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HATE SPEECH AND HATE BY DESIGN: ANTI-MIGRANT DISCOURSE IN SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores hate speech as a governing logic embedded in Serbia's migration management, extending beyond explicit verbal hostility to encompass institutionalized silence, public spectacles, and policy design. Drawing on speech act theory, critical discourse analysis, and scholarship on racialized governance, it conceptualizes hate speech as a performative act with perlocutionary force. Through ethnographic and discursive analysis, the article shows how people on the move are rendered both hyper-visible and absent – criminalized, pitied, or erased – depending on political need. It argues that hate speech, framed through calculated ambivalence and absent presence, sustains exclusionary practices and legitimizes state and societal violence against migrants.

Keywords: hate speech, performativity, migration, exclusion, violence, Serbia

DISCORSO D'ODIO E ODIO PER PROGETTAZIONE: LA RETORICA ANTIMIGRATORIA IN SERBIA

SINTESI

Questo articolo esplora il discorso d'odio come logica di governo incorporata nella gestione delle migrazioni in Serbia, andando oltre l'ostilità verbale esplicita per includere il silenzio istituzionale, le rappresentazioni pubbliche e la progettazione delle politiche. Facendo riferimento alla teoria degli atti linguistici, all'analisi critica del discorso e agli studi sulla governance razzializzata, esso concettualizza il discorso d'odio come un atto performativo con forza perlocutiva. Attraverso un'analisi etnografica e discorsiva, l'articolo mostra come le persone in movimento vengano rese al tempo stesso iper-visibili e assenti – criminalizzate, compatite o cancellate – a seconda delle necessità politiche. Si sostiene che il discorso d'odio, inquadrato attraverso l'ambivalenza calcolata e la presenza assente, alimenti pratiche di esclusione e legittimi la violenza statale e sociale contro i migranti.

Parole chiave: discorso d'odio, performatività, migrazione, esclusione, violenza, Serbia

INTRODUCTION[1]

In Serbian legislation, hate speech is a form of discrimination, "which include direct and indirect discrimination, violation of the principle of equal rights and obligations, incitement to discrimination, association for the purpose of discrimination, hate speech, harassment, degrading treatment, and sexual and gender-based harassment and inducement to discrimination" (Sl. glasnik RS 22/2009 & 52/2021, 2009, Art. No. 5). In particular, it represents "the expression of ideas, information, and opinions that incite discrimination, hatred, or violence against an individual or group of individuals based on their personal characteristics, in public media and other publications, at gatherings and places accessible to the public, through the writing and display of messages or symbols, and in other ways" (Sl. glasnik RS 22/2009 & 52/2021, 2009, Art. No. 11).

Legally and pragmatically, hate speech is not just expressive – it is performative. It is a speech act (Mey, 2021), with tangible effects, or perlocutionary force (Austin, 1990), shaping how its targets are viewed, treated, and situated within society. These effects range from generating fear, hostility, or moral panic, to legitimizing exclusion and normalizing violence:

> *Creating contempt toward a particular individual or group, generating negative stereotypes about a particular individual or group, encouraging discrimination and hostility, prompting societal condemnation of a particular individual or group, causing feelings of insecurity and fear among a particular individual or group members, inflicting physical or psychological pain on a particular individual or group members, issuing threats against a particular individual or group, inciting and provoking violence against a particular individual or group, instilling a sense among a large segment of citizens that such behavior toward a particular individual or group is socially desirable and justified, creating a belief among a wide circle of citizens that such behavior will be tolerated and will not lead to accountability*. (YUCOM, 2007, 2)

As the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM, 2007) observes, hate speech in Serbia often operates invisibly through normalization, saturation, and its reinterpretation as patriotism – conditions which render legal redress both politically fraught and institutionally elusive. Following Austin, the success of hate speech depends not only on the speaker's intention but also on its uptake by an audience ready to affirm and enact its logics. This uptake can be emotional, behavioral, or administrative. Hate speech thus often exceeds the moment of utterance and permeates institutional action, media representation, and policy design. In other words, hate speech operates on multiple levels: it can be explicit and verbal, but also diffuse, implicit, or even absent. Its perlocutionary force does not rely on loud expression – it can function through repetition, visuality, or silence.

