

Taking the Balkan route to Belgrade: Conspiracy theories surrounding the settlement of migrants in Serbia during the coronavirus

Mila Bajić

Nationalism Studies Program

Central European University

milabajiic@gmail.com

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SUMMARY

According to Uscinski (2020), conspiracy theories often initiate political debates and very rarely are the areas of politics that are not exposed to at least one such narrative. This paper examines the mobilization potential of a popular conspiracy theory based on the idea that the police curfew in Serbia served as a smokescreen for the mass settlement of migrants within the country, as well as the ways in which people were convinced that these statements were true and why they were effective. Fear of the unknown and uncertainty has been found to be the strongest catalyst when it comes to stimulating citizens and members to believe and support this theory. The spread of this conspiracy theory through social media such as Facebook is evidence of the growth of so-called horizontal trust, which replaces vertical trust more often associated with traditional media (Bangerter, Wagner-Egger and Delouvéé 2020). The 330,000-member “STOP Settlement of Migrants” Facebook group became particularly active during curfew and the state of emergency, which was a time of great insecurity and fear of the unknown. The paper also analyzes the key discursive characteristics that are part of the anti-migrant discourse within this largest Facebook group. Through the analysis, five categories of hatred were identified and explained, following the example of the typology of Andre Oboler (2016). The paper also analyzes the key discursive characteristics that are part of the anti-migrant discourse within this largest Facebook group. Through the analysis,

five categories of hatred were identified and explained, following the example of the typology created by Oboler. The paper also analyzes the key discursive characteristics that are part of the anti-migrant discourse within this largest Facebook group. Through the analysis, five categories of hatred were identified and explained, following the example of the typology of Adre Oboler (2016).

KEYWORDS: conspiracy theories, migrant and refugees, Facebook, stereotyping, online discrimination, discourse analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Since March 2020, everyday life around the world changed in more ways than one. Social distance and self-isolation as a consequence of the spread of the novel coronavirus and the subsequent pandemic have become the new norm in the world. Growing control over citizens by state apparatuses has also contributed to feelings of anxiety, fear, insecurity and uncertainty. In such conditions, the fertile ground that was created for the birth and spread of conspiracy theories is no surprise. At their core, all these theories sought to clarify the new situation both in Serbia and the rest of the world. Like most things in the 21st century, these theories began to spread and found their safe haven on the Internet. In Serbia, conspiracy theories that advocated for the disclosure of an alleged secret government plan to use the nation-wide curfew as a smokescreen for the mass settlement of migrants throughout the country were among the most common. In propagating this theory, the greatest achievement was reached by Facebook group called "STOP the Settlement of Migrants", which counted over 300,000 members.¹ It is important to note that the content published in this group that was used in this research is available to the general public, that is, that this group is not closed and that the personal data of any member of this group was not used.

With the beginning of the curfew in Serbia, the majority of communication moved to the digital sphere. Some really important and positive things happened as a result of this communication - we have witnessed the organization of fellow citizens with

¹ The group has since been taken removed, after multiple instances of reports due to its content.

the intention of helping the most vulnerable and oldest members of society through grocery runs, donations and medical assistance. Hyper-production of the production, sale and donation of masks and other protective material was launched, and various experts in the field of psychology, sociology and medicine offered their help to those who felt scared, anxious and uncertain. With all this in mind, it is important to emphasize that the changes in the digital sphere were not only limited to these acts of kindness and compassion. Messages of skepticism, dissatisfaction and hatred intensified over time and gradually began to spread and attract the attention of social media users. As already mentioned, the Facebook group "STOP the Settlement of Migrants" shows a clear example of the popularization of such dangerous statements, which are also motivated by anger, hatred and fear of the unknown. The frequency of post being published in this group increased during the curfew and this can be seen as a consequence of the fact that citizens and social media users were forced to spend all their time at home and in front of their screens in much larger numbers and much longer intervals than before. This physical inability to go outside and rely solely on official information placed by the authorities created distrust in many citizens, not only towards the sources of information, but also towards the information itself. One of the most important points of public angst was the creation of a centralized information system regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and its spread throughout the country. On March 28, amid the worsening situation caused by the virus, the government issued a decree on information which mandated that all official public information related to the virus was to come directly from high government officials or members of the national COVID-19 Crisis Team.² The fact that the distribution and dissemination of misinformation and fake news is further facilitated through social networks explains the seriousness of this problem. On social networks, content is created and managed by networked members (in this case Facebook groups) who generally share the same beliefs and similar worldviews. This is a significant difference compared to traditional media, because in these groups it is the members who become active content producers and cease to be only passive recipients. In other words, they take the discourse into their own hands.

