozen girls arguing over whose turn it is to program the robot, while someone in the back is looking for a bow to make the robot pretty.

That's the sound of "Girl Programmers", a program built by Organisation Irida to show that coding isn't something foreign, difficult, or only "for boys". That girls can sit down at a table full of LEGO bricks, cables and sensors, and discover that it might be one of the most fun things they have ever tried.

The girls are between 7 and 14, they come from small towns across Serbia, and they do not need to know anything beforehand. No computer at home? Doesn't matter. Never tried robotics? Doesn't matter either. All we really need is for them to be curious, and brave enough to try.

It all started in 2023, when 20 girls from Odžaci went to the "Vukobratović Robotics Days" competition without really knowing what to expect. They came back with awards in two categories, and that one trip changed everything.

A year later, we weren't 20 anymore. We were 80, from Odžaci, Zrenjanin, Smederevo, and Šid. Ten weeks, Saturday after Saturday, sitting together, building robots and writing programs, solving problems and changing plans at the last minute. And then we walked onto that stage and brought home six awards.

I was the mentor and coordinator for Zrenjanin, which meant I was there for everything and anything that was needed. For the tears when something failed on the fifth try.

For the shriek when it finally worked. For that proud feeling of watching a child explain her robot to a panel of judges.

There are so many moments I remember, but one keeps coming back to me.

We were sitting at the drawing table in the chill area. Four girls, one girl's mom, and me. We were doing something completely ordinary, coloring a poster, when one of the girls looked up and said, entirely serious: "Milica, this right now is like we're your children."

The others nodded instantly, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Then one of them pointed to her mom and asked if the mom is also one of my children now, since she was with us at the competition?

Her mom laughed, without a moment's hesitation, and said: "I am. Today, we are all Milica's children."

I don't know if there's a better way to describe what this program actually is. It's not just LEGO bricks and code. It's not just the awards, even though they mean a lot to us. It's about a few hours on a Saturday, around one table, where a girl from a small town realises she can be an engineer, a programmer, whatever she wants.

We're already preparing the third cycle, for 2026/2027, a hundred new girls waiting to take their first steps into programming and robotics. Many new Saturdays. Many new stories.

So if you know a girl who's curious, or brave enough to try something new, tell her about us. Share this story. Somewhere out there is a girl who just needs to hear that the table is open, and there's a seat for her too. You don't need to build a robot to be part of this; you just need to help one more girl realise she can build it.

Milica Jovanov (Mima) is a 25-year-old from Serbia. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Engineering Management at the Technical Faculty “Mihajlo Pupin” of the University of Novi Sad. She is actively involved in local community projects through the BIT-ZRAK initiative, which she co-founded with her friends, and is looking forward to the next cycle of the Girls Programmers programme organised by Organisation Irida.

“I write for Balkan Talks because it turns stories into conversations that challenge perspectives.”

Why Everyone Should See The Cell

Author: Almin Šemić

“The Cell” is a theatre performance that explores the growing problem of domestic violence affecting an increasing number of families who remain silent out of fear for their lives.

The play was created as part of the Pirouette Phase 2 project, implemented in Mostar by the Local Democracy Agency Mostar (LDA Mostar). The project’s goal is to use art to address and highlight local social issues.

The Cell premiered in both Mostar and Berlin and has been adapted in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (BHS) as well as in English.

The title, The Cell, carries multiple layers of meaning. A cell is the basic building block of all living organisms, but it can also represent a prison cell for an abuser, the home as a family cell, and society itself as a social cell.

At the heart of the story is a family gradually falling apart. The father, an abusive man who had earlier attempted to report domestic violence occurring in his neighbour’s home, returns home heavily intoxicated and sits down at the dinner table. What begins as an argument over something as trivial as a cup of cold coffee quickly escalates into domestic violence.