Hate speech targeting people on the move (Rijken & Pijnenburg, 2021) is a well-documented phenomenon, extensively studied in the context of migration and human rights violations (Arcila Calderón & Veglis, 2023). Critical discourse analysis has shown that hate speech is not merely a matter of explicit slurs or criminal incitement, but often functions as part of normalized, everyday language that upholds structural exclusion. Teun van Dijk (1993; 2018) argues that racist discourse operates through subtle rhetorical strategies, topoi, and ideological framings embedded in media and political talk. Ruth Wodak (2021) further demonstrates how right-wing populist narratives use fear, victim-perpetrator reversals, and "calculated ambivalence" to frame exclusion as common sense. This normalization blurs the line between legality and harm, enabling hate speech to circulate through policy discourse, administrative routines, and public sentiment.

Building on the concept of absent presence (Parmar, 2021; M'charek et al., 2014), this article analyses hate speech not only as a series of isolated utterances with specific perlocutionary effect (Austin, 1990), but also as a conceptual and operational axis that shapes public perception, legitimizes asymmetrical power relations, and sustains privilege through normalized and institutionalized forms of discrimination, including, at times, overt violence. As Parmar (2021) suggests, forms of racialized governance often work through what is *not* said – through omission, bureaucratic neutrality, or the strategic withdrawal of speech – which can carry powerful political effects. Hate speech may be excluded from concrete narrations, yet continue to function powerfully beneath the surface, structuring responses to mobility and inflicting harm. By examining both explicit and implicit discursive patterns that dehumanize people on the move, normalize violence, and frame mobility as deviance, the article contributes to a growing body of research on the discursive infrastructure of racialized governance (Garneau, 2024; Parmar, 2021).

1 This article is the result of work carried out at the Institute of Ethnography SASA, which is financed by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, under the Agreement on the Realisation and Financing of Scientific Research Activities of a Scientific Research Organisation in 2025 (No. 451-03-136/2025-03/200173, dated 4 February 2025).

This framework is particularly relevant in the Serbian context, where verbal attacks have increasingly been replaced by institutionalized silence, vague bureaucratic terms, and visual performances of control – such as encampments, police raids, and deportations – circulated without accompanying justification. The article considers hate speech as embedded within migration policies, institutional routines, and everyday administrative practices – domains often obscured by processes of normalization, formalization, or regulatory silence, yet central to the ongoing production of exclusion. In this sense, hate speech does not simply flare up in moments of crisis; rather, it is sustained through routinized discursive, visual, and bureaucratic mechanisms that govern mobility in subtle yet enduring ways.

Over the past fifteen years, Serbia's migration discourse has shifted in step with its increasing alignment with EU migration policy and its role in the externalization of European borders – driven both by its geographical position and the political imperatives of the EU accession process. Public and official narratives, understood here as thematically and ideologically coherent accounts disseminated through various media platforms, have oscillated between portraying people on the move as "victims" deserving humanitarian concern and as "threats" to national and regional security. In 2015, migrants were described as "refugees" and "those who did not come to make incidents" (Politika, 2015); by 2016, they were characterized as "those whom no one in the EU wants to see, let alone accept" (RTS, 2016). With the closure of the formalized Balkan corridor, openly dehumanizing expressions—such as "Asian bandits and scum" (MUP RS, 2022) – entered public discourse prompted by state officials. These discursive shifts signal not merely a rhetorical change, but the consolidation of a governing logic in which exclusion, containment, and racialized suspicion become normalized. Hate speech settles into routine, shaping who is considered governable, expendable, or beyond the bounds of political and social belonging. Through the externalization of borders and accompanying legal and institutional transformations, the EU has exported its migration control rationale – which has been localized and rearticulated through specific discursive and political idioms in the Serbian context.

This logic remains even when no verbal speech is present: by 2024, migration had largely faded from Serbian public discourse, despite the ongoing presence of people on the move. Sporadic reports on smuggling arrests and "security threats" (Jovanović, 2024) replaced earlier narratives, revealing a shift from active hostility to passive erasure. Silence itself can result in the same consequences as hate speech – "not talking" becomes a mode of legitimizing dehumanization, exclusion and sustaining systemic violence.

