

HATEFUL DISCRIMINATORY DISCOURSE ONLINE IN BULGARIA

Annual Report 2025

LIFE Project

September 2025

Disclaimer

HATEFUL DISCRIMINATORY DISCOURSE ONLINE IN BULGARIA

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LIFE-Living Safely in a Digital World Project aims to increase the resilience of the young generation on facing the risks of the digitalization and its impact in their everyday life through empowering youth organizations to be involved in policy dialogue and use non-formal learning in their work with the young people.

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Executive Summary

This Annual Report 2025 builds upon the baseline established in 2024, offering a more robust and comprehensive view of the state of hateful discriminatory discourse (HDD) online in Bulgaria. Drawing on a large-scale national survey with **1,000 respondents** and **two extended focus groups (20 participants)**, the findings confirm that hate speech remains pervasive, emotionally damaging, and inadequately addressed by platforms and institutions.

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Key insights from the survey reveal that:

- **Exposure is widespread:** 87% of respondents have encountered hate speech online at least once, with **41% experiencing it daily** and **36% weekly**.
- **Forms of hate speech remain consistent but intensified:** Racism (70%), sexism (65%), and homophobia/transphobia (62%) dominate, while religious intolerance (47%) and socio-economic discrimination (29%) are also common. Compared to 2024, gender- and orientation-based hate speech has increased.
- **Platforms act as central vectors:** Facebook (71%), TikTok (63%), Instagram (59%), and YouTube (54%) are the most cited spaces where youth encounter hate speech. TikTok, in particular, has grown in prominence compared to 2024.
- **Emotional and behavioral impacts are significant:** Anger and disturbance (46%) and anxiety or fear (31%) are the most reported feelings. A worrying 18% reported withdrawal or self-censorship, limiting their digital participation.
- **Reporting mechanisms remain ineffective:** Only 8% of respondents found platform reporting effective. 45% said nothing happened after reporting, while 29% received no feedback.
- **Perceptions are increasingly negative:** 68% believe that hate speech online is growing, and 72% consider it a major societal concern.

Focus group discussions reinforced these findings, providing rich qualitative insights:

- **Normalization of hate speech:** Many participants described it as part of the “everyday online culture,” particularly in comment sections on TikTok and Facebook groups.
- **Psychological toll:** Participants spoke about anxiety, self-censorship, and avoidance, linking online harassment to absenteeism from school and reduced participation in digital spaces.
- **Reporting frustrations:** Experiences with reporting were overwhelmingly negative, with participants describing the process as symbolic and ineffective.
- **Emerging resilience:** A minority of participants (around 15%) shared examples of mobilizing peers to intervene against hateful content, emphasizing that peer support and counterspeech can mitigate hostile online climates.

The evidence paints a clear picture: hateful discriminatory discourse online in Bulgaria is not only persistent but evolving in form and platform presence. While awareness is high, and youth

demonstrate resilience and readiness to engage in counter-narratives, systemic issues—especially platform accountability—remain unresolved.

Key Highlights

The 2025 Annual Report on Hateful Discriminatory Discourse (HDD) in Bulgaria provides an expanded evidence base and captures both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the problem. Compared to 2024, the findings illustrate intensification of exposure, diversification of hate forms, and continued dissatisfaction with reporting mechanisms.

Survey (1,000 respondents)

- **Demographics:**
 - Largest group: youth aged 15–19 (34%), followed by 20–24 (22%).
 - Gender balance: 51% female, 47% male, 2% unspecified.
 - Education: majority with secondary (41%) and bachelor’s degrees (29%); fewer with master’s or postgraduate education.
 - Geographic distribution: strongest representation from Blagoevgrad (30%), Petrich (12%), Gotse Delchev (10%), Sofia (15%), and smaller shares from other municipalities.
- **Digital engagement:**
 - **82% use social media multiple times daily.**
 - Most popular platforms: Facebook (71%), TikTok (63%), Instagram (59%), YouTube (54%).
 - Online media portals are also widely visited, with news outlets and forums serving as secondary arenas for HDD.
- **Exposure to hate speech:**
 - **41% daily encounters, 36% weekly.**
 - Top categories: racism (70%), sexism (65%), homophobia/transphobia (62%), religious intolerance (47%), socio-economic discrimination (29%).
 - Compared to 2024, **sexism and homophobia/transphobia have grown in frequency**, while racist content remains most common.
- **Impacts:**
 - Anger and disturbance (46%).
 - Anxiety, fear, or stress (31%).
 - Avoidance of platforms/self-censorship (18%).
 - Motivated to act (12%).
- **Reactions and reporting:**
 - Ignoring/blocking: 55%.
 - Reporting: 38%.
 - Engaging with counterspeech: 12%.
 - Reporting outcomes: 45% no action, 29% no feedback, only 8% effective.
- **Perceptions:**
 - 68% believe online hate speech is increasing.
 - 72% are concerned at medium-to-high levels.

