

ANNALES

Anali za istrske in mediteranske študije
Annali di Studi istriani e mediterranee
Annals for Istrian and Mediterranean Studies
Series Historia et Sociologia, 35, 2025, 4





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Series Historia et Sociologia, 35, 2025, 4

ISSN 1408-5348
e-ISSN 2591-1775

UDK 009

Letnik 35, leto 2025, številka 4

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Tisk/Stampa/Print:

Založništvo PADRE d.o.o.

Založnika/Editori/Published by:

Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko - Koper / *Società storica del Litorale - Capodistria*® / Inštitut IRRIS za raziskave, razvoj in strategije družbe, kulture in okolja / *Institute IRRIS for Research, Development and Strategies of Society, Culture and Environment* / *Istituto IRRIS di ricerca, sviluppo e strategie della società, cultura e ambiente*®

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Address of Editorial Board:**

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Redakcija te številke je bila zaključena 30. 12. 2025.

**Sofinancirajo/Supporto finanziario/
Financially supported by:**

Javna agencija za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko dejavnost Republike Slovenije (ARIS)

Annales - Series Historia et Sociologia izhaja štirikrat letno.

Maloprodajna cena tega zvezka je 11 EUR.

Naklada/Tiratura/Circulation: 300 izvodov/copie/copies

Revija Annales, Series Historia et Sociologia je vključena v naslednje podatkovne baze / *La rivista Annales, Series Historia et Sociologia è inserita nei seguenti data base* / *Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in:* Clarivate Analytics (USA): Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) in/and Current Contents / Arts & Humanities; IBZ, Internationale Bibliographie der Zeitschriftenliteratur (GER); Sociological Abstracts (USA); Referativnyi Zhurnal Viniti (RUS); European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS); Elsevier B. V.: SCOPUS (NL); Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).

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HATE SPEECH: CONCEPTUAL INTERSECTIONS AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES

INTRODUCTION

In July 2024, an interdisciplinary academic symposium about hate speech took place in Ljubljana.¹ This international professional exchange was the foundation for the articles appearing in this special issue of *Annales, Series Historia et Sociologia*; ultimately, these articles together argue that a synthesis of knowledge scattered throughout different disciplines is the way forward if we wish to understand this complex phenomenon. I want to thank Prof. Mateja Sedmak and the *Annales* journal, who recognized the merit of this debate to be published on its pages. I also wish to acknowledge the excellent and diligent peer-review process and especially extend my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers who donated their time and expertise to this endeavour.

The special issue opens up a space for discussions that address the contemporary challenge of polarization of societies and contribute to a clearer conceptualization of hate speech. The contributions come from various disciplines (sociology, political science, anthropology, linguistics, law) and focus on country cases outside of the usual “Western gaze”: Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, and Turkey. In so doing, a space is provided for scholarly study across the wider Central-Eastern European and Balkans region. Although the contexts differ, the underlying dynamics are remarkably similar. The special issue thus advances a regional perspective that challenges the dominance of Western-centric hate speech scholarship. In contrast to what is often pervasive in legal analyses’ focus on individual rights and freedom of expression, these contributions emphasize collective processes: the sedimentation of prejudice into institutions, the entanglement of discrimination with governance, and the circulation of destructive messages across media and everyday life. Rather than treating it as a narrow legal category or a problem of a linguistic nature, the issue thus traces how hate speech participates in the maintenance of hierarchies: how words and silences, gestures and policies, all converge in the practices of inclusion and exclusion that shape modern societies. Across its diverse case studies ranging from legal practice and online discourse moderation in Slovenia, to nationalist symbolism in Croatia, migration management in Serbia, everyday imaginaries of difference, and the pragmatics of ethnic labelling in Turkey, the issue’s

authors share an intellectual commitment to understanding hate speech as a system of governance and social reproduction of difference, not an anomaly of aggression. In this sense, hate speech is not simply what offends, it is what defines the boundaries of belonging.

