Annual Report

2025

media-diversity.org

MEDIADIVERSITY INSTITUTE

Key Achievments

RDN

produces 13 research reports focused on gendered disinformation and hate speech

RDN

awards 30 grants, in 6 Western Balkans countries

- **MDI WB** holds events for YOU(th) CARE for Change: “Beyond the Framing: Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes in Media”, No Pride in Genocide, and “On the Frontlines of the Movement: Student Organising and the Deconstruction of Misogyny in the Media”

5 new projects

LIMENet

awards 33 grants, supporting 39 European organisations in 5 countries

- **MDI WB** hosts Breaking Words, Building Bridges: Responses to Polarisation in the Western Balkans

YOUth Care

provided continuous support for youth-led initiatives with a focus on solidarity, support and care, including the provision of two grants.

- **PODCast** produces practical guides for podcasting

Project Highlights

2025 was a remarkable year for MDI Western Balkans (MDI WB) project work. We celebrated many major milestones, with the launch of several new projects, a focus on youth, innovation, and helping strengthen local media, among many other achievements. On a more reflective note, we bid farewell to the Youth in Western Balkans project, after three intensive years of work on intercultural dialogue among WB youth and with recognition that more of this work is needed in the region.

LIMENET

- **Lead coordinator: MDIG**
- **Project partner: MDI WB**

Enhancing local and community media in Europe

LIMENet awarded grants to local and independent media outlets and journalists in Belgium, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Serbia for innovative and creative projects to support media viability and resilience. A total of 33 grants have been awarded in the five countries, supporting 39 organisations. Those projects are now underway, with results due in 2026.

They include:

- Collaborations between media, non-profits and universities to expand youth audiences and produce a series on health.
- The development of an innovative content production system to increase audience reach by repurposing original content in different formats.
- The inclusion of Roma youth in covering pressing yet underreported issues to strengthen investigative community journalism.

- A 10-episode multimedia podcast series that brings unapologetically queer storytelling and critical political insight, featuring grassroots voices.
- A game environment and workshops allowing youth to dive into algorithms, echo chambers, and polarisation while experimenting with how different roles influence their media presence.
- A cross-border partnership to produce multilingual coverage on shared regional issues.
- The creation of engaging multimedia content that highlights the real-life benefits of European integration while pushing back against disinformation.

A public call for proposals was launched in August, attracting around 150 applications. The grants of between 16,000 and 20,000 euros cover up to 80% of eligible project costs, with a required 20% co-financing contribution from the applicant.

Innovation Fair

The LIMENet Media Innovation Fair in Budapest in March brought together 100 media professionals from six project countries and 15 other countries, for workshops on inclusive journalism and thought-provoking panels tackling the pressing challenges facing local media today. The event underscored what many in the sector already know: there is no silver bullet to save journalism, but there is strength in collective experience and innovation.

REPORTING DIVERSITY NETWORK

- **Lead partner: MDI WB**
- **Partner: MDIG**

Influencing media representation of ethnicity, religion and gender in the Western Balkans

RDN produced 13 research reports in 2025, focused on gendered disinformation and hate speech in the region.

Gendered disinformation

Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans led regional research on gendered disinformation in the Western Balkans through data collected from Reporting Diversity Monitoring and looking at fact-checking portals. Reports on North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia are available online.

Key findings:

- In **Albania**, irresponsible reporting, or the outright dismissal of survivors, exacerbates collective trauma and perpetuates a culture of silence, discouraging women from speaking out. The prevalence of gender disinformation, particularly in the political and public spheres, calls for urgent reform.
- In **Kosovo**, gender disinformation is a growing and intensifying phenomenon. It is not isolated but intersects with broader ideological, nationalist, and populist agendas that seek to maintain patriarchal control and suppress progressive change.
- Political figures, media outlets, online trolls, and organised misogynistic groups are key actors in producing and amplifying this disinformation.
- In **Montenegro**, a study of 18 examples found most cases involved the political participation and professional achievements of women, with the aim of shaming and portraying them as untrustworthy.
- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, gendered disinformation is deeply intertwined with the country's post-war political and media landscape, the persistence of patriarchal norms, weak regulatory frameworks, and external geopolitical influences. Slow progress in aligning the country's legal framework with European regulations leaves significant gaps in tackling online gender-based attacks.
- In **Serbia**, gendered disinformation serves as a political tool to target women, with narratives actively undermining efforts for equal rights, with many focusing on health hoaxes. Women in politics are routinely discredited, portrayed as incompetent and morally corrupt based on sexist tropes.
- In **North Macedonia**, gender disinformation has evolved from just a media problem to a security risk and more effective mechanisms to combat misinformation and foster informed, respectful dialogue are needed.

Media Monitoring Reports

The project also published a series of Media Monitoring Reports for the Western Balkans countries. They summarise key narratives and perpetrators of hate speech, showing patterns and key triggers of polarisation. The findings were presented and discussed at a regional conference in Belgrade in September.

Key findings:

- On a regional level, a total of **611 cases of hateful and harmful speech** were recorded during the reporting period (January 2024 to June 2025).
- Ethnicity and gender remain the **two most targeted identities**.
- **Ethnic hate continues to dominate** in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Montenegro, and North Macedonia.
- **Ethnic hate** was recorded in more than half of all BiH cases (53.57%).
- In contrast, **gender-based hate speech** prevailed in Albania (46.36%), making up almost half of all recorded cases.
- **Gender-based hate speech** was strongly present in Kosovo, where it often intersects with ethnic targeting.
- Serbia stood out for an **intensified wave of political targeting**.

- **Hate against sexual minorities** declined regionally.
- **Targeting journalists** rose significantly, in both frequency and intensity.
- **The main generators of hate speech were private persons** (29.96%), namely users on social media platforms or anonymous commentators spreading hate speech on online portals.

In April, Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans along with partners in Reporting Diversity Network opened a call for project proposals aiming to counter hate speech and improve representation of diversity. 230 applied, with 30 successful, including five in each of the Western Balkan countries.

Breaking Words, Building Bridges

MDI Western Balkans hosted a two-day regional conference, Breaking Words, Building Bridges: Responses to Polarisation in the Western Balkans in Belgrade in September, where journalists, media experts, and civil society representatives from across the region gathered to confront the growing chal.lenges of hate speech, disinformation, and political divides.

The panel, Taming the Beast: Social Media Platforms - Regulating Content, moderated by MDI Executive Director Milica Pešić, examined the impact of European regulations on Big Tech. The panel, with award-winning Croatian journalist and founder of the Europe Future Centre Ivana Dragičević, media expert and member of MDI's Media Diversity Research Centre Advisory Board Dr Snježana Milivojević, and Thomas Hughes, the CEO of Appeals Centre Europe, explored the challenges of removing harmful content from major social media platforms. The panel examined the European Union's "troika" of digital laws - the Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act (DMA), and European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) - highlighting why consistent enforcement matters for citizens, media, and democracy.

The conference also featured sessions with RDN's latest media-monitoring findings, an exhibition on sexist and misogynist media discourse, and an interactive workshop on detecting scapegoating narratives and linguistic tools.

PODCAST

Partner: MDI WB

Enhancing digital literacy and empowering young people by leveraging the power of podcasting

The two-year project which provides non-formal education opportunities that foster creativity, digital skills, and social engagement launched in January 2025.

What youth think about podcasting

In order to frame project activities on data, the project's first activity was to conduct a survey. It found:

- 72% of young people showed clear interest in learning how to create their own podcasts.
- 89% stated that creating podcasts could boost their confidence in speaking and expressing themselves.
- Podcasts are considered safe spaces.
- 60% believe podcasts give youth a voice.
- They expressed a strong desire to talk about mental health, social inclusion, diversity, entrepreneurship, and personal stories.