- 72% recommend education as a solution, 51% stricter platform policies, 45% victim support, 32% peer counter-campaigns.

Focus Groups (20 participants, ages 16–22)

- **Normalization:** Hate speech perceived as routine, particularly on TikTok comment sections and Facebook groups.
- **Emotional and social impact:** Reports of anxiety, loss of confidence, avoidance of digital spaces, and even reduced classroom participation.
- **Reporting frustrations:** Participants describe platform reporting tools as ineffective, lacking feedback, and often symbolic.
- **Resilience and counterspeech:** Some participants mobilized peers to counter hate, finding peer intervention more effective than official reporting mechanisms.

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Overall conclusions from highlights

- Exposure to hate speech remains **pervasive and daily** for many young people.
- Hate categories have **shifted**, with sexism and homophobia becoming more prominent compared to 2024.
- Emotional and behavioral impacts are substantial, threatening participation, inclusion, and well-being.
- Institutional and platform responses remain insufficient.
- Youth demonstrate resilience and propose practical solutions, especially education, peer campaigns, and victim support

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication platforms has transformed how young people in Bulgaria engage with information, peers, and civic life. However, alongside the opportunities for connection and expression, the online environment continues to host harmful dynamics, with hateful and discriminatory discourse (HDD) emerging as a persistent and complex challenge.

The **LIFE – Living Safely in a Digital World** project responds to these challenges by enhancing youth resilience to digital risks. It does so through a combination of research, education, and policy dialogue, with a strong emphasis on youth participation and evidence-based advocacy. The Bulgarian country report serves as both a monitoring tool and a platform for recommendations that reflect the lived realities of young people.

Building upon the **2024 baseline report**, the **2025 edition** aims to provide:

1. **An updated national picture** based on a significantly larger survey (1,000 respondents) and expanded focus groups (20 participants compared to 10 last year).
2. **Comparability across time**, ensuring continuity with the 2024 report while identifying new trends and shifts.

3. **Deeper qualitative insights**, capturing the voices and experiences of youth in Bulgaria in greater detail.
4. **Policy-relevant outcomes**, highlighting pathways for intervention at the levels of education, platform accountability, and community support.

The findings are particularly significant given the **growing centrality of platforms like TikTok** in shaping youth culture and discourse. Compared to 2024, evidence suggests a diversification of hate categories, rising prominence of gender- and orientation-based abuse, and persistent shortcomings in platform responses.

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By situating youth voices at the core of the analysis, the report seeks to inform stakeholders—**policy makers, educators, civil society organizations, and digital platforms**—about the urgent need for coordinated action. The ultimate goal is to ensure that the digital environment in Bulgaria becomes safer, more inclusive, and conducive to the democratic participation of all young people.

Scope

The 2025 Annual Report defines a **clear scope** to ensure continuity with the 2024 edition and to facilitate robust comparisons across time. The scope delineates the geographic, demographic, thematic, and platform dimensions of the research.

Geographic Scope

- The survey included respondents from across Bulgaria, with a strong focus on the **Blagoevgrad region**, complemented by significant participation from **Petrich, Gotse Delchev, Kyustendil, and Sofia**.
- This regional spread provides both urban and semi-urban perspectives, capturing different digital cultures and levels of access to online resources.

Demographic Scope

- Primary focus on **youth aged 15–29**, aligned with EU and national definitions of the youth population.
- To contextualize findings, the survey also included **adults up to age 40**, providing comparative insights into generational differences in exposure, perception, and coping strategies.
- Gender distribution is broadly balanced (51% female, 47% male, 2% unspecified), ensuring that gendered dynamics of online hate speech can be captured reliably.
- Educational background spans secondary, vocational, bachelor's, and master's levels, providing a layered understanding of how education relates to online behavior and exposure to hate.

Thematic Scope

The report focuses on **hateful discriminatory discourse (HDD)** across the following categories:



- **Racism and xenophobia** – hostility based on ethnicity, nationality, or migrant status.
- **Sexism and misogyny** – gender-based abuse, objectification, and hostility toward women and girls.
- **Homophobia and transphobia** – derogatory speech targeting sexual orientation and gender identity.
- **Religious intolerance** – hate speech against specific faith groups or practices.
- **Socio-economic discrimination** – shaming or exclusion based on economic status, poverty, or marginalization.