A shared conceptual argument is that hate speech must be understood beyond merely “illegal expression.” It is not only a verbal, written or otherwise disseminated aggression but a systemic, performative, and relational phenomenon that sustains hierarchies of “race,” class, gender, nation, and other conceptions of group belonging. The special issue explicitly links hate speech to Othering as a social mechanism and as a social act with effects, a tool of governance, a mirror of inequality. Together, these frameworks recast hate speech as a mechanism of boundary-making, woven into politics of inequality. Yes, legal definitions must balance freedom of expression with human dignity and democratic participation. But the scholarly focus should shift from “offensiveness” to social effect, for hate speech is about undermining equal participation. Online environments intensify this dynamic through speed, anonymity, and privatized governance.

Nationalism, racism, migration and gender

Veronika Bajt’s opening article lays the conceptual groundwork for the collection by arguing that hate speech must be approached sociologically, as a practice that reflects and reinforces structural inequalities. Moving beyond narrow legal definitions, Bajt frames hate speech as a mechanism of social domination, enabled by power asymmetries that allow some groups to define others as inferior or threatening. Drawing on critical race theory, nationalism studies, the concept of criminalization of migration, and intersections with gender analysis, she identifies two central logics: boundary-making and the so-called myth of purity, which together explain the construction of both external “enemies” (e.g. migrants, racialized Others) and internal ones (gender “deviants,” dissenters). Hate speech thus operates as a discursive tool for policing boundaries and sustaining the myth of purity. It is not random or purely emotional but instrumental, embedded in the nation-state’s pursuit of homogeneity. Bajt’s approach positions hate speech as both a mirror and a mechanism of structural power: it reveals social

¹ The conference was organized by the Peace Institute within a research project entitled “Hate Speech in Contemporary Conceptualizations of Nationalism, Racism, Gender and Migration,” funded by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARIS), grant number J5-3102.



Photo by Jon Tyson on Unsplash.

hierarchies and reproduces them by legitimizing exclusion. Thus, hate speech is a sociological phenomenon, not just a legal category. Understanding it demands an intersectional, multi-scalar lens connecting micro-level discriminatory communication with macro-level power structures.

In her article on anti-migrant discourse in Serbia, **Marta Stojić Mitrović** shifts the focus from speech to governance, arguing that hate speech extends beyond words into policy and institutional practice. Using speech act theory, she shows how its perlocutionary force lies in producing social and political effects. Migrants become hyper-visible as bodies, yet silenced as voices through racialized governance. Drawing on critical border studies, Mitrović demonstrates how border governance is enacted as everyday performance. She shows how grassroots hate speech becomes state action that reproduces exclusion visually and affectively. She argues that hate speech can function without speech – through bureaucratic routines that normalize exclusion, media spectacles (e.g., police raids), and strategic silences. This “hate by design” captures how administrative omissions, detention protocols, and legal amendments transform migrants into governable subjects, reinforcing hierarchies of belonging

while preserving Serbia’s image as a “responsible” EU partner. Ethnographic evidence illustrates how local protests evolved into national policy, embedding discrimination in procedural norms. Mitrović’s analysis resonates with Bajt’s “border and purity” framework: here, borders are not only territorial but bureaucratic and discursive, defining who is human enough to be protected by law.

Ana Frank’s article extends Bajt’s framework into the symbolic and affective realm of identity. Drawing on postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, and intersectional feminism, she introduces the notion of “the imaginary” as a network of images and myths that define belonging. Hate speech functions as a disciplinary mechanism within this imaginary, often implicit and non-verbal, emerging through visibility and everyday cues. Frank’s key empirical findings are based on interviews and focus groups with migrants, Muslims, Roma, and gender minorities in Slovenia, revealing how markers like the headscarf are tolerated for Christian women but vilified for Muslim women. Frank situates this within cultural or neo-racism, where exclusion is justified by lifestyle and civilizational difference rather than biology, intertwined with gendered and religious Othering. Her core argument is that hate speech restores normative order when imaginaries are challenged, operating through silence, glances, and institutional practices. Effective counter-narratives must hence confront not just individual expression of speech, but these systemic imaginaries.