² Milica Stojanović. "Serbian Government Takes Control of Information Flow About Pandemic". *Balkan Insight*. April 1, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/01/serbian-govt-takes-control-of-information-flow-about-pandemic/> (accessed October 17, 2020)

The main question that this research has sought to offer an answer to is how migrants and refugees are represented in the discourse used within this conspiracy theory? The analysis offers some of the key themes within this discourse through textual and visual content shared in the group to better understand the ways in which migrants and refugees are presented to members of this group, but also how members present migrants through content that they themselves create and share. The analysis seeks to address some of the main arguments aimed at antagonizing migrants, and these arguments were divided and broken down within thematic units. An emphasis was also placed on the way in which migrants and refugees are represented and described within these groups.

2. CONSPIRACY THEORIES ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

At the very beginning of this paper, it would be useful to offer a brief overview of the essence of the concept of conspiracy theories. How and why they arise and how do they spread through society? Who are they most often intended for and who do they most often target? In what periods can we expect their spread and what are the potential catalysts for that? As already mentioned at the beginning, the focus of this research was on the conspiracy theory that connects the state of emergency, more specifically the state-imposed curfew period produced by the coronavirus pandemic in Serbia and its alleged connection with the settlement of migrants in the country.

Almost all researchers involved in the development and analysis of conspiracy theories agree on several facts. First, conspiracy theories mainly deal with major events that attract much public attention.³ Second, these events are always treated as some kind of cover-up of some potentially greater truth that represents an attack on the masses. Another important aspect is that conspiracy theories have become more frequent and widespread throughout the world in recent years. Most of these theories are generally global in nature, but they also have the ability to be personalized for specific communities, groups, and states, but also for continents. The latter is the case with conspiracy theories about migrants and refugees. From Hungary to Norway, the so-called

³ Joseph E. Uscinski. 2020. "Conspiracy Theories: A Primer" (London: Riwman & Littlefield), p2.

illegal settlement of migrants has been portrayed as a significant problem threatening Europe, not just individual countries.

Intertwining of conspiracy theories can often be seen in these Facebook groups, therefore not only anti-migrant content is shared, but also skepticism about wearing masks and the coronavirus itself, as well as homophobia and concerns about the impact of the 5G network as just some of the examples. At one time, discussions on the new Montenegrin religious law became topical, as did the issue of Kosovo's independence, which has returned to the public spotlight in recent months. Linking these theories indicates the presence of great skepticism towards the authorities, in this case the president and the ruling party and the crisis headquarters, but also "higher authority" which according to more global conspiracy theories is often found in the character of George Soros, the European Union and other international organizations in the neoliberal division of the spectrum.

It is important to note that conspiracy theories are not the same as fake news. In one respect, not all false news claims that there is some secret evil plan. Moreover, the creators of fake news are aware that they are spreading lies. They do this to create confusion, mobilize their audience, or denigrate opponents.⁴ However, the instrumentalization of false news for the purpose of scaring and spreading panic can lead to the consolidation of conspiracy theories. This is obvious when you look at the main sources through which news is shared in this Facebook group. Newspanel.rs is one of the key media protocols from which news related to migrants and refugees is shared within the group. This site does not offer any sources, as well as information about the authors of these articles, but rather it relies on inflammatory rhetoric and often offers links to messages from Twitter accounts that mostly imply some of the aforementioned conspiracy theories. Butter and Knight also emphasize the role of conspiracy theories in solidifying individual or group identities. In his second chapter, Peter Kreko emphasizes that the importance of conspiracy theories for collective identity is precisely one of the main reasons why it is difficult to discredit or "expose" them. It is through conspiracy theories that the ingroup can be strengthened, through the collective raising of self-