Platform Scope

The analysis covers both **social media platforms** and **online media portals**, where youth report encountering hate speech most often:

- **Facebook** (71%) and **TikTok** (63%) emerge as the most cited spaces, reflecting generational shifts in usage.
- **Instagram** (59%) and **YouTube** (54%) remain highly relevant among youth audiences.
- Online news portals and forums continue to host polarizing discussions, with hate speech particularly visible in **comment sections**.

Comparability Scope

To maintain consistency with the **2024 Annual Report**, the 2025 study replicates core survey questions and focus group themes while expanding the scale of participation. This allows for both **trend analysis** and **cross-sectional insights** into emerging forms of hate speech and platform dynamics.

Methodology

The methodological approach for the 2025 Annual Report combines **quantitative survey research** and **qualitative focus group discussions**, ensuring both statistical robustness and in-depth understanding of youth experiences. This mixed-method design replicates the 2024 framework while **expanding the sample size** and refining thematic coverage.

Survey Component

- **Sample size:** 1,000 respondents (compared to 50 in 2024).
- **Sampling approach:** Online distribution through youth organizations, educational institutions, and social networks in Blagoevgrad, Petrich, Gotse Delchev, Kyustendil, Sofia, and smaller municipalities.
- **Demographics:** Balanced gender distribution, diverse age brackets (15–40), and varying educational backgrounds.
- **Questionnaire design:** Replicated core 2024 questions on:
 1. Demographics and social media usage
 2. Frequency of encountering hate speech

3. Forms of hate speech encountered
 4. Platforms most affected
 5. Emotional and behavioral impacts
 6. Reactions and reporting behavior
 7. Effectiveness of reporting mechanisms
 8. Perceptions of hate speech as a growing problem
 9. Suggested solutions for addressing hate speech
- **Data processing:**
 1. Multi-select responses were normalized (split into individual categories).
 2. Descriptive statistics summarize distributions.
 3. Comparative analysis across **age, gender, and education** provides segment-level insights.
 4. Year-to-year trend comparisons highlight changes between 2024 and 2025.

Focus Group Component

- **Sessions:** Two focus groups conducted in **Blagoevgrad and Sofia**.
- **Participants:** 20 youth (12 male, 8 female), aged 16–22, recruited through schools, youth NGOs, and peer networks.
- **Discussion structure:**
 1. **Introductions and ground rules** (confidentiality, respect, inclusiveness).
 2. **Main discussion themes:**
 - Experiences of encountering online hate speech.
 - Psychological and emotional impacts.
 - Awareness and use of reporting mechanisms.
 - Coping strategies, peer support, and resilience.
 - Recommendations for reducing hate speech.
 3. **Conclusion and reflections** (participants summarize takeaways and propose actions).
- **Data collection:** Sessions were transcribed, anonymized, and coded for thematic analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant identities.
- **Analysis:** Thematic coding identified cross-cutting patterns such as normalization of hate, emotional toll, reporting frustrations, and emerging resilience. Direct quotes are included to illustrate key points.

Limitations

- **Self-reporting bias:** Responses reflect personal perceptions, which may differ from observed online behavior.
- **Non-probability sampling:** Survey distribution favored youth engaged with NGOs and educational networks, potentially limiting generalizability.
- **Platform variability:** Some platforms (e.g., private chats, closed groups) may be underrepresented.
- **Comparability issues:** While methods replicate 2024, shifts in platform dynamics (e.g., TikTok's growth) affect comparability.

Strengths

- **Larger sample size** (1,000 vs. 50) significantly increases reliability.
- **Triangulation of data** (survey + focus groups) strengthens validity.
- **Year-to-year comparability** ensures continuity and trend identification.
- **Youth-centered approach** prioritizes the voices of those most directly affected.

Data and Analysis

Survey

The national survey with **1,000 respondents** provides the quantitative backbone of this report. Compared to the 2024 baseline (50), the larger sample allows for far more reliable insights into demographics, social media usage, exposure to hate speech, its impact, and perceptions of possible solutions.

Summary of Survey Responses

Demographics

- **Age distribution:**
 - 15–19 years: 34%
 - 20–24 years: 22%
 - 25–29 years: 18%
 - 30–34 years: 14%
 - 35–40 years: 12%
- **Gender:** 51% female, 47% male, 2% other/unspecified.
- **Education:** Majority hold **secondary education (41%)** or **bachelor's degrees (29%)**; fewer have **master's (15%)** or vocational/primary education (15%).
- **Geographic spread:** Highest representation from **Blagoevgrad (30%)**, followed by **Petrich (12%)**, **Gotse Delchev (10%)**, **Sofia (15%)**, with smaller shares from Kyustendil and other towns.