Beyond verbalized narratives and strategic silences, this article also considers public spectacles as a crucial dimension of the discursive infrastructure of border governance. Events such as apprehensions, encampments, and the physical restraint of people on the move – deliberately staged and broadcast by state actors – are not exceptional performances but integral to the routine logic that underpins the governance of mobility. These spectacles serve to dramatize state control, rendering migrant bodies hyper-visible while simultaneously dehumanizing and criminalizing them. They operate as performative acts of power, reinforcing narratives of threat, illegality, and state sovereignty without relying on explicit verbal justification. In this way, border spectacles become a mode of communication that legitimizes exclusion not through argument, but through repetition, visibility, and affect. They complement hate speech and "hate silence" by visually enacting the very hierarchies that verbal discourse and institutional policy seek to maintain. Framed within this broader system, spectacle becomes not an anomaly but a routinized feature of migration governance – an embodied discourse that transforms state violence into normalized public display.

This article adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in critical discourse analysis, with a focus on how language and silence function as instruments of governance. It draws on speech act theory (Austin, 1990) to conceptualize hate speech as a performative act with perlocutionary force – capable of producing social realities, legitimizing exclusion, and authorizing violence. Building on critical border regime studies (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) and scholarship on racialized governmentality (Garneau, 2024; Parmar, 2021; M'charek et al, 2014), the analysis situates hate speech within broader logics of border control, securitization, and institutionalized inequality. The empirical material includes media reports, political statements, social media content, protest materials, and institutional communications produced in Serbia between 2008 and 2024. These sources were selected for their discursive impact – particularly in shaping public affect, normalizing discriminatory practices, and mobilizing state and non-state responses toward people on the move. Priority was given to texts and events that generated public reaction or emerged in moments of political tension, allowing for an analysis of how hate speech operates not only through explicit language, but also through spectacle, bureaucratic silence, and calculated ambivalence.

While individual cases of hate speech are often cloaked in political rhetoric, this analysis takes into account collective expressions of hate, particularly institutionalized and therefore less visible forms, such as migration policies and official practices. These forms, like individual acts of hate speech, carry a powerful perlocutionary force. However, their effects are not incidental but rather necessary and often systematic outcomes of the conceptual frameworks and assumptions underlying their design. By institutionalizing discrimination, these policies embed the structural mechanisms of exclusion and hostility within governance systems, extending the impact of hate speech beyond individual acts to state-level practices.

MIGRATION GOVERNANCE AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF HATE IN SERBIA

Building on the preceding discussion of hate speech as a performative and institutionalized act with far-reaching perlocutionary effects (Austin, 1990), this section examines how such dynamics unfold in the specific socio-political context of Serbia. Rather than focusing solely on isolated instances of verbal hostility, it considers how hate becomes embedded in state practices, institutional frameworks, and bureaucratic routines. In Serbia, the governance of mobility operates through discursive and material strategies that normalize exclusion, racialize belonging, and render certain groups – particularly people on the move—hyper-visible as threats or invisible as subjects of rights. These dynamics are not peripheral but central to a logic of racialized governance (Garneau, 2024), where discrimination is not only enacted through explicit speech but reinforced through euphemism, silence, and spectacle.

Migration emerged as a pivotal domain in Serbia's EU accession process, operating as both a policy issue and a symbolic site for the country's reputational rehabilitation after the wars of the 1990s. Following years of international isolation, economic sanctions, and its perceived role in the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbia sought to reposition itself as a "responsible" European partner. This effort coincided with the protracted presence of refugees and internally displaced persons from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, producing a complex domestic terrain of displacement and containment (Stojić Mitrović, 2020). Migration governance thus became a political tool for reconciling national anxieties with supranational expectations, simultaneously projecting compliance with EU norms while managing internal tensions rooted in unresolved histories of violence and exclusion.