⁴ Peter Knight & Michael Butter. (eds.) 2020. "Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories". (New York: Routledge) p2.

confidence, self-victimization or shifting the blame to external actors.⁵ Kreko emphasizes that the importance of conspiracy theories for collective identity is precisely one of the main reasons why they are difficult to discredit or "expose". It is through conspiracy theories that the "inner group" (ingroup) can be strengthened, through the collective raising of self-confidence, self-victimization or shifting the blame to external actors.⁶ Peter Kreko emphasizes that the importance of conspiracy theories for collective identity is precisely one of the main reasons why they are difficult to discredit or "expose". It is through conspiracy theories that the "inner group" (ingroup) can be strengthened, through the collective raising of self-confidence, self-victimization or shifting the blame to external actors.⁷

According to research that has dealt with the psychology of conspiracy theories⁸, human belief in conspiracy theories is guided by the satisfaction of certain motives that can be characterized as epistemological (desire for understanding), existential (desire for control and security) and social (desire to maintain a positive image of oneself or a group). All three factors listed in this study indicate that belief in conspiracy theories is driven by the need for members to feel safe and informed. Especially in the case of social motives, where conspiracy theories have been found to raise a sense of personal value as well as group values by letting the blame for negative outcomes be attributed to those outside the group.⁹ These factors are important when considering the content of the messages shared in the Facebook group that was the subject of the analysis of this paper. Great emphasis is placed on concepts such as population replacement, loss or change of religion, loss of culture and national identity.

The Facebook group "STOP the Settlement of Migrants", which was analyzed in this study, at one point counted 362 thousand members. After the end of the state of emergency and curfew, the narrative in the groups changed but did not significantly deviate from the previous framework. The members of the national COVID Crisis Team as well as members of the ruling party continued to be frequently mentioned and their

⁵ Peter Kreko. 2020. "Countering Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation" in Knight & Buttler (eds.) 2020. "Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories". (New York: Routledge) p246.

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ Karen M Douglas, Robbie M Sutton & Aleksandra Cichoka. 2017. "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories". *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26(6), SAGE Publications, pp. 538-542.

⁹ Douglas et al., p540.

statements were criticized and placed in the broader context of a conspiracy against the "common people". It is clear that one of the goals of this group was to mobilize civic dissatisfaction through connecting with its members based on some of the currently trending topics. These topics include: the response of state authorities to the coronavirus epidemic in the country, general dissatisfaction with the ruling party in Serbia, resolving the Kosovo issue and the so-called "settlement" of migrants in Serbia.

One of the administrators of this Facebook group is the "Civic Patrols" initiative, which are self-declared patrols of citizens gathered around the "No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija" initiative. This initiative became known to the general public in Serbia after numerous protests against migrants in cities across the country and the capital.¹⁰ Members of this initiative have on several occasions organized visits to neighbourhoods of Belgrade where migrants and refugees reside and illegally asked them to show them their IDs, restricting their movement and threatening them with physical violence.

The reason why it is easy to spread the narrative of these theories is precisely the way in which they spread within such groups. As Bangerter, Wagner-Egger, and Delouvé state, conspiracy theories spread across two communicative genres: storytelling and argumentation.¹¹ Both genres are narratively suitable for platforms such as Facebook and other social networks, because they stimulate discussions and debates. At their core, conspiracy theories are stories in which certain actors try to convince other members of something. They offer alternative perspectives for stories whose explanations people may not be happy with and open up the possibility for further observation. This format during the global pandemic and curfew created an ideal fertile ground for the spread of various conspiracy theories. The field of transmission of conspiracy theories is still insufficiently explored, but is of key significance for further analysis.

