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DIGITAL PLATFORMS AS CATALYSTS OF SOCIAL CONFLICTS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF REGULATORY MECHANISMS[***]

Abstract: *The contemporary society is exposed to a continuous process of transformation that is strongly influenced by the dynamic development of digital platforms. One of the significant positive effects of this impact is the rapid exchange of information, but it also has its negative sides as it simultaneously creates new challenges for social stability. Both globally and locally, digital platforms become catalysts for conflicts, such as political polarization, the spread of disinformation and hate speech. This paper examines how regulatory mechanisms in Serbia and other jurisdictions respond to these challenges, with the aim of determining their strengths and limitations. Through a comparative analysis of international and national approaches, the paper points to the need to improve the regulatory framework in Serbia, taking into account the specificities of the local context and global trends. By applying the content analysis and deduction methods, the authors conclude that effective regulation requires linking legal, technological and educational instruments into a functional model that simultaneously protects freedom of expression and strengthens social resilience.*

Keywords: *digital platforms, social conflicts, legal regulation, freedom of expression, security.*

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, digital platforms have evolved from technological innovations into key actors of social transformation. Their influence is no longer limited to communication and information exchange, but extends to shaping public opinion, political dynamics and social values. Instead of merely reflecting existing attitudes, digital platforms increasingly produce, amplify and channel them, thanks to algorithmic mechanisms that favor emotional reaction over rational debate. In such an environment, the issue of regulating digital space becomes not only a legal but also social, political and ethical issue of utmost importance.

The aim of this paper is to examine how regulatory mechanisms in Serbia respond to the challenges posed by digital platforms in the domain of disinformation, hate speech and political polarization. Special attention is paid to comparative experiences and good practices in other European countries, with the aim of identifying models that would be applicable in the domestic context. The paper starts from the assumption that effective regulation cannot rely solely on legal norms but must include institutional readiness, technological competence and social resilience.

The methodological framework of the paper is based on qualitative content analysis, a comparative approach, and deductive reasoning. Through the analysis of relevant reports, laws, academic studies and examples from practice, the paper seeks to offer an interdisciplinary insight into the issues of regulating the digital space. The research outcome indicates the need for functional regulation that combines legal predictability, local moderation and systemic education as prerequisites for a resilient and democratic digital environment.

The paper is organized into three analytical chapters. It first examines how digital platforms have changed their role – from technological intermediaries to actors shaping social relations, emotional reactions, and political flows. Then, the focus shifts to the mechanisms of digitally fueled conflicts, with specific reference to polarization, disinformation, and hate speech, and how they are manifested in the Serbian context. The final section analyzes regulatory challenges and opportunities: from institutional capacities and language moderation to media literacy and functional regulation inspired by the European standards. Based on comparative analysis and insights into domestic practice, the paper shows that effective regulation is possible only if legal, technological, and educational instruments are connected into a single, context-sensitive model that simultaneously protects freedom of expression and strengthens social resilience.

2. Digital platforms as actors of social transformation

2.1. From mediator to catalyst

Digital platforms have long been presented as mere technical tools: places where users "connect freely" and where content "circulates by itself" (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2020). In reality, it is about complex mechanisms of influence that increasingly determine not only what will be seen but also how something will be thought about. It is not just about the platform mediating communication but also shaping the conditions for it to take place. It is no longer difficult to separate the technical infrastructure of platforms from the social patterns that are formed through them: the algorithm decides what will be visible, what it will be associated with, and in what context it will be interpreted. It is no longer a passive filter of content but an active factor that covertly directs the dynamics of public discourse to maintain attention. In this sense, the algorithm represents an architecture of power that operates not by command but by setting the conditions within which some messages circulate more easily, faster, and more frequently than others.