Social Media Usage

- **82% use social media several times per day.**
- Most frequently used platforms:
 - Facebook (71%)
 - TikTok (63%)
 - Instagram (59%)
 - YouTube (54%)
- Online media portals (e.g., news sites, forums) also play a central role, particularly comment sections.

Encountering Hate Speech

- **87% of respondents have encountered hate speech online at least once.**
- **41% daily, 36% weekly, 10% monthly, 13% rarely or never.**
- **Most common forms:**
 - Racism and xenophobia (70%)
 - Sexism and misogyny (65%)
 - Homophobia/transphobia (62%)
 - Religious intolerance (47%)
 - Socio-economic discrimination (29%)

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Impact of Hate Speech

- Anger/disturbance: 46%
- Anxiety, fear, stress: 31%
- Avoidance or self-censorship: 18%
- Motivated to act/counterspeech: 12%

Reactions and Reporting

- Ignore/block: 55%
- Report content: 38%
- Engage directly (counterspeech): 12%
- **Reporting outcomes:**
 - 45% said nothing happened
 - 29% received no feedback
 - 18% saw content removed
 - Only 8% considered reporting effective

Perceptions

- **68% believe hate speech online is increasing.**
- **72% express medium-to-high concern.**
- Suggested solutions:
 - Education and awareness campaigns (72%)
 - Stricter platform policies (51%)
 - Support services for victims (45%)
 - Youth-led counter-campaigns (32%)

Segment Analysis

By Age

- Younger groups (15–19) report **higher daily exposure (52%)**, particularly on TikTok.
- Older groups (30–40) encounter more hate speech in **news portals and forums**, often linked to political discourse.

By Gender

- **Women** more frequently report experiences of **sexism and misogyny (72%)**, as well as **harassment in private messages**.
- **Men** report higher exposure to **racism/xenophobia (74%)** and hate in gaming communities.

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By Education

- Respondents with **secondary education** more likely to encounter hate speech in **TikTok and Facebook comments**.
- Respondents with **higher education** more likely to report hate speech in **news forums** and are slightly more engaged in counterspeech.

Sentiment Analysis

- **Anger/Upset:** Dominant reaction (46%); respondents describe feeling “provoked” and “tired of constant negativity.”
- **Anxiety/Fear:** 31% report emotional strain, especially among younger participants (15–19).
- **Powerlessness:** Many expressed frustration that reporting rarely leads to action.
- **Motivation/Resilience:** 12% felt driven to speak up, often citing peer support as a key factor enabling counterspeech.

Trend Analysis (2024 → 2025)

- **Increase in exposure:** Daily encounters rose from **38% (2024)** to **41% (2025)**.
- **Shift in forms:** Racism remains dominant, but **sexism (+6%)** and **homophobia (+5%)** show notable increases.
- **Platform dynamics:** TikTok has gained prominence as a central space for hate speech among youth, overtaking Instagram in reported cases.
- **Emotional impact:** Levels of anxiety and fear rose slightly (from 28% to 31%), while anger/disturbance remained stable.
- **Reporting dissatisfaction:** Persistent trend—ineffective reporting mechanisms continue to undermine trust.

Focus Group Discussion

To complement the survey findings, two extended focus groups were conducted in **Blagoevgrad** and **Sofia** in May–June 2025. Each session brought together young people aged **16–22** (total **20 participants**, 12 male and 8 female) with diverse educational backgrounds. The aim was to capture **lived experiences**, contextualize survey data, and explore **qualitative insights** into the impacts of online hate speech.

Introduction

The focus groups began with **introductions and ground rules**, ensuring confidentiality, respect, and inclusiveness. Participants were encouraged to speak freely, share personal experiences, and reflect on both challenges and potential solutions. A short icebreaker allowed participants to describe their **most used social media platform** and whether they had ever seen hostile content there. All 20 respondents answered “yes,” confirming the pervasiveness of hate speech across platforms.

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Main Discussion

1. Experiences of Encountering Hate Speech

Participants described multiple platforms where hate speech occurs:

- **TikTok comments:** “The comments under trending videos are brutal—if you disagree, you’re instantly attacked.”
- **Facebook groups:** “Discussions in local community groups are toxic, with insults based on ethnicity or politics.”
- **Gaming chats:** Several participants reported racist and sexist insults during online games.
- **News portals/forums:** Hate speech was prevalent in comment sections, often politically driven.

The **most frequent forms** mentioned were racism, sexism, homophobia, and attacks on socio-economic status (e.g., mocking poverty).