Training and Resources

PODCast held training in Belgrade in November for 24 young people and youth workers from six European countries. The project has also produced guidelines, including *Start Your Podcast* - a practical step-by-step tools to record, edit and share a podcast.

YOU(TH) CARE FOR CHANGE

Partners: MDIG, MDI WB

Empowering and mobilising the next generation of Global Caretakers for a shared, sustainable Euro-Mediterranean future

As part of the YOU(th) CARE or Change project, MDIG organised a panel discussion, "Beyond the Framing: Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes in Media", in November with Sabine Panet, editor-in-chief of Axelle Magazine, and writer and editor Shahed Ezaydi. The speakers explored the importance of intersectionality in storytelling, the power of media narratives in shaping social norms and the responsibility of journalists to challenge rather than reinforce stereotypes.

The project call for sub-granting to support ideas related to social and ecological issues received 112 project proposals, with a total of 30 grants awarded. In Serbia and Belgium, 5 projects were sub-granted running for a maximum of 12 months. They include providing safe LGBTQI+ spaces, strengthening diversity of student representation, and running workshops for safe spaces to empower students and teachers to co-create inclusive school environments through youth-led, participatory education in empathy.

MDI WB organised a No Pride in Genocide film screening in Belgrade in September, bringing together queer artists from Palestine, the diaspora, and around the world, emphasising the interconnectedness of struggles for justice, linking the fight against occupation with the fight against homophobia, transphobia, racism, misogyny, and exploitation, and creating a space for solidarity.

As student-led protests developed into a year-long nationwide movement for justice and accountability in Serbia, MDI WB held a panel discussion "On the Frontlines of the Movement: Student Organizing and the Deconstruction of Misogyny in the Media". The event brought together students and professors to share experiences from student-led movements and participatory civic engagement, with the panel also addressing media misogyny and specific forms of (media) violence targeting young women.

PROJECTS THAT WRAPPED UP IN 2025

YOUTH IN FOCUS

Lead Partner: MDI WB

September 2024 - May 2025

The project aimed to improve the media and information literacy of young people and the participation of young people in democratic processes by promoting the role of young people as users, authors and interlocutors in media content.

The implementation of the MIL projects in local communities is of great importance because it enables local youth to develop the skills necessary for a critical understanding of media content and the use of media tools to advocate for their needs and solutions that are in line with the community's interests. The role of the media is crucial in shaping the perception of young people, and this project has helped to open the media space for young people as equal interlocutors on all social issues.

Also, the project contributed to strengthening the youth's influence in the community.

YOUTH IN WESTERN BALKANS - A VIRTUAL POSTCARD

Lead Partner: MDI WB

December 2022 - November 2025

Increasing intercultural and media literacy competences of youth in North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina

The project worked with a total of 2,416 youth, including 1,607 high school participants and 809 other students.

Young people from Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina met in Montenegro in June for a summer camp on media and information literacy and intercultural dialogue organised by MDI WB. They explored topics including the deconstruction of stereotypes, and countering harmful narratives in the media as a precondition for intercultural dialogue and understanding.

The final conference for the Youth in Western Balkans - A Virtual Postcard project titled “Youth building bridges: Media literacy, solidarity and intercultural dialogue in the Western Balkans” was held in October in Belgrade in cooperation with YOU(th) CARE. It featured panel discussions on MIL as a tool of intercultural dialogue in a time of protests and navigating intersectional identities.

MDI WB awarded young people for their multimedia content production at the final conference. Along with one regional award, there were four national awards (for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) for best content on intercultural dialogue.

YOCOJOIN

Partners: MDI WB, MDIG

1 September 2023 - 31 August 2025

Intensifying efforts towards more inclusive and engaging journalism: introducing youth community reporters within local news media outlets

The final year of the project produced events, workshops, training and a workbook.