3. "COMMISSIONER FOR MIGRATION AND DISSEMINATION OF FALSE NEWS"

¹⁰ Nemanja Mitrović, "Civil Patrols: Whos patrolling Belgrade in the search for migrants" (Narodne patrola: Ko patrolira Beogradom u potrazi za migrantima) *BBC Serbia*. March 9, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-51761864> (accessed October 19, 2020)

¹¹ Adrian Bangerter, Pascal Wagner-Egger & Sylvain Delouvé. 2020. "How Conspiracy Theories Spread" in Knight & Butters (eds.). 2020. *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. (New York: Routledge) p207.

For the purposes of the research, the content that was shared within the Facebook group from March 15 to May 7, that is, from the declaration of the state of emergency and during the curfew in Serbia, was analyzed. According to the analysis of the given content and in accordance with the offered theoretical framework, three predominant themes that appear in the contents that are shared in the group have been singled out.

3.1. IDENTITY

The first major topic within the analysis was the topic of identity and the way it was constructed. In the posts in the Facebook group, great emphasis was placed on the firm division between "us" and "them". This dichotomy is emphasized in several ways (citizens / migrants; Europe / Islam; civilization / animals and similar examples). In line with this polarization, culture is often emphasized as the reason why it is impossible to integrate migrants and refugees from the Middle East within Serbia. Religion and interpersonal relationships, especially between men and women, were cited as major examples of a cultural gap between the two groups. Many examples of alleged violence by the migrant and refugee population against Serbian citizens also point to a symbolic loss of identity and therefore represent a significant part of this discourse.

Conspiracy theories related to the "replacement" of the population known as "white genocide" or the "Great Replacement theory" have always been very popular and were quickly met with the approval of the masses. These theories were easy to adopt because they covered a large part of the population (white middle class) affected by various socio-economic disasters in the past few generations. With that in mind, the beginning of the global migrant crisis in 2015 only accelerated the spread and belief in this theory.

As a key sociological factor for the spread of conspiracy theories, Uscinski (2020) emphasizes group identity. According to his analysis, conspiracy theories that largely relate to group dynamics can create a sense of superiority, narcissism, and even motivated reasoning, allowing members of that group to ignore the bad behavior of other members of their group and only focus on the alleged bad behavior of the targeted, outer

groups.¹² Group conspiracy theories can create a sense of belonging in individuals, which can produce some alleged "attacks" on the group to be interpreted as attacks on the person. In this case, the members of the Facebook group represent the Serbian people who were attacked by the migrant and refugee population, but also by the migrant policy of the European Union and the authorities in their country.

3.2. SECURITY

Another topic was security. In a large number of posts in the group, the emphasis was placed on the so-called "discovery of the truth" when it comes to the arrival of migrants in Serbia, and a large number of answers were offered by members of the group in regards to this question. A majority of the content which contained threatening messages which circulated in the group claimed that a secret state plan for the repopulation of Serbia was underway, as well as that no media wanted to spread the truth about this event. In the period of analysis, a lot of video content was distributed in the group by members showing buses that were allegedly resettling migrants and refugees throughout Serbia. These claims were unfounded, especially considering the fact that migrants and refugees were arbitrarily deprived of their liberty during the state of emergency in Serbia and were not allowed to leave camps and reception centers.¹³ Precisely because of this kind of content circulating, it wasn't unusual to come across a lot of posts in the group, calling for citizens to take matters into their own hands. An additional danger of such incendiary calls lies in the fact that, as mentioned earlier, one of the administrators of this group is the "Civil Patrols" initiative, which on several occasions conducted campaigns against migrants and refugees residing in Belgrade, which gave these calls an added layer of validity. The last case of realization of such calls happened on October 25, 2020 in the park near the Faculty of Economics in the center of Belgrade.¹⁴

¹² Uscinski p73.