The legislative reforms of the late 2000s – particularly the adoption of the Law on Asylum (Sl. glasnik RS 109/07, 2007) and the Law on Foreigners (Sl. glasnik RS 97/08, 2008) – marked formal alignment with EU standards. However, these reforms did more than transpose technical norms: they introduced an interpretive regime that fused humanitarian language with securitarian logics and racialized assumptions. As Wodak (2021) theorizes through the concept of "calculated ambivalence", people on the move were constructed as both vulnerable figures deserving aid and dangerous intruders threatening social cohesion. The salience of each framing shifted in response to evolving EU discourse and specific local contexts.

Within this regime, public discourse initially centered not on non-citizens but on so-called "fake asylum seekers" – Serbian nationals returned from Western Europe under the Readmission Agreement. These individuals were depicted as "internal others", a source of shame and a hindrance to Serbia's EU aspirations (Stojić Mitrović, 2020). Meanwhile, non-citizen migrants remained largely absent from mainstream political narratives. Their presence was largely relegated to technocratic documents, humanitarian programs, or sporadic references by local residents in towns hosting asylum centers.

This absence, however, was far from neutral. As Parmar (2021) argues, governance often functions through "absent presence" – through omission, bureaucratic neutrality, and the silencing of politically inconvenient subjects. The marginal visibility of non-citizens in Serbia's early migration discourse allowed for the quiet buildup of exclusionary infrastructures, where hate speech operated not through incendiary rhetoric but through legislative calibration, institutional design, and regulatory silence. These forms of hate – implicit, procedural, and dispersed – carried significant perlocutionary force: they established thresholds of belonging, defined conditions of tolerability, and prepared the ground for more explicit forms of exclusion that would follow in the subsequent years.

This institutional sedimentation of racialized governance (M'charek et al., 2014; Garneau, 2024) allowed the Serbian state to maintain its image as a compliant EU candidate while simultaneously reinforcing domestic hierarchies of exclusion. It rendered people on the move both politically useful and socially disposable – figures to be governed but not heard, tolerated but not integrated. In this way, the early phases of Serbian migration policy demonstrate how hate speech, when understood as a routine logic of governance, exceeds the realm of verbal animosity and becomes embedded in the very architecture of statecraft.

Local articulations of hate speech: Banja Koviljača as discursive precedent

The routinization of hate speech as a governing logic becomes particularly visible at the intersection of institutional, legislative, and symbolic practices with lived

social dynamics, as exemplified in the emergence of anti-migrant discourse in Serbia in 2011. While Serbia had already adopted EU-aligned migration legislation – most notably the Law on Asylum (Sl. glasnik RS 109/07, 2007) and the Law on Foreigners (Sl. glasnik RS 97/08, 2008) – public discourse and societal attention to people on the move remained peripheral until a moment of localized disruption catalyzed broader ideological shifts. This moment emerged not from state-level policy, but from a protest in the spa town of Banja Koviljača, near the Bosnian border, where Serbia's then only asylum center was located.

Due to the center's limited capacity, many people on the move resorted to informal shelter – abandoned buildings, parks, and other public spaces. Their everyday visibility in these spaces ignited local discontent, culminating in a petition and public protests aimed squarely at state authorities. As stated:

> *We, the undersigned citizens of Banja Koviljača, wish to alert all structures within the Municipality of Loznica to problems arising from the large number of refugees (both illegal and legal asylum seekers) in our town! Their numbers, uncontrolled movement, and occasional behavior on the verge of incidents are causing fear, especially among children and younger women. Resolving this issue is urgent; if not addressed, greater inconveniences may arise!* (Stojanović, 2012, 8)

These mobilizations exemplify the felicity conditions of hate speech as a speech act, in Austin's (1990) terms: the speech produced effects because the institutional and social context was primed to accept, echo, and act on it. The protests' perlocutionary force – intended to provoke institutional response – was fulfilled when the state relocated people on the move and expanded accommodation infrastructure. This movement from local expression to national policy underscores how hate speech operates not only through intent, but through uptake and effect, and how it transitions from speech to governance.