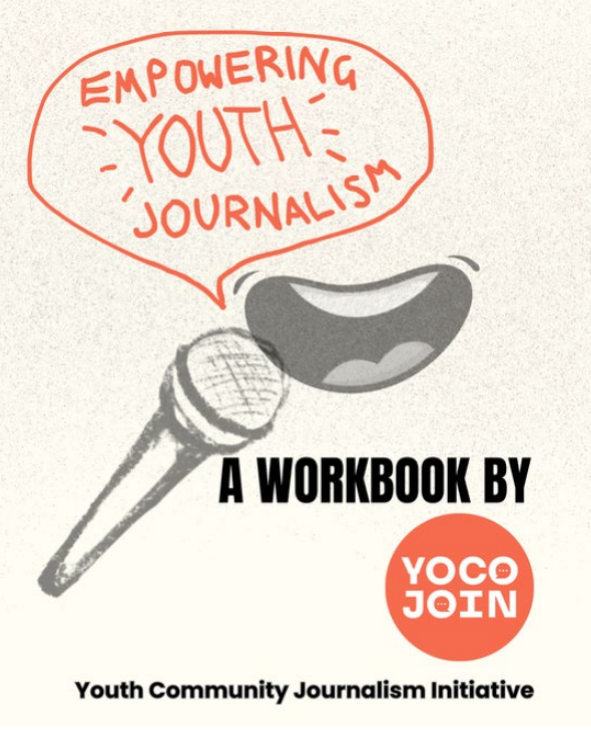
In May, YoCoJoin brought together 67 journalists, mentors, media professionals, and changemakers from across Europe at the Brussels event "Young Community Journalists: Revitalising Local Media in Europe". During the full day of discussions, workshops, and youth-led presentations, panels explored the challenges of local journalism, including news deserts, structural vulnerabilities, and the need for EU-level support. Workshops centred on the role of young journalists in local newsrooms. A highlight of the event was a showcase panel where young YoCoJoin reporters presented their stories.

Media Diversity Institute Global trained 10 young journalists on the importance of youth community journalism and continued mentoring six of them as they developed stories closely connected to their values, backgrounds, the challenges their communities face, and their motivation to create small but meaningful change. The stories covered a range of topics including the impact of Russian influence on Georgia's democratic path toward the EU, the challenges refugees face within Belgium's asylum system and why homelessness sector needs to listen to women with lived experience.

Reimagining local news with youth YoCoJoin held the workshop "Reimagining local news with youth" at the Voices - European Festival of Journalism and Media Freedom in Croatia in March, talking about best practices for engaging and empowering young people in community media.

Key lessons in a workbook

Key lessons of the 24-month project can be found in the *YoCoJoin Workbook*: *Empowering Youth in Local Journalism*. It offers practical methods for engaging and training youth in journalism, tools and templates for collaborative content production, real-world examples from young reporters and mentors, and strategies to make youth community journalism sustainable in diverse contexts. The Workbook is aimed at local media organisations, educators, and youth workers.



NEW PROJECTS

MLADI IN DEFENCE OF FACTS

Project lead: MDI WB

1 September 2025 - 30 April 2026

Empowering youth

The project aims to empower young people to recognise and critically analyse mis-, dis-, and malinformation, as well as harmful narratives that influence public discourse and the perception of social issues in local communities.

The project will focus on developing competencies for media literacy and critical thinking, which are key prerequisites for active civic participation, especially in societies facing polarisation and the manipulation of media content.

The project's goal is to contribute to the creation of more resilient local communities, which are capable of recognising and responding to harmful narratives and misinformation. Young people trained through project activities will be able to initiate socially engaged campaigns, promote accurate information ecosystems and encourage critical thinking among peers and the wider population.

INFOFACTO

Partner: MDI WB

3 November 2025 - 2 November 2027

Youth-centred media literacy

InfoFacto will help adolescents manage rapidly evolving media environments, by assessing digital content, engaging with diverse perspectives, and navigating AI-driven misinformation. Vulnerable and marginalised communities, including disadvantaged youth, rural populations, and minorities at risk of information manipulation, are being prioritised.