¹³ "Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants illegally and arbitrarily detained on the basis of discriminatory criteria". Initiative A11. April 20, 2020. <https://www.a11initiative.org/en/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants-unlawfully-and-arbitrarily-detained-on-the-basis-of-discriminatory-criteria/>.

¹⁴ Dragoslav Dedović, "Ethnic cleansing of the park" (Etničko čišćenje parka). *Deutsche Welle*. October 26, 2020. <https://p.dw.com/p/3kQvR> (accessed October 27, 2020).

When security is mentioned, a large amount of content also drew attention to the role of the police, that is, according to the members of this group, its non-response to the threat that migrants and refugees pose to the country and the people. Police have often been criticized for allegedly defending migrants and even lacking loyalty to their own people. It was also emphasized that the police, under the command of the state leadership, cover up all criminal acts committed by migrants and refugees in the country, while they illegally arrest, beat and abuse Serbian citizens. This narrative was especially relevant when a citizen drove his car into the Reception Center for Migrants in the Belgrade municipality of Obrenovac, after which he was arrested and taken into custody.¹⁵ It is important to note that the citizen filmed the entire event and broadcast it live via his Facebook profile, which shows the importance of social networks for the dissemination of such content, as well as the primary group which the citizen wanted to address with his act as well as where he sought support. In addition to the police, the media were also accused of covering up the situation due to the so-called refusal to publish the "truth", in which they are referring to the content that is shared by these groups. Most of the content that is shared throughout these groups, especially if the source is an online media portal, does not offer any credible sources or verify the information they publish. According to the members of this group, these cover-ups were orchestrated by the state leadership, which is why one member called the Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia "the Commissariat for Migration and Spreading Fake News" in their post.

According to the number of posts, it could be concluded that the main reason for the threat to security is potential terrorism. According to the Psychosocial Innovation Network's (PIN) "Attitudes towards refugees and migrants" survey conducted in June 2020, almost 40% of respondents believe that migrants and refugees currently residing on the territory of the Republic of Serbia are members of terrorist organizations such as

¹⁵ Jelena Zorić, "He drove through the fence and entered the Obrenovac migrant Reception center" (Kolima probio ogradu i uleteo u Prihvatni centar za migrante u Obrenovcu). *NI*. May 7, 2020. <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a596797/Kolima-probio-ogradu-i-uleteo-u-Prihvatni-centar-za-migrante-u-Obrenovcu.html> (accessed October 27, 2020).

ISIS, which aim to destroy the Christian population, and one third are of the opinion that there is a secret plan for the settlement of migrants on the territory of Serbia.¹⁶

3.3. FEAR

The third topic that arises in the content analysis is related to fear. According to the aforementioned analysis by Douglas, Sutton, and Chichoke (2017), this fear can be related to economic, security, or existential factors. The fear related to the previous two topics of analysis can be interpreted as the biggest catalyst for spreading such content. Among the most common, there is the fear of "loss of identity" and ones own country, or the fear of citizens and members of these groups not to become "second-class citizens" in their own country, as is often mentioned. Some of the main topics that can be singled out when talking about this fear, and are listed in these groups are: (1) fear of the so-called "Islamization" of Serbia and Europe, which is mentioned in countries in the region such as Hungary, Croatia, and broader, Poland, Czechia and the like. There is also fear (2) for the safety of women, which is additionally encouraged by frequent posts in which examples of attacks and rapes of women by members of the migrant population in Serbia are cited. Most of this content is quickly discredited and it turns out that it is disinformation placed by certain members along with accompanying articles that have no sources nor are they based on facts. The third category consists of (3) economic fear, that is, the fear of losing economic security due to the influx of the migrant workforce. A large number of posts in the group are dedicated to this narrative, focusing on the fact that migrants coming to Serbia are more financially viable for employers, as well as that there is a state initiative to provide social and financial assistance to migrants and refugees. When it comes to this last point, it is worth noting that a large number of members of this group are economic migrants themselves, or even war refugees, that are living either in EU countries or even further such as North America or Australia, but fail

¹⁶ Maša Vukčević Marković, Jovana Bjekić, Marko Živanović, Milica Ninković & Irena Stojadinović. 2020. "Attitudes towards refugees and migrants" (Stavovi o izbeglicama i migrantima) Psychological Innovation Network. https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Stavovi-prema-izbeglicama-i-migrantima_2020.pdf p14.

to recognize their migrant status as equal to those migrants and refugees that are residing in Serbia, who are either in transit or seeking asylum.