The narratives voiced during the protests did not meet the legal definition of hate speech, yet they powerfully conveyed exclusionary messages through insinuation, bodily visibility, and emotional cues. Remarks such as: "they go to the grocery shop and touch the bread"; "they stand in groups on the sidewalk" and "they laugh" (Stojić Mitrović, 2016, 215) recast ordinary behaviours as threatening. These statements relied on the audience's assumptions and the broader context to generate meaning – inviting listeners to interpret mundane actions as signs of danger, impropriety, or cultural incompatibility. In doing so, they mobilized fear without stating it directly. Moreover, these rhetorical strategies functioned through topoi (van Dijk, 1993; 2018) that constructed people on the move as "too male," "too Muslim," overly youthful, and hypersexualized – dangerous not through what they did, but through what they were assumed to be.

In this frame, the vagueness allowed for inferring the intended meaning. It did not come from state elites but from grassroots actors who portrayed local women and children as vulnerable figures in need of protection thus reinforcing patriarchal order, while migrants, the ultimate male outsiders, were cast as aggressors despite lacking power or voice. As such, hate speech emerged not through overt racial slurs but through appeals to public safety and community cohesion, cloaked in a language of reasonableness and urgency. This aligns closely with Parmar's (2021) notion of absent presence, wherein racialized subjects – here, non-citizen migrants – are hyper-visible in physical space but excluded from political and discursive participation. Their presence prompted speech, but they themselves were not interlocutors. They were objects of fear, not subjects of dialogue. Protestors did not engage migrants in debate; they petitioned the state to act *on* them.

As protests intensified, symbolic gestures quickly escalated into overt hostility: parents withdrew children from schools, roads were blockaded, migrant housing was attacked, and human rights activists faced public threats (Stojić Mitrović, 2016, 216–268). In response, the state opened a new asylum center and relocated most people on the move out of Banja Koviljača. These developments illustrate how hate speech, when uptaken by institutions, can translate into concrete policy decisions. The state's compliance with protest demands did not represent a collapse of authority, but rather its exercise – a performative enactment of a hierarchized social order. This response reaffirmed distinctions between populations deemed worthy of protection and those rendered expendable, aligning with what Garneau (2024) identifies as the discursive infrastructure of racialized governance.

Crucially, this was not a deviation from governance norms but their enactment. Hate speech here was not just tolerated – it was felicitous and functional. It shaped spatial policy, mobilized institutional mechanisms, and redefined the terms under which people on the move could be seen, treated, and contained. These protest-driven interventions set the precedent for later forms of state-led exclusion: first by legitimizing state inaction, and then by demanding state overreaction.

Thus, the events in Banja Koviljača illustrate how hate speech operates across multiple registers – as local affect, institutional policy, and performative governance. It shows how governing through speech is not limited to officials or parliaments but unfolds through complex circuits of utterance, uptake, and consequence that render certain lives governable only through separation, suspicion, and silence.

FROM AUDIENCE TO AUTHOR: THE STATE'S UPTAKE AND PRODUCTION OF DISCURSIVE EXCLUSION

Until 2015, the Serbian state largely functioned as a receptive audience in the domain of migration discourse, responding reactively to local actors – residents, municipal authorities, and civil society organizations – who voiced concerns about the perceived threat of people on the move. These articulations, often couched in racialized, gendered, and securitarian terms, were taken up by the state and translated into administrative decisions, spatial interventions, and symbolic policy moves. In Austin's (1990) terms, these utterances were felicitous: they produced real-world effects through their uptake. However, the status of the state began to shift with the growing political and economic salience of migration-related topics, particularly in the context of Serbia's EU accession process. As migration governance became more tightly entangled with access to EU funds and border externalization agendas (Beznec et al., 2016), the Serbian state repositioned itself from a passive respondent to an active speaker, narrating its own role in the regional migration regime.

At this juncture, Serbia's self-presentation as a "humane" country toward migrants during the height of 2015 "refugee crisis" was not merely rhetorical – it was a performance of statehood directed at the EU. The formal opening of the first EU accession negotiation chapters followed shortly after such portrayals (Beznec et al., 2016). Yet the figure of the migrant remained speechless – evoked as an object in need of management, but stripped of voice and agency. It was made visible only through discursive framings which excluded socio-political belonging and recognition.

The securitarian turn in EU migration policy – particularly after the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey and questions surrounding the EU-Turkey deal (Brandt, 2016) – further shaped