Although the focus is on youth, educators, parents, journalists, and researchers who play a key role in fostering media literacy will be offered targeted training to equip them with tools to support youth in critically engaging with digital content.

ACTIVE CITIZENS

Partner: MDI WB

1 December 2025 - 30 September 2026

Empowering activism through the support of informal groups

Active Citizens aims to empower citizens to actively shape and improve their local communities with the support of small grants. The project will focus on strengthening up to 80 informal groups by building their capacities to develop clear, actionable initiatives and to mobilise community members around issues that matter to them and their communities. MDI Western Balkans will directly support 10 informal groups.

The project also provides tailored support to locally led initiatives, helping informal groups improve the effectiveness, visibility, and impact of their actions. Through this approach, the project encourages active citizenship, fosters community engagement, and contributes to more accountable, inclusive, and democratic local environments.

Events

MDI led high-level discussions across the globe tackling key issues related to the media and diversity.

WORKSHOP

COMBATING HATE SPEECH ON AND WITH MEDIA

At the No Hate Speech Week

The workshop was co-hosted between Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans and Neue deutsche Medienmacher*innen, who both monitor the media for hate speech, in six countries in the Western Balkans and in Germany. The discussion revolved around the media reporting and harmful language and hate speech on social media. In the workshop, Ivana Jelaca, MDI WB Executive Director, presented RDN media monitoring and analysis methods, as well as results. Followed by a discussion, Ivana led a small workshop on analysis of the sentiments behind harmful content and how we can respond to such narratives sensitively and effectively.

HATE SPEECH WORKSHOPS

Based on the Reporting Diversity Network knowledge base, MDI WB led several youth-focused workshops focused on hate speech. In addition, Ivana Jelaca contributed to ODIHR's training for women community leaders in Kosovo, by leading a workshop on understanding and countering gendered hate speech.

ADVOCACY

Fourteen civil society organisations, including MDI WB, journalist associations and independent media, sent an open letter to META regarding the recent suspensions and deletions of Instagram accounts of independent media and civil society organi- sations in Serbia, as well as other similar attacks on media outlets' social media accounts. The reason for sending the letter was the temporary shutdown and suspension of the Instagram accounts of several independent media, civil society organisations, photojournalist, as well as other personal accounts that criticised the authorities.

In September, MDI WB organised, together with the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia and the Journalists' Association of Serbia, solidarity action outside the Government of the Republic of Serbia, reading aloud the names of journalists killed in Gaza to highlight support for Gazan colleagues and call for international media to be granted access to Gaza.

In October, MDI, MDIG and MDI WB joined more than 100 organisations to call on the European Parliament, the European Commission, and Member States to guarantee substantial and long-term EU funding and **investment for public interest media.** A joint letter, stress that independent journalism and public-interest media are essential for Europe's democracy, economy, and resilience against hybrid threats.

OTHER NEWS

This year, again, we have awarded the **YOUTH award** for the best youth multi-media content focused on media literacy and youth participation. The award winner is journalist **Ganja Nikolic** from Nis, who was awarded for her article **"Postcard from student protests - diversity unites, not divides"** where she wrote about the student protests in Nis and the expression of youth solidarity and the role of intercultural understanding and collaboration played.

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The winners of this year's regional award are **Amina Basic** from Bosnia and Herzegovina and **Ana Adamovic** from Serbia for the video **"Protests that united the region"**, in which they show the protests in Serbia, emphasising the importance of youth voices in social changes. Through recordings and interviews, the authors of the video show how young people recognise injustice and use their voices to create space for solidarity, dialogue and joint action.

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Aleksandar Đokić, Project Manager at Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans, won the second prize in the Socially Responsible Reportage category at the 30th International Reportage and Media Festival (INTERFER). “The story of Marina Adamović and her humanitarian mission has been recognised, supported and rewarded. Marina is an inspiration and an indicator of the strength of an individual in the middle of the system, and the possibility that her story reaches the wider public represents true value and an incentive for further engagement.” - Aleksandar.

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