Referring again to the PIN survey, almost 60% of Serbian citizens believe that migrants and refugees represent an economic burden for the country, and the same percentage also believe that their prolonged stay in the country brings with it an increase in crime rates.¹⁷

4. HATE CATEGORIES

The second part of the analysis refers to the descriptions of migrants and refugees themselves within the Facebook group “STOP the Settlement of Migrants”. Following the example of the typology offered in the research by Andre Oboler (2016), five categories were identified according to which hatred towards migrants and refugees could be classified:

4.1. A threat to public safety

In most of the posts, migrants and refugees are presented as dangerous and aggressive, without any regard to the laws that apply on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. Most of the visual content shared in the group tended to present members of the migrant and refugee populations in dangerous and aggressive situations, using images and video content of real Islamic extremists that were recorded neither in Serbia nor during the period in which they were posted. A lot of old content was also used, including an infamous 2015 photo showing a big group of migrants and refugees crossing from Croatia to Slovenia. This same photo was used for the Brexit referendum in the UK in 2016, as well as in the anti-migrant billboard campaigns in Hungary.¹⁸

4.2. Cultural threat

¹⁷ Vukčević Marković, Bjekić, Živanović, Ninković & Stojadinović p12.

¹⁸ Cristina Abellan Matamoros, “Hungarian government rehashes UKIP anti-migrant poster in new ad”. *Euronews*. March 29, 2018. <https://www.euronews.com/2018/03/28/hungary-government-s-new-anti-immigration-ad-copies-ukip-s-controversial-anti-migrant-post> (accessed October 25, 2020).

In line with the theme of identity, these posts aimed to visually demonstrate how large the cultural gap is between migrants, who mostly come from the Middle East and Africa, and Serbs and Europeans. Often, the visual contents shared in the group showed women wearing burqas and niqabs and represented men who were married to several women. This is an interesting paradox considering the fact that the leading narrative is that migrants and refugees passing through Serbia are mostly young men who are militarily capable and have no families. It is often alluded to Sharia law and its implementation in Serbia in the event of a mass settlement of members of the Islamic population in the country.

4.3. Economic threat

Migrants and refugees are portrayed as an economic threat, and mostly as a burden on the social system. The assumption is that most migrants and refugees have no desire to integrate, neither culturally nor economically, and thus only seek the benefits that the state can provide them. Most of this discourse is based on the idea that the state is buying houses in villages in Serbia that are intended for the settlement of migrants and refugees. One such story was debunked by the online portal Fake News tragač, which clarified that the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration posed a statement saying that the houses were in fact intended for refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia.¹⁹ Despite such examples, such posts and content did not stop being shared even after the end of the curfew and the state of emergency on the territory of Serbia, but were instead still being published with the same intensity.

4.4. Dehumanization and demonization of migrants

¹⁹ Stefan Kosanović, “The state is not buying houses in Alibunar for migrants from the Middle East” (Država migrantima sa Bliskog Istoka ne kupuje kuće u Alibunaru). *Fake News tragač*. May 25, 2020. <https://fakenews.rs/2020/05/21/drzava-migrantima-sa-bliskog-istoka-ne-kupuje-kuce-u-alibunaru/> (accessed October 27, 2020).

Of all the categories used to spread negative propaganda about members of the migrant and refugee population, dehumanization and demonization contained the most explicit examples of racism. For a start, all migrants and refugees are reduced to Muslims and Islam is caricatured in various ways. As Oboler himself pointed out, one of the key ways to dehumanize the Muslim population is to try to deny the human right to freedom of religion by accusing the religion [of Islam] itself of being against human rights.²⁰ This is achieved through sharing content that highlights the most brutal practices in Sharia law or persistent reminders of terrorist attacks carried out by Al Qaeda or the Islamic State. Through this narrative, the target group is presented as evil and the goal is to lose all empathy for them, simply put to dehumanize and demonize them.