2. Psychological and Emotional Impacts

Youth emphasized the **psychological toll**:

- **Anxiety and stress:** “After a wave of insults, I felt nervous even checking my notifications.”
- **Self-censorship:** Many avoided posting personal opinions for fear of being attacked.
- **Withdrawal:** Some stopped using certain platforms altogether.
- **Anger and frustration:** Common reactions to repeated exposure, often leading to heated online arguments.

Notably, several participants linked online harassment to **real-world consequences**, such as **absenteeism from school** and **loss of motivation in class discussions**.

3. Mechanisms of Reporting

Almost all participants had tried reporting hate speech at least once, but experiences were negative:

- **Lack of feedback:** “I reported dozens of posts—nothing ever happened.”
- **Perception of futility:** Reporting felt like “sending messages into a void.”

- **Platform bias:** Some participants believed platforms removed mild content but ignored blatant hate.

Only **4 out of 20** participants described any positive experience with reporting mechanisms.

4. Coping Strategies and Peer Support

Despite frustrations, youth demonstrated resilience:

- **Peer support:** Friends defending each other online was seen as more effective than platform responses.
- **Counterspeech:** Calm fact-checking and humor sometimes de-escalated hostile threads.
- **Avoidance:** Many chose to ignore/block aggressors, but acknowledged this did not solve the problem.
- **Private sharing:** Screenshots and group chats were used to vent and seek support after exposure to hate.

5. Youth Recommendations

Participants proposed practical solutions:

- **Education in schools:** Systematic digital and media literacy to teach recognition of hate speech and coping strategies.
- **Peer-led campaigns:** Youth-produced videos and graphics countering hate narratives.
- **Platform accountability:** Stronger moderation, transparency, and penalties for repeat offenders.
- **Mental health support:** Access to counselors in schools to help youth process experiences.
- **Community initiatives:** Encouraging solidarity and tolerance through local projects.

Conclusion

The focus groups confirmed that **hate speech is normalized and widespread**, particularly among young people active on TikTok and Facebook. The **emotional and social impacts are severe**, contributing to anxiety, self-censorship, and disengagement. Participants are **deeply skeptical** of platform reporting mechanisms, which they perceive as symbolic. Yet, the groups also revealed **resilience and creativity**: young people are willing to mobilize peers, experiment with counterspeech, and push for education-driven solutions.

Data Collection and Recording

Sessions were conducted in a semi-structured format, lasting 90 minutes each. Both were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed. Participants were anonymized using pseudonyms (e.g., “Maria, 17, Blagoevgrad”). Direct quotes were selected to illustrate thematic findings without compromising confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Thematic coding identified five dominant themes:

1. **Normalization of hate speech** in everyday digital life.
2. **Psychological toll** including fear, anger, and withdrawal.
3. **Frustration with reporting mechanisms.**
4. **Peer support and counterspeech** as effective, informal coping strategies.
5. **Youth-driven recommendations** highlighting education, campaigns, and platform accountability.

Quantitative Data: Summary of Data Collected from Focus Groups

Although focus groups are primarily qualitative in nature, quantitative summaries provide useful context regarding participant demographics and self-reported experiences.

Participant Profile

Variable	Findings
Total participants	20
Gender	Male: 12 (60%); Female: 8 (40%)
Age groups	16–18 years: 8 (40%); 19–21 years: 6 (30%); 22–24 years: 6 (30%)
Education	Secondary school: 10 (50%); University students: 8 (40%); Vocational training: 2 (10%)
Location	Blagoevgrad: 12 (60%); Sofia: 8 (40%)

Experiences with Hate Speech

Variable	Findings
Daily encounters	11 participants (55%)
Weekly encounters	7 participants (35%)
Monthly or rare encounters	2 participants (10%)
Most reported platforms	TikTok (16 mentions), Facebook (14), Instagram (9), Online games (7)
Most reported hate categories	Racism (15 mentions), Sexism (13), Homophobia/Transphobia (12), Socio-economic (6), Religion (5)

Reactions and Coping

Variable	Findings
Reported hate content	Yes: 16 (80%); No: 4 (20%)
Satisfaction with reporting	Satisfied: 4 (20%); Dissatisfied: 12 (60%); Neutral: 4 (20%)
Coping strategies	Ignoring/blocking (14 participants); Counterspeech (7 participants); Peer support (12 participants); Avoidance of platforms (6 participants)

Perceptions and Recommendations

Variable	Findings
Perception of increase in hate speech	Yes: 15 (75%); No: 3 (15%); Unsure: 2 (10%)
Top recommendations	Education in schools (15 participants); Stronger platform accountability (12); Peer-led initiatives (10); Mental health support (7)

Analysis:

The quantitative overview of focus group participants mirrors the larger survey: **daily exposure is common**, particularly on TikTok and Facebook, and **sexism/homophobia are increasingly reported alongside racism**. Dissatisfaction with reporting mechanisms is near-universal, though a **minority (20%) expressed satisfaction** in cases where content was removed after multiple reports. Importantly, **peer support and education** consistently emerged as preferred solutions, reinforcing the survey’s findings.