History, symbol and memory

Katarina Damčević’s case study examines how historical symbols act as vehicles of hate speech in Croatia. Focusing on the contentious salute “Za dom spremni” (*Ready for the Homeland*) which was used by the WW2-era fascist Ustaša regime, the article applies cultural semiotics to show how symbols mediate nationalism, memory, and exclusion. The contemporary Croatian state’s tolerance of the salute (one such prominent example is a memorial plaque near the Jasenovac concentration camp) signals institutional complicity in normalizing exclusion. In this symbolic economy, hate speech becomes cultural heritage. Educational curricula and public policy sanitize fascist legacies, transforming a gesture of violence into a marker of patriotism and thus preventing any critical reckoning, argues Damčević. She exemplifies how hate speech operates through the politics of memory, by deciding which histories can be spoken and which must remain unacknowledged. The salute’s contemporary reappearance in politics, popular culture, and sports demonstrates how hate speech can be non-verbal yet performative, embedding discrimination in everyday rituals. Damčević

warns about broader implications, concluding that confronting hate speech in post-conflict societies requires addressing competing historical narratives; legal bans alone cannot succeed without challenging the collective imaginary of nationhood. In this, she directly echoes Frank's conceptual analysis and Bajt's myth of purity: in both, the Other is expelled from collective identity. The Croatian case adds a diachronic dimension, showing that hate speech is not only about current discourse but about the narratives societies construct about themselves and about their pasts.

Melike Akkaraca Köse's linguistic study deepens the theoretical conversation by dissecting how hate speech operates within language itself. The article examines ethnic terms in Turkish, such as "Ermeni" (Armenian), "Yunan" (Greek), "Rum" (Greek), and "Yahudi" (Jew/Jewish). These are words that function both as neutral ethnic descriptors and as pejoratives for slurring, revealing a dual role of naming and denigrating. Akkaraca Köse develops the complex phenomenon of Ethnic/Social Terms used as Insults (ESTIs). Unlike canonical slurs, ESTIs carry derogatory autonomy: their pejorative force stems from shared conventions rather than explicit insult. This is because they are linguistic forms that are contextually ambivalent, capable of naming or denigrating depending on situation, tone, and intent. She situates this phenomenon within Turkey's national narrative of homogeneity, showing how language becomes an archive of Othering. Terms like "Ermeni" or "Rum" hence become semiotic tools for constructing Turkishness through negation. Hate speech here is not an anomaly but embedded in the lexicon, commodifying ethnic identity as moral judgment. Her analysis underscores the issue's central theme that hate speech is never just about meaning as such, but about who gets to define and control meaning. The Turkish case underscores that even ostensibly neutral language can perpetuate structural hierarchies when social imaginaries of nationhood are exclusionary.

Addressing hate speech: The limits of moderation and accountability

Zoran Fijavž analyses how Slovenian digital media manage hate speech under the EU Digital Services Act, based on interviews and document analysis. His findings highlight four dimensions: (a) moderation extends beyond illegal hate speech to incivility and offensive content; (b) large outlets use advanced systems, while smaller ones rely on social media with weaker controls; (c) a paradox in the law shows that, by late 2024, no takedown orders were issued for Facebook by Slovenian authorities, while local media faced stricter policing; and (d) moderators endure psychological strain and harassment amid resource shortages. The study shows that hate-speech governance



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has been privatized, shifting responsibility from the state to precariously resourced media workers. It situates online moderation within the political economy of digital capitalism, revealing how infrastructural inequality shapes which hate speech is removed and which persists.

Neža Kogovšek Šalomon and **Sergeja Hrvatič** round out the special issue with a highly important and timely empirical study. They examine how the Article 297 of the Slovenian Penal Code, the provision criminalizing public incitement to hatred, violence, or intolerance, is enacted in prosecutorial and judicial practice. They explain the Slovenian legal framework where Article 297 had long been understood as requiring both a public act of incitement, and either a threat to public order or the use of threat, insult, or verbal abuse. This dual condition made Slovenia's approach among the narrowest in the EU (alongside Cyprus). The 2019 Supreme Court judgment, however, clarified that these conditions are alternative, not cumulative, and that a threat to public order may be abstract, not concrete. This interpretation thus aligned Slovenia more closely with European rather than U.S. doctrine. The authors analysed 157 prosecutorial files in the period from 2019 to 2023 to see whether the prosecutorial

practice changed because of the Supreme Court judgment, or not. Their analysis shows that public figures accounted for a third of suspects. Only 14% of the reported cases resulted in indictments, and even fewer in convictions. The data reveal that most incidents occur online, where anonymity and platform architecture complicate evidence collection.