4.5. Instruments of power struggle

Previously, the analysis mentioned the importance of group identity for spreading and believing in conspiracy theories. Somewhere at the intersection of cultural and economic threats, a significant number of the shared content refers to the instrumentalization of migrants and refugees in a secret state plan that aims to "replace the population". The so-called secret agreement on the return of migrants and refugees from Austria to Serbia has been cited several times as the main argument for distrust in the government and its migrant policy, although the existence of such an agreement has never been confirmed. According to research, such an agreement does not exist or has been signed anywhere, and statistics show that since the beginning of the refugee crisis, not a single person who is not a Serbian citizen has been returned to Serbia from Austria.²¹ Despite this information, the content circulating in the group, especially articles from portals such as Newsportal.rs, persistently states that this is a conspiracy in which all government bodies, the police and the army, as well as the media, are participating in. According to Biddlestone et al., conspiracy theories within ingroups groups may aim to legitimize injustice, that is, they can offer those who believe in them some tangible reason for their

²⁰ Andre Oboler. 2016. "The Normalisation of Islamophobia through Social Media: Facebook" in Awan, Imran. (ed.) 2016. "Islamophobia in Cyberspace: Hate Crimes Go Viral". (New York: Routledge) p51.

²¹ Nemanja Rujević, "Is Austria returning migrants to Serbia?" (Da li Austrija vraća migrante u Srbiju?). *Deutsche Welle*. January 25, 2020. . <https://www.dw.com/sr/da-li-austrija-vra%C4%87a-migrante-u-srbiju/a-52110363> (accessed October 25, 2020).

own unsatisfactory socio-economic situation.²² This kind of thinking distracts the ingroup group from facing the real reasons for their social position, which can sometimes be symptoms of deeper systemic problems or in some cases unwillingness to accept the new and unknown.

5. THE ROLE OF FACEBOOK

The fact that Facebook is the platform on which such groups encounter the most follow-up is very worrying, especially since we are already very aware that the regulation of such groups is very slow and, in some cases, even impossible, especially when it comes to offenses such as hate speech.²³ In previous years, although exposed to criticism and condemnation, Facebook rarely adopted and checked hate speech reports from countries where no representatives were appointed. Although Facebook, especially for the case of Serbia, was called upon to take notice, any reaction from the tech giant was absent and Serbia still did not get a country representative for this social network.²⁴ This is certainly also supported by the list of rules on the page of the group that was the subject of the analysis of this paper.

²² Oboler p226.

²³ Kari Paul. 'It let white supremacists organize': the toxic legacy of Facebook's Groups. *The Guardian*. February 4, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/feb/04/facebook-groups-misinformation> (accessed February 10, 2021)

²⁴ "SHARE files complaints against Facebook and Google". SHARE Foundation. December 4, 2019. <https://www.sharefoundation.info/en/share-files-complaints-against-facebook-and-google/>

Group Rules from the Admins

- 1 Lažne informacije** ...
Sve objave u kojima postoji mogućnost da su lažne i ne proverene informacije nećemo objavljivati ili ih brišemo naknadno ako nam promaknu. Mogućnosti pokretanja krivične odgovornosti.
- 2 Будите пристојни и учтиви** ...
Циљ нам је да заједно створимо окружење у којем ће се сви осећати пријатно. Поштујте једни друге. Здраве расправе су пожељне, али не заборавите на учтивост.
- 3 Без говора мржње и узнемиравања** ...
Водите рачуна да се сви осећају безбедно. Није дозвољено малтретирање било које врсте и не толеришемо увредљиве коментаре о темама као што су раса, верска припадност, култура, сексуална оријентација, род или идентитет.
- 4 Без промоција и непожељних садржаја** ...
Од чланова ове групе очекује се да дају више него што добијају. Самопромоција, непожељни садржаји и нерелевантне везе нису дозвољени.
- 5 Поштујте туђу приватност** ...
Међу члановима групе мора постојати међусобно поверење. Искрена и отворена комуникација је веома важна, али неке информације могу бити осетљиве и поверљиве природе. Оно што се подели у групи, остаје у групи.