It’s important to say that father is contradicting character, because he went to report domestic violence from his neighbors but eventually do the same to his own family. The son, who has witnessed this countless times before, is too afraid to confront his father. Instead, he escapes into the one thing that brings him comfort – biology – repeating the definition of a cell as a way of distancing himself from the violence surrounding him. The mother lives in constant fear and does not dare to oppose

her abusive husband, believing that doing so could cost her life.

Throughout the performance, the song “Bolji život” (“A Better Life”) serves as a recurring musical motif.

Two additional characters give the production a distinctive symbolic dimension. Although the son is physically present on stage, his inner thoughts are spoken aloud by his twin brother, while the son himself communicates only through movement, expressing fear, anxiety, and uncertainty without words. The musician, who accompanies the performance throughout, embodies a supernatural presence. In the final scene, she strangles the abuser, symbolizing liberation, justice, and the family’s long-awaited freedom.

Almin Šemić is a 24-year-old from Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. He is currently studying Journalism and Public Relations. Alongside his studies, he writes poetry for Librum and serves on the PR team at the humanitarian organisation Ruku na Srce. His work explores society, culture, and everyday life through both journalism and creative writing.

“I write for Balkan Talks because it gives me the freedom to write about social issues that many other media outlets choose not to cover. For me, Balkan Talks is a place where I can truly enjoy writing while contributing to meaningful public dialogue.”

Hive (2021): Women's Voices in Contemporary Balkan Cinema

Author: Eirini Tsordia

Over the past decade, some of the most compelling new voices in Balkan cinema have come from women filmmakers. Working across societies marked by war, political transition, systemic corruption and deeply rooted patriarchal traditions, directors such as Jasmila Žbanić (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Teona Strugar Mitevska (North Macedonia), Tamara Kotevska (North Macedonia), and Blerta Basholli (Kosovo) have created films that confront questions of gender, memory, nationalism, religion, and social justice with remarkable sensitivity and artistic confidence. Their work has not only reshaped the region's cinematic landscape but has also attracted significant international recognition. *Hive* (2021), Basholli's debut feature, stands as one of the finest examples of this remarkable wave.

Since Serbian militias entered villages in the Kosovar province in 1999, many boys and men have been missing, including Fahrije's husband – leaving her a single parent who had been caring for their two children and her disabled father-in-law. Left to ensure her family's survival, Fahrije takes matters into her own hands. She first obtains a driver's license, then starts a small business, actions that provoke the wrath of the conservative, patriarchal local society.

The director, Blerta Basholli, originally from Kosovo, first encountered Fahrije Hoti's story during an interview she gave on American television, in which she discussed the backlash she faced for seeking independence and proposing a cooperative to provide work for other widows in her community. At the time, the director was living in New York on a scholarship. Initially,

she mistook the story for a joke due to her emotional and geographical distance from Kosovo. However, upon realising the seriousness of Fahrije's situation, she was inspired to delve deeper. Captivated by the story, the director began writing and directing what would eventually become *Hive* in 2011. A decade later, the film made history by winning all three major awards in the World Cinema section at the Sundance Film Festival – the only film to ever achieve this feat.

Basholli approaches the story with restraint and confidence, avoiding unnecessary melodrama or overemphasis. This is a tale of humanity and resistance, framed by a clear feminist perspective. In *Hive*, patriarchy is represented not only through visible actions – such as stones smashing Fahrije's car windows, her father-in-law's objections or an attempted assault by a supplier – but also through the absence of a male protector. The ghost of patriarchy lingers in the perception that Fahrije's efforts to support herself dishonor her missing husband. Her grief is entangled with guilt: if her husband is dead, her actions are seen as a confirmation of his death, dissolving their marriage, and rejecting her eternal dependence on him. If, by some miracle, he were alive, many believe he would feel ashamed of her. Fahrije's husband thus becomes like Schrödinger's cat – both alive and dead – while society seeks to confine her autonomy.