In a social context, this change in role has led to the rise of emotionally charged content, which spreads at breakneck speed and often fuels polarization. Rather than reflecting users' existing attitudes, platforms increasingly encourage, amplify, and channel them, owing to algorithmic designs that favor engagement at all costs. This means that content that provokes outrage, fear, or anger appears more often in the feed because these emotions generate the most reactions, comments, and shares (Tufekci, 2015: 208).

In such an environment, digital platforms are no longer just technological intermediaries: they have become cultural architectures, in which new social realities are produced but also where old conflicts are re-articulated and amplified. This makes them not only communicative but also political actors, whose decisions (regardless of how "automated" they may be) have real consequences for social cohesion.

2.2. Emotional reactions more important than information

The key to what makes digital platforms functionally powerful but socially risky is precisely the way in which information is distributed: not by the measure of importance but by the measure of interaction. The algorithms that manage content are not designed to inform but to retain attention. In such a system, attention is not something that is earned by argument but it is produced by emotion.

According to Tufekci's (2015: 208) analysis, algorithmic logic sometimes coincides with the objective interest of the audience but, in most cases, they encourage the repetition and reinforcement of content that provokes reactivity: anger, fear, indignation. As these emotions are most easily measurable (by the number of comments, shares, and even negative reactions), they become the digital currency in the attention economy. From this perspective, conflict is not a side effect but a mechanism of engagement.

The Serbian context further complicates the possibility of resisting toxic digital impact. The Serbian digital environment is often exposed to content that quickly gains viral potential, not because it is true but because it provokes a strong emotional reaction in a moment of institutional silence. At the same time, the level of media literacy remains low. According to the Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans (Hysa et al., 2023: 60–62), Serbia ranks 31st out of 41 countries in the European Media Literacy Index, which means that the ability to distinguish accurate information from manipulation is limited for a large part of the population. At the same time, institutions are slow to react. Transparency Serbia points to chronic problems in staffing and practical implementation of existing regulations (Nenadić et al., 2024: 11–13). This creates an empty space that the platform algorithmically fills: what remains marginal elsewhere, more easily becomes news here – not by the weight of the content but by its ability to "hit the nail in the coffin" at the right moment.

As we already pointed out, research by Tufekci (2015: 208) indicates that platforms promote content that causes fear, outrage, or moral panic – because such content engages attention and thus prolongs the users' presence. In societies with high media literacy, this type of content often remains on the margins of public debate; in Serbia, it is gaining strength and breadth. The reason is not in its truthfulness but in the fact that the algorithm recognizes a key variable: anxiety at the right moment. When the institutional verification system is late or absent, such news – instead of being denied – multiplies like a digital epidemic.

As shown in the analysis of media reporting during the 2014 floods in Serbia, in moments when institutional response is delayed or absent, the space for disinformation and emotionally charged content expands, not only in traditional media but also on social networks (Janković, Srdić & Baćanović, 2016). There is much less such (untrusted and manipulative) content in Estonia and the Czech Republic, countries where media literacy is integrated into the education system (National Library of Estonia, 2023; EDMO, 2023). This further strengthens the thesis that platforms do not "create" the problem, but they certainly accelerate and multiply it when society fails to set an epistemological threshold for it.

2.3. Speed, short memory and digital violence

In the digital environment, news travels faster than the readers' capacity to question its accuracy. Instead of verification, reaction dominates – often in the form of bits of anger, fear, or irony, which then become new "fuels" in the algorithmic cycle. The first to react gains visibility; the one who checks loses pace. Thus, the paradox of a fast society arises: the more disturbing the message, the faster it spreads; the more complex the information, the less likely it is to be read to the end.

Examples from the local context clearly confirm this. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Viber groups in Serbia and the region have become informal channels for the spread of unverified and often harmful information: from claims that the virus kills children to messages calling for complete distrust of official sources. As pointed out by the Regional Cooperation Council, it is precisely the emotional coloring of these messages (fear, panic, distrust) that has enabled them to spread faster and more effectively than official statements, often without malicious intent but with serious consequences for social stability (Kapetanović, 2020).