Figure 1: Group rules “STOP Migrant Settlement Movement” set by the group administrator

All this leads to the creation and maintenance of what Andre Oboler calls Hate 2.0, which refers to the normalization of hatred based on untrue information, and implies the establishment of social acceptability towards such content, which is then later freely shared on social networks. It is the combination of hate speech and the platform that can enable such content to go viral, that is, to amass the greatest reach, that creates Hate 2.0.²⁵ The danger is reflected in the idea that dissemination and mass acceptance and participation in such content leads to the normalization of such opinions and attitudes,

²⁵ Oboler p45.

which may create the impression that it is acceptable to express them in everyday life and on the streets, which we have already seen happening in Belgrade, but also other cities throughout Serbia.²⁶

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude this analysis, it is important to note that according to the survey of attitudes towards refugees and migrants, 92% of respondents pointed out that they have never had direct or indirect contact with refugees and migrants in Serbia.²⁷ Taking into account these statistics, it can be argued that most of the attitudes formed and expressed in these groups, such as the one analyzed in this paper, stem from insufficient information and prejudices driven by emotions rather than objective facts. It is clear from the offered analysis that the content shared in such groups still represents a danger that can be transferred from the digital to the analog world. It is clear that in times of crisis it may seem easier to mobilize people around conspiracy theories that can offer some potential explanation for the situation we all find ourselves in, but it is important to be aware that this is not a justification for the normalization of misleading and potentially dangerous discourses. That is why it is the obligation of everyone, the state, the media and social networks, but also those who participate in the creation and dissemination of this content to better inform and educate themselves about the dangers that conspiracy theories and misinformation can bring with them.

In his work “‘Trust no one’: Modernization, paranoia and conspiracy culture”, Stef Aupers (2012) offers a definition of conspiracy culture, which he says is a product of modernization and modern times, emphasizing that conspiracy theories can no longer be described as something that takes place exclusively on the fringes of our society. Conspiracy theories have become an integral part of everyday life and various local and global examples can be found. Precisely because of the examples of real conspiracies that were discovered in the last century, such as Watergate, the absolute belief in narratives

²⁶ Dalibor Stupar, “Nikola Kovačević: In Serbia hate crimes against migrants are not punished” (Nikola Kovačević: U Srbiji se ne kažnjavaju akti mržnje protiv migranata) *Autonomija*. October 30, 2020. . <https://www.autonomija.info/nikola-kovacevic-u-srbiji-se-ne-kaznjavaju-akti-mrznje-protiv-migranata.html> (accessed October 30, 2020).

²⁷ Vukčević Marković et al. p17.

offered by state leaders is considered naive.²⁸ Of course, Aupers does not believe that any information offered by an authority should be considered part of some larger conspiracy, but only points out that critical thinking is a prerequisite for considering information in the world in which we live. Critical observation of conspiracy theories is a relatively new field in the social sciences, but with the mass use of the Internet, it is impossible to ignore their growing importance. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate this phenomenon as precisely as possible in order to be able to offer appropriate strategies for their analysis in the future, as well as to prevent potential dangers that they may bring with them.

Facebook groups like this are not a local phenomenon, and it is possible to find them in almost every country. From Myanmar to Norway, the fact is that these groups have become an integral part of the social structure and it is impossible to eradicate them. Instead, it is important to find adequate ways to approach this topic, without discrediting these theories as simple paranoia, but also not to fall down the rabbit hole.

²⁸ Stef Aupers. 2012. “‘Trust no one’: Modernization, paranoia and conspiracy culture”. *European Journal of Communication* 27(1), SAGE Publications, p24.

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