Qualitative Insights: Summary of Qualitative Findings from Focus Groups

The **qualitative dimension** of the focus groups adds depth to the survey findings, highlighting the emotions, perceptions, and lived experiences behind the statistics. By analyzing transcripts, several **dominant themes** emerged that illustrate how young people in Bulgaria perceive and respond to hateful discriminatory discourse online.

Normalization of Hate Speech

Participants frequently described hate speech as an “everyday feature” of online spaces:

- *“On TikTok, it’s almost expected that under every viral video someone will post something racist or sexist.”*
- *“In Facebook groups, people insult each other so much that it becomes background noise.”*

This normalization results in a dangerous **desensitization**—many young people no longer react strongly to hate speech unless it is extreme or personally targeted.

Psychological Toll

Exposure to constant hostility takes a clear emotional toll:

- Feelings of **fear, anxiety, and stress** were commonly reported.
- Some participants described **sleep difficulties** after prolonged exposure to online harassment.
- A recurring theme was **self-censorship**: “I stopped posting about my opinions—why bother, I’ll only get attacked.”

In several cases, young people described withdrawing from online communities entirely, particularly when hate targeted their gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

Contextual Triggers

Participants noted that hate speech tends to **spike during sensitive events**:

- **Political debates** or election campaigns.
- **Sports events**, especially football matches, where ethnic slurs become common.
- **Controversial news stories**, particularly around migration, women's rights, or LGBTQ+ issues.

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These triggers create cycles of hostility that spill over from online spaces into real-world discussions.

Algorithmic Amplification

A striking theme was the perception that platform algorithms **amplify hateful content**:

- Participants believed that controversial posts “go viral” faster.
- Several noted that “the more hateful the comment, the more likes it gets.”
- This perception contributed to **mistrust of platforms**, as participants felt hate was being indirectly rewarded.

Reporting as Symbolic

Reporting mechanisms were consistently described as ineffective:

- *“It feels like sending a complaint into a black hole.”*
- Participants saw reporting as a **symbolic act**, with little expectation of real consequences.
- Only a handful shared positive experiences where reported content was eventually removed, but they considered these the exception.

Effective Responses and Coping

Despite frustrations, participants identified **peer interventions** and **counterspeech** as the most effective strategies:

- Calm fact-checking and humor were seen as useful in de-escalating hostile threads.
- Peer solidarity (friends stepping in to defend each other) helped reduce feelings of isolation.
- However, avoidance and blocking remained the most common coping mechanisms, even if acknowledged as short-term solutions.

Youth-Driven Recommendations

The focus groups generated concrete ideas for change:

1. **Education:** Mandatory media literacy classes in schools to help recognize and respond to hate speech.
2. **Peer-led campaigns:** Youth-produced content on TikTok and Instagram to counter hateful narratives.
3. **Platform accountability:** Stricter moderation and transparency in reporting outcomes.
4. **Mental health support:** Access to school counselors for victims of online abuse.
5. **Community solidarity:** Local initiatives that promote tolerance and bring together diverse groups.

Summary:

Qualitative findings show that Bulgarian youth experience online hate speech as both **pervasive and damaging**, but they also demonstrate **resilience and creativity** in coping. While systemic responses remain weak, young people see education, solidarity, and counterspeech as key to building safer online spaces.

Impact and Outcomes

The combined evidence from the **survey (1,000)** and **focus groups (20)** provides a clear picture of how hateful discriminatory discourse (HDD) online affects young people in Bulgaria. The findings highlight both **negative impacts** and **emerging positive outcomes**, reflecting a complex balance between harm and resilience.

Impact

Emotional and Psychological Impact

- **Anger and frustration (46%)** – the most common reaction, often leading to heated exchanges online.
- **Anxiety, stress, and fear (31%)** – especially reported among younger participants (15–19).
- **Self-censorship (18%)** – withdrawal from online discussions, avoiding controversial topics.
- **Feelings of powerlessness** – linked to ineffective reporting mechanisms.
- **Reduced mental well-being** – cases of sleep problems, concentration difficulties, and school absenteeism.

Behavioral Impact

- **Avoidance of platforms:** Many youth reduced their activity on TikTok, Facebook, or forums.
- **Blocking and ignoring:** Widespread as a coping mechanism, though seen as short-term.
- **Peer reliance:** Young people increasingly depend on friends to defend them in online conflicts.
- **Disengagement from civic discourse:** Some stopped posting on political or social issues.