At such a pace, it is worrying that not only is the truth being erased but also attention. Users rarely move to the stage of considering the consequences of what they have shared; digital attention is shallow but its effect is not. It makes digital violence (hate speech, degradation of the interlocutor, misrepresentation and caricature of opponents) not only possible but also systemically encouraged. Moreover, while an individual has little memory of what he/she posted yesterday, the platform remembers everything and constantly learns from the posted data how to better engage the person tomorrow.

3. Social conflicts in the digital environment: polarization, disinformation and hate speech

3.1. Polarization as an algorithmically driven structure

In the digital environment, polarization is no longer just a social consequence; it becomes a productive logic. Algorithmic recommendations, driven by the logic of engagement, lead less and less to dialogue, and more and more often to stratification: everyone gets their own version of reality, in which beliefs are reinforced and doubts are self-quoted. Platforms do not accelerate the debate: they fragment it, creating digital chambers in which resistance to opposing opinions becomes a sign of identity (Ecker, 2025: 30).

In Serbia, this logic is visible in the pre-election periods, particularly in 2020 and 2022. Often unconsciously, social media users are locked into "info-eco-

cameras": if you watch a satirical video against the government once, the platform will offer five similar ones; if you read a text relativizing the opposition, the algorithm will understand it as an instruction for further action (Medjedovic, 2020). This is how parallel worlds are built, not because someone intentionally created them but because someone mathematically optimized them for a longer stay.

Similar processes were observed in Croatia during the 2020 elections, when memes and video content dominated the networks in the function of political mockery. In the United States, it was shown in 2016 how microtargeting on Facebook can affect the mood of entire demographic groups (Tucker et al., 2018: 6). In all these cases, the platform is not the cause of division; it is its architect and amplifier.

3.2. Disinformation: Viral narratives in times of uncertainty

In times of crisis – be it a health, security or political crisis – social media become spaces for the rapid spread of content that is not always based on verified information. It is precisely in such an environment that disinformation is created and spread. Claims that are not only false but are designed or edited to misinterpret facts cause confusion or produce an emotional reaction that obscures the capacity for critical thinking.

Research by the SHARE Foundation shows that in Serbia, during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a sharp increase in disinformation circulating through Viber groups, Facebook profiles and other digital channels. Among the most prevalent were claims about the impact of vaccines on reproductive health, doubts about the origin of the virus, and various global conspiracy theories. As stated in the report, the structural appeal of this content rested on its emotional coloring, formal similarity to official announcements, and equal accessibility across all social strata (Savić et al., 2020: 35–38).

What further complicates the fight against disinformation is the fact that institutional responses are often late, appear confusing, or are not sufficiently adapted to the digital language of communication. Examples from the report show that, on several occasions, clarification of official positions occurred only after days of unverified claims being spread. In this temporal "empty space", disinformation became the dominant reference for understanding the situation (Savić et al., 2020: 35–38).

By comparison, similar trends have been observed in other Eastern European countries, such as Poland and Bulgaria, where research has shown that disinformation with similar narrative patterns (such as claims that quaran-

tines are a prelude to a permanent suspension of civil liberties) circulates in roughly identical digital formats (Chałubińska-Jentkiewicz, Soler & Makuch, 2023: 98–101; Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021). This points to the transnational nature of these phenomena as well as to the fact that regulatory responses must be based not only on domestic legislation but also on cooperation and rapid reaction within a broader regional and international framework.

3.3. Hate speech and the normalization of digital violence

On social media, hate speech has become more prevalent not just because it is "easier for people to say" but also because the communication infrastructure is set up to reward it. Anonymity protects, algorithms promote, and the line between sarcasm and insults is increasingly blurred. In this environment, what is socially acceptable is not determined by institutions but by indicators of engagement: the number of comments, emoticons, and actions. The problem is no longer that hate speech "happens" but that it passes, often as the content with the greatest reach.