Kogovšek Šalamon and Hrvatič's legal-empirical study of Slovenian prosecutorial practice reveals how law's explicit definitions often fail to capture social harm because legal definitions focus on explicit incitement, ignoring systemic discrimination. Their contribution argues that Slovenian law enforcement remains relatively lenient and structurally ill-equipped, underscoring the limits of purely judicial approaches. The courts, by focusing narrowly on intention and explicitness, overlook the subtler perlocutionary force of everyday "destructive messages," the cumulative effect of repetition and coded hostility. Like Bajt and Frank, Kogovšek Šalamon and Hrvatič's text can also be read as an understanding that hate speech cannot be fully grasped within the boundaries of law. It must be read within the field of power, ideology, and social structure. The failure of the legal system is symptomatic of a broader cultural denial: the refusal to see hate speech as a mirror of systemic inequality.

Counter-narratives and the politics of recognition

In tracing how nationalism, racism, gender, and migration intersect in the making of hate speech, the contributors to this special issue accomplish more than regional documentation. They offer a theoretically grounded, empirically rich account of hate speech as a global condition, one that travels across languages and borders, yet always returns to the same question: who is entitled to speak, and who is silenced by what is said?

Several uniting threads weave through the special issue. One is intersectionality, since the contributors treat social categories such as ethnicity, gender, nation, and the phenomenon of migration not as separate axes but as interlocking systems. The most frequent targets of hate speech are those already stigmatized along multiple dimensions. Moreover, the performativity of power links the contributions in acknowledging how speech acts, policies, and symbols do not just reflect power but perform it. Mitrović's "hate by design," Frank's "imaginary," Akkaraca Köse's ESTIs, and Bajt's "border and purity" each illustrate this principle in different registers. In a sense it is also the failure of legalism that Kogovšek Šalamon and Hrvatič exemplify in showing how juridical approaches cannot grasp the diffuse, affective, and structural nature of hate speech. Law can sanction incitement but not

imaginaries. Another uniting thread of the special issue is the normalization and invisibility of hate speech. Analysed most prominently in the Croatian semiotic, Turkish linguistic, and Slovenian digital-media cases, it highlights how hate speech becomes normalized through heritage, humour, or algorithm. The challenge, as previously noted, lies not only in condemning hate speech but in first recognizing it. Throughout the volume, the authors show that countering destructive messages requires more than refutation; it demands altering the frameworks that make hate speech intelligible. This may entail a legal reform, but also educational change, inclusive policy, redefining collective memory, media accountability, linguistic awareness, and the reimagining of belonging. Across disciplines and cases, the authors converge on a politics of recognition: the task is to build societies where difference does not automatically signify danger, where language is not weaponized. This entails a collective willingness to imagine the community otherwise.

Despite their disciplinary diversity, the seven articles converge on a shared insight: hate speech is relational, systemic, and performative. It is not merely an expression of individual prejudice but an enactment of collective order. This shared understanding allows the special issue to move beyond condemnation toward explanation. Hate speech is not only something societies must combat but something they produce to sustain themselves. Recognizing this unsettling truth opens the door to more meaningful counter-narratives – ones that address the conditions enabling hate speech rather than merely its expressions. And yet the special issue does not end with prescriptions but with a challenge. If hate speech is a mirror of our social dynamics, then countering it requires more than censorship or polite dialogue. It requires a transformation of the imaginaries that render inequality acceptable.

Taken together, the contributions advance a regional epistemology of hate speech rooted in Central-Eastern European and Balkan experiences but with global resonance. They collectively argue that hate speech is a mode of governance. Counter-narratives must operate not only at the level of expression but within imaginaries, institutions, and infrastructures. In unison, the studies in the special issue portray hate speech as a traveling concept, adaptable across histories yet anchored in persistent inequalities. By connecting the discursive, legal, technological, and symbolic dimensions, this special issue of *Annales* offers one of the most comprehensive regional syntheses to date, bridging critical theory and empirical rigor. We hope you will enjoy reading it.

Veronika BAJT