Community-Level Impact

- **Normalization of toxic discourse:** Hate speech increasingly seen as “part of the culture.”
- **Polarization:** Divisions deepen around ethnicity, gender, and politics.
- **Offline spillover:** Hate from online discussions often transferred into classrooms and local communities.

Outcomes

Despite the negative impacts, several **positive outcomes** were identified:

Increased Awareness

- Compared to 2024, more respondents **recognize hate speech as a serious societal issue** (72%).
- Youth show improved ability to **identify discriminatory content**, including subtle forms of sexism and homophobia.

Growing Advocacy

- Calls for **media literacy in schools** and **stricter platform regulation** are stronger than in 2024.
- Focus group participants actively discussed **solutions**, showing readiness to contribute.

Youth Resilience

- Around 12% of respondents said they felt **motivated to act** rather than withdraw.
- Peer solidarity and counterspeech were highlighted as **effective community tools**.
- Several participants shared examples of **youth-led initiatives**, such as TikTok campaigns countering stereotypes.

Policy and Platform Implications

- Findings reinforce the **urgent need for accountability** under the EU’s **Digital Services Act (DSA)**.
- Education, awareness, and victim support must be **integrated into national youth policy**.
- Youth voices should be included in **platform consultations** to design better reporting and moderation systems.

Summary:

The impact of online hate speech on Bulgarian youth is **profoundly negative**, affecting mental health, participation, and community cohesion. However, the **outcomes also demonstrate resilience**: young people are aware of the risks, motivated to act, and increasingly articulate in demanding structural solutions. The challenge now is to **channel this resilience into sustainable interventions** that combine education, policy reform, and community action.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the 2025 survey and focus groups, this report identifies a set of **priority recommendations** aimed at addressing hateful discriminatory discourse (HDD) online in Bulgaria. These recommendations are directed toward **policy makers, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and digital platforms**.

1. Education and Awareness

- Integrate **digital and media literacy** into school curricula at all levels.
- Provide training for teachers, youth workers, and community leaders on recognizing and countering hate speech.
- Launch **nationwide awareness campaigns** targeting youth, parents, and educators, emphasizing the harms of hate speech and the importance of counterspeech.

2. Stricter Platform Policies

- Enforce **clearer moderation standards** on Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.
- Improve **algorithmic transparency**, particularly regarding content amplification and viral hate.
- Ensure **timely and transparent feedback** on reporting outcomes, moving beyond automated responses.
- Penalize repeat offenders with escalating consequences, including temporary bans and account removal.

3. Improved Reporting Mechanisms

- Simplify reporting processes, making them more **accessible and user-friendly**.
- Introduce **real-time progress tracking** for users who submit reports.
- Establish independent **third-party oversight** to monitor platform responses.

4. Community Support and Victim Services

- Create **peer-led support groups** in schools and communities where youth can share experiences and coping strategies.
- Expand access to **mental health services**, including school counselors trained to deal with online harassment.
- Encourage **civil society organizations** to provide victim assistance, legal advice, and safe reporting channels.

5. Legal and Policy Measures

- Strengthen the **national legal framework** to align with the EU's **Digital Services Act (DSA)**.

- Ensure effective **implementation and enforcement** of existing anti-discrimination laws online.
- Promote **cross-sector collaboration** between government, NGOs, educators, and tech companies.

Summary of Recommendations

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- **Educate:** Build long-term resilience through schools and awareness campaigns.
- **Regulate:** Hold platforms accountable under EU and national frameworks.
- **Support:** Provide services and solidarity for victims.
- **Empower:** Enable youth to lead peer-driven counter-narratives.
- **Enforce:** Apply legal and policy tools to deter and punish offenders.

Conclusion

The 2025 Annual Report confirms that online hate speech in Bulgaria remains **pervasive and damaging**, but it also highlights the **potential for youth-driven change**. Young people are aware, engaged, and eager to contribute to solutions. By combining education, platform accountability, and community support, stakeholders can ensure that Bulgaria’s digital space evolves into a safer and more inclusive environment for all.

Documented Cases of Hate Speech in Bulgaria (2023–2025)

To complement survey and focus group data, this section summarizes publicly documented cases of hate speech and discriminatory discourse that appeared in Bulgarian media between 2023 and 2025. The examples include statements by political figures, institutional decisions, and incidents in sports and online platforms. They illustrate the persistence and variety of hate speech across social, political, and digital domains.

1. Antisemitic Threat to the Sofia Synagogue (February 2025)

A man was arrested after making a telephone threat to “exterminate Jews” directed at the Central Sofia Synagogue. The case was widely covered in national media and condemned by the Jewish community as an alarming escalation of antisemitic hate speech.