The backdrop of numerous missing persons and the ongoing search for their remains adds an emotionally charged layer to the narrative, making *Hive* reminiscent of *Parallel Mothers* by Pedro Almodóvar. However, unlike Almodóvar's melodramatic approach to historical tragedy, Basholli masterfully integrates a community's collective trauma with one woman's personal journey toward emancipation. Fahrije's struggle becomes an example for the other widows in her village, who rally around

her.

Central to Fahrije's transformation is her evolving relationship with her late husband's beehive, which gives the film its title. Initially, she is a foreign presence, vulnerable to stings despite protective gear, and haunted by the notion that her husband had "never been stung". However, as she confronts societal obstacles and normalised misogyny disguised as tradition, she finds her strength. She emerges as the queen of the hive, uniting the worker bees to create an independent, resilient ecosystem that requires no male master. This symbolism underscores the real-life success of Fahrije and her colleagues, celebrated in the film's credits. This way, *Hive* highlights the critical importance of women's solidarity in challenging male dominance.

Fahrije's story is one of hope in a nation still haunted by the ghosts of a brutal war. The fact that the narrative is based on true events and a real woman makes its impact even more profound, transforming *Hive* from a story of individual survival into a powerful testament to resilience, solidarity, and women's agency.

Eirini Tsordia is a 30-year-old from Greece. She is a human rights lawyer based in Athens. She studied Law at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens before specializing in Human Rights and Democratisation through the Global Campus of Human Rights. Fluent in Greek, English, Italian, French, and German, she is passionate about fostering dialogue across diverse cultures, ideas, and communities.

“I write for Balkan Talks because it represents a space for community, respect, and mutual understanding. At a time marked by spiraling social, political, economic, and environmental challenges, I am proud to contribute to an initiative that brings people and perspectives from the Balkans closer together.”

Let's Keep Balkan Talking

Closing Remarks

If you have reached these final pages, thank you for staying with us. Not simply because you have reached the end of a publication, but because you have chosen to spend your time listening to voices that are too often left unheard.

Over the previous pages, we have travelled across the Western Balkans and encountered stories of women fighting for safety, activists demanding accountability, researchers questioning legal and political systems, artists responding to violence through creativity, and young people refusing to accept silence as the only possible inheritance. We have moved through policy recommendations, research essays, opinion pieces, interviews, poetry and reviews. These contributions differ in form, country of origin and perspective, but they share a belief that the societies we live in are neither finished nor unchangeable.

The Balkans are still frequently described primarily through division: borders, conflicts, political crises and unresolved differences. Yet working on Balkan Talks over the past two years has shown us another side of the region. Across different languages, cultures and histories, young people continue to ask remarkably similar questions about safety, equality, memory, discrimination, democracy and the institutions that shape their lives. They also continue to ask how we can speak with one another across those differences without pretending that they do not exist.

Balkan Talks was never created to provide definitive answers to these questions. Its purpose has been to create a space in which they can be asked openly and critically,

where disagreement does not have to end a conversation, and where young people from across the region can encounter perspectives they might otherwise never hear.

This is also why writing remains important to us. In an environment increasingly shaped by endless scrolling, instant reactions and disappearing attention spans, writing requires a different kind of engagement. It asks us to spend time with an argument, to reconsider our assumptions and, sometimes, to remain with questions that do not have simple answers. Every contribution to Balkan Talks begins with someone's curiosity, research, frustration, experience or hope, but once published it becomes an invitation for others to respond, disagree, develop the argument further or begin an entirely new conversation.

We often hear that young people are the future. The people whose work fills these pages remind us why that formulation is insufficient. Young people are already researchers, artists, journalists, lawyers, educators, activists and community organisers. They are documenting injustice, proposing alternatives, preserving difficult memories, creating knowledge and building relationships across borders. Their voices deserve to be taken seriously not because young people are necessarily always right, but because democratic and intellectually open societies depend on the possibility that new generations can question what previous ones have taken for granted.

And for Balkan Talks, these final pages are not only a conclusion. They are also the beginning of the next stage of our work.

From the 2026/2027 academic year, the Invisible University for Southeastern Europe (IUSEE), developed under Central European University's Global Invisible University initiative, will provide a new educational space for students from across the Balkans. Building on several years of pilot courses and regional

cooperation, IUSEE will offer interdisciplinary and transnational courses addressing the Balkans through questions of history, society, culture, democracy, borders, conflict and European integration. The programme grows from the same environment in which Balkan Talks itself first emerged: one based on the idea that academic knowledge should cross institutional and national borders and that students should be participants in creating intellectual communities rather than simply recipients of knowledge.

Beginning with the Fall 2026 semester, students will be able to participate in free online courses carrying between 4 and 6 ECTS credits. Alongside academic coursework, the wider programme will create opportunities for mentoring, methodological training, mobility and further international academic exchange. The aim is to make individual courses available online, while building a regional educational community in which students can meet peers and scholars whom they might otherwise never encounter.

Balkan Talks will remain closely connected to that community. The conversations that begin in a seminar do not have to end when the class does: they can become research, essays, interviews, collaborations, public discussions and new questions for others to take further. In the same way, something first encountered in Balkan Talks can become the starting point for deeper study and academic work.

And not everything will happen online. The period ahead will also bring offline educational programmes, winter and summer schools, workshops, forums and other spaces where Balkan Talkers, and those who are only about to become part of this community, can meet, learn and work together across the region. We want Balkan Talks to remain a publication, but also to continue growing as a community around it, a place

where education and regional exchange reinforce one another.

There is therefore much more ahead of us: new courses, new authors, new collaborations and, inevitably, new disagreements. There will be subjects we have not yet considered and people whose voices have not yet reached our pages. We hope some of them will be yours.

So, if something in this issue challenges you, continue questioning it. If it gives you an idea, develop it. If you disagree with an author, formulate the argument and join the discussion. Read critically, write courageously and disagree respectfully. Support independent youth media, recommend authors whose work deserves a wider audience, and send us your research, essays, poems, reviews and ideas.

If you would like to learn more about our upcoming educational programmes, courses, winter and summer schools, forums and other opportunities across the region, or simply find out how you can become a Balkan Talker yourself, follow our web journal, Balkan Talks, and our Instagram page (@talksbalkan). This is where we will continue sharing new calls, opportunities and ways to participate in the community.

Balkan Talks can only remain meaningful if it continues to change with the people who participate in it. The goal has never been to build a platform that simply speaks to young people, but one in which young people from across the Balkans speak with one another, while being heard.

This special issue ends here, but the work, fortunately, does not. The next semester, the next school, the next article and the next conversation are already ahead of us.

Let's keep Balkan talking.

Balkan Talks is a volunteer-based community of young writers, editors, researchers and activists from across the Balkans, brought together by the belief that young people need spaces where they can speak freely, question the world around them and be heard. Authors and editors build that space together, learning from one another and creating a journal shaped by the people whose voices fill its pages.

For this Special Issue, we turn to gender equality, feminism and femicide in the Western Balkans. Through research essays, policy papers, opinion pieces, interviews, poetry and reviews, our contributors write about violence, inequality, LGBTQ+ rights, representation, resistance, solidarity and the everyday realities behind the questions we so often discuss only through statistics or policy.

These pages matter because young people across the Balkans have something to say about the societies they live in. Here, they speak in their own voices, from their own experiences and perspectives. Reading this journal is an invitation to listen to them, encounter experiences beyond your own, question things we have learned to take for granted and become part of a conversation that continues across borders.

For this Special Issue, we are especially grateful to the Open Society Foundations and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights Serbia for supporting our work and our advocacy for the recognition of femicide as a distinct criminal offence.

These are our voices and this is the community we are building together. We invite you to open the journal and join the conversation.