In Serbia, especially during election periods, social media algorithms play a key role in the formation of "info-bubbles". The mechanism is simple: if a user views a satirical content directed against the government once, the algorithm offers them more similar ones; if they open a text that relativizes the opposition, the system interprets this as a signal for further "profiling" of the content. In this way, communication spaces with a pronounced ideological orientation are created, not because they were intentionally created but because they are mathematically optimized for the maximum stay of users within a certain emotional-political sphere. As note by Medjedovic (2020), this optimization enables a significant multiplication of partial narratives with minimal platform control during campaigns, and especially in moments of social crises.

One of the biggest challenges in the fight against digital violence is the lack of language adaptation of content moderation tools. As shown in the Council of Europe report, most platforms do not have sufficiently developed mechanisms for recognizing hate speech in less widely spoken languages, including Serbian and its variants (Council of Europe, 2022). In Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, several initiatives have been launched in recent years aimed at strengthening local moderation and developing tools for recognizing digital violence in the languages of the region (BIRN, 2023b). Although there is no systematic analysis of their effects, individual reports from Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina note concrete examples of better cooperation between the civil sector and platforms during election campaigns, as well as

somewhat faster reactions to reported content (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024; Metamorphosis Foundation, 2025). North Macedonia is mentioned less in this context but it is reported that a decline in the use of openly offensive language in official channels was observed during the pre-election period.

The need for a similar approach in Serbia is increasingly noticeable. If the legal and institutional system fails to respond to the normalization of digital violence, the platform will eventually become a space in which the boundaries of what is socially acceptable are not determined by law or ethics but by algorithmic interest in conflict.

4. Towards a more efficient model: regulatory challenges and opportunities

4.1. Institutional strengthening: capacity, competence, pace

The problem of regulating digital platforms in Serbia is not primarily normative but also institutional in nature. Existing laws, such as the Public Information and Media Act or the Criminal Code, cover certain aspects of disinformation, hate speech and threats to security in the digital space. However, the bodies responsible for their implementation, primarily the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (*Srb.* REM), do not have the capacity to act effectively in the conditions of technological and communication explosion.

As the regulatory body responsible for electronic media, the REM formally does not have the authority to intervene in the field of social networks. Although there are some proposals from the expert community aimed at expanding its competences, no concrete changes have been made. In practice, there is no clearly defined institutional response on digital platforms even in cases where digital platforms host content that would be sanctioned as hate speech or incitement to violence in traditional media. An even greater problem is the lack of technological infrastructure and trained staff to monitor, analyze, and act in the digital environment. Compared to similar institutions in the European Union, domestic institutions do not have tools for monitoring virality, detecting algorithmically enhanced content, nor do they have a sufficient number of digital forensics and regulatory analysis experts (BIRN, 2023a; ITU, 2023). As shown in the comparative example of the German BNetzA, which has its own technical teams and direct communication with the largest platforms (BNetzA, 2022), regulation remains formal without internal technological competence.

Strengthening institutional capacity in Serbia means not only increasing the number of employees or allocating more funds but also precisely defining

jurisdiction over digital platforms. This includes the possibility of issuing binding orders, cooperating with platforms through transparency mechanisms and, possibly, creating a specialized body within the REM or another regulator that would deal exclusively with digital content.

4.2. Localization of moderation: Language as a tool and a challenge

One of the key obstacles to effective content regulation on digital platforms in Serbia is the lack of language adaptation of the moderation system (Muminovic & Kadric, 2024). The world's largest platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube or X (formerly Twitter), primarily direct their algorithmic and human resources for content control towards English and other "high priority" languages (Gorwa, Bins & Katzenbach, 2020). The Serbian language is treated as marginal in this system: the volume of content that is moderated at the local level is negligible compared to the actual volume of communication.

Comparative experiences show that localization of moderation is not just a matter of translation but requires a deep understanding of the cultural, political and linguistic context. ARTICLE 19's report on content moderation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2022) indicates that global platforms often function as "terra nullius", spaces in which local context remains invisible to algorithmic and human moderation mechanisms. The lack of understanding of local markers of hate speech, ethnic tensions and political nuances leads to ineffective intervention during social crises. The authors of the report propose the formation of a coalition for freedom of expression and content moderation, which would allow platforms to connect with local actors and better understand the specificities of language and social context.

Similarly, a BIRN report (2023b) highlights the positive effects of cooperation between media organizations and technology companies during the election period in Croatia, stating that some categories of discriminatory comments were significantly decreased, thanks to the moderators trained in the local language context.

For Serbia, this experience can serve as a basis for developing a similar model, either by introducing an obligation for platforms to enable moderation in the Serbian language or through public-private initiatives to build a national moderation infrastructure. Such an approach would need to be not only linguistically sensitive but also consistent with the domestic legal order, especially in the areas of freedom of expression and legal protection of users. A regulatory system that claims to be effective must recognize from the outset that, in the digital environment, language is not only a means of communication but also the first line of regulation.

4.3. Media literacy as a prerequisite for resilience

In Serbia, media literacy is rarely treated as a priority (Karadžić et al., 2023: 54–58); yet, it is a strategic prerequisite for digital security. The problem lies not only in the lack of curricular content but also in the fact that the ability to read critically, evaluate sources and recognize manipulation is not recognized as a matter of public interest. Content regulation has limited scope if citizens are unable to recognize its risks before reacting to it (Karadžić et al., 2023: 60, 83).

Media literacy programs in Serbia are mostly limited to short-term projects and are not integrated into the education system at a strategic level. According to the Media Literacy Index 2022, Serbia is among the countries with the lowest level of media literacy in Europe; the reason for this devastating state of affairs is the lack of institutional support and systemic approach. This deficit is becoming increasingly security-related, as confirmed by UNICEF's Policy Brief (2023), which emphasizes that media and digital literacy must be an integral part of school policies aimed at protecting children in the digital environment, and as a prerequisite for resilience to manipulation, data misuse and technologically mediated violence (Lessenski, 2022; UNICEF, 2023: 6–9).

Positive comparative experiences exist. In Finland, media literacy is integrated into the education system as an interdisciplinary topic, present across the curricula from primary school to upper secondary school. Instead of being treated as an isolated lesson, it is developed as a civic competence, the ability to critically read media content, recognize manipulative techniques, understand the digital footprint and share information responsibly. According to the OECD report, "Finland's media literacy education system is a key component of its effort to strengthen societal resilience to systematic and targeted dissemination of disinformation and anti-democratic messages" (OECD, 2023). Such an approach involves cooperation between schools, libraries, media, NGOs and state institutions, within a whole-of-society and whole-of-government model.

In the domestic context, the potential for a similar approach exists in cooperation between schools, the non-governmental sector and the media, with the support of the state. Instead of occasional campaigns, there is a need for a systemic approach (from textbooks to morning programs, from teachers to YouTube creators) because, in an era where the digital word has consequences, the ability to interpret it is not a matter of luxury but of public interest.

4.4. From legal to functional regulation: digital pragmatism

The regulation of digital platforms today is rarely addressed by the question of whether but rather by the question of how. Normative frameworks that only declaratively establish obligations but do not contain mechanisms for monitoring, enforcement and handling the consequences remain in the realm of good intentions. A shift towards functional regulation is needed, one that not only describes objectives but also acts in accordance with the pace and technological specificity of the digital environment.

The example of the European Digital Services Act (DSA) indicates this shift: it requires not only the removal of harmful content but also transparency of algorithms, the mandatory appointment of a legal representative in member states and the possibility of direct communication between platforms and national bodies (European Commission, 2024: 5-8). Although Serbia is not a member of the EU, the mechanisms envisaged in the DSA can serve as a source of inspiration for domestic regulations that would be binding, predictable and, most importantly – operational.

One of the key elements of functional regulation is the balance between freedom of expression and protection from digital violence. Instead of a binary logic, either complete freedom or complete control, it is necessary to develop institutional criteria that allow for rapid, proportionate and legally verifiable intervention. Criminal policy cannot be the only tool: prevention, cooperation and education mechanisms are equally important.

Platforms are not external actors within the legal order; they are already an integral part of it, albeit an unregulated one. If a new regulatory logic is not derived from this, we risk the legal order remaining fixed on messages that are already late. Instead of limiting ourselves to declarative expectations, a model is needed in which regulators have a clear set of tools and platforms are obliged to respond in real time. Otherwise, the public interest remains in the domain of the statement, not the consequences.

5. Conclusion

Digital platforms are no longer technological intermediaries but active shapers of the public sphere. Their algorithmic logic, geared towards maximum engagement, produces an environment in which polarization, disinformation, and hate speech are not random phenomena but systemically driven structures. In such an environment, regulation can be neither exclusively legal nor exclusively technical; it must be functional, interdisciplinary, and contextually sensitive.

The challenges Serbia faces are delicate: in addition to the already highlighted problem of low media literacy, there is a limitation of institutional capacities, and moderation mechanisms often fail to recognize the linguistic and cultural nuances of the local context. Nevertheless, comparative experiences show that it is possible to build a model that combines legal predictability, technological competence, and social resilience. This involves not only improving the regulatory framework but also building an infrastructure for local moderation, systemic education, and institutional cooperation.

Rather than leaving the digital space as a zone of normative uncertainty, there is a need to develop an approach in which the platform is obligated, the citizen is empowered, and the institution is technologically equipped. Regulation that does not keep pace with digital reality risks being symbolic. But regulation that recognizes the algorithm as a new architecture of power and responsibly sets its limits can become the basis for a new social contract in the digital age.

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ДИГИТАЛНЕ ПЛАТФОРМЕ КАО КАТАЛИЗАТОРИ ДРУШТВЕНИХ КОНФЛИКАТА: КОМПАРАТИВНА АНАЛИЗА ПРАВНИХ РЕГУЛАТОРНИХ МЕХАНИЗАМА

Резиме

Савремено друштво је изложено континуираном процесу трансформације који је под снажним утицајем динамичног развоја дигиталних платформи. Брза размена информација, као један од значајних позитивних ефеката оваквог утицаја, има и своје негативне стране, јер истовремено ствара нове изазове за друштвену стабилност. Како у свету, тако и у Србији, ове платформе постају катализатори конфликата, као што су политичка поларизација, ширење дезинформација и говор мржње. Уместо да делују као неутрални технолошки посредници, платформе све чешће имају активну улогу у обликовању јавног простора, што отвара питања одговорности, транспарентности и регулативе. У раду се разматрају начини на које правни системи у Србији и појединим другим државама покушавају да одговоре на изазове које доноси деловање дигиталних платформи. Поређењем различитих приступа, настоји се сагледати шта у постојећим решењима функционише, шта изостаје, и где постоји простор за прилагођавање српског регулаторног оквира – не само у складу са домаћим потребама, већ и у светлу ширих, глобалних кретања. Посебна пажња посвећена је питању како правни системи реагују на алгоритамску посредованост у ширењу садржаја, као и на улогу државе у заштити јавног интереса без угрожавања слободе изражавања. Применом метода анализе садржаја и дедукције, рад настоји да покаже да ефикасна регулација не може почивати искључиво на правним нормама, већ захтева повезивање правних, технолошких и образовних инструмената у функционалан модел. Такав модел мора бити у стању да одговори на сложеност дигиталног окружења, штитећи истовремено основна права и јачајући друштвену отпорност.

Кључне речи: дигиталне платформе, друштвени сукоби, правна регулатива, слобода изражавања, безбедност.