Affected group: Jewish community.

Source: Bulgarian National Radio, bTV News, February 2025.

2. Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD) Decision against Kostadin Kostadinov (November 2024)

The CPD ruled that the leader of the nationalist party Vazrazhdane used antisemitic and xenophobic language on Facebook targeting MP Daniel Lorér.

Affected group: Persons of Jewish origin.

Source: CPD Decision № 430/19.11.2024; national press reports.

3. Repeat CPD Sanction of Kostadin Kostadinov and “Vazrazhdane” (April 2025)

A subsequent CPD decision confirmed systematic dissemination of antisemitic hate speech through official party pages, noting hostile comments and posts glorifying Nazi ideology.

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Affected group: Jewish community.

Source: CPD Decision № 164/14.04.2025; Bulgarian National Television.

4. Sanction of VMRO–BND for Discriminatory Statements (July 2023)

The CPD sanctioned VMRO–BND for discriminatory public messaging targeting vulnerable groups, as documented by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC).

Affected groups: Roma and migrants.

Source: BHC, “Human Rights in Bulgaria 2023.”

5. Hate Speech on PIK TV (February 2024)

A broadcast on PIK TV described refugees as “Islamic hordes flooding Bulgaria.” The Council for Electronic Media (CEM) issued a formal warning, classifying the content as hate-inciting.

Affected groups: Migrants and Muslims.

Source: CEM Monitoring Report 2024.

6. Widespread Hate Speech Recorded by BHC Annual Report 2024

The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee’s annual report highlighted persistent hate speech in online media targeting Roma, LGBTI people, and Muslims, noting a rise in politically motivated hostility.

Affected groups: Roma, LGBTI, Muslims.

Source: BHC, “Human Rights in Bulgaria 2024.”

7. Criminal Code Amendment Including Sexual Orientation (July 2023)

Following multiple public incidents of homophobic rhetoric, Parliament amended the Criminal Code to explicitly list sexual orientation as a protected ground against hate speech and hate crime.

Affected group: LGBTI persons.

Source: National Assembly Gazette, July 2023.

8. Public Debate on the “Boyan Rassate” Case (June 2024)

Media coverage of the court case against far-right activist Boyan Rassate, charged with incitement to discrimination and hate on the basis of sexual orientation, triggered nationwide discussion about hate crimes.

Affected group: LGBTI persons.

Source: Radio Free Europe Bulgaria, June 2024.

9. UEFA Fine for FC Levski (August 2023)

UEFA fined Levski Sofia €40,000 for discriminatory chants and nationalist symbols displayed by fans during a European match against FK Shkupi.

Affected group: Ethnic minorities.

Source: UEFA Disciplinary Decision 2023.

10. Racist Abuse in Bulgarian Volleyball (January 2025)

The Bulgarian Volleyball Federation penalized CSKA Sofia after supporters shouted racist insults at Levski player Liván Osoria during a league match.

Affected group: People of African descent.

Source: BF Volleyball Disciplinary Commission Decision 2025.

11. Racist Chants during International Football Match (October 2023)

UEFA ordered Serbia to play its home game against Bulgaria without spectators following racist chanting in a previous match in Belgrade. The incident received broad coverage in Bulgarian media.

Affected group: Ethnic minorities.

Source: UEFA Decision 2023; Bulgarian sports press.

12. “Lukov March” Neo-Nazi Demonstrations (2023–2024)

Despite official bans, extremist groups held annual marches in Sofia commemorating General Hristo Lukov, featuring Nazi symbolism and xenophobic slogans. The events were condemned by the government and international organizations as manifestations of hate.

Affected groups: Jewish community and minorities.

Source: World Jewish Congress, Bulgarian National Radio, February 2023–2024.

13. CPD Annual Report on Hate Speech in Media (2023)

The CPD’s 2023 annual report cited specific media publications found to contain hate speech and discrimination, noting limited editorial accountability.

Affected groups: Various minorities.

Source: CPD Annual Report 2023.

14. Online Hate and Gender-Based Violence Cases (May 2025)

The CPD issued an opinion concerning online profiles on TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook promoting violence against women and misogynistic narratives.

Affected group: Women.

Source: CPD Press Release May 2025.

15. BHC White Paper on Hate Crime and Hate Speech (2024)

The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee's white paper documented the prevalence of anti-Roma, anti-Muslim, and anti-LGBTI rhetoric across online platforms and traditional media. Page | 24

Affected groups: Roma, Muslims, LGBTI persons.

Source: BHC White Paper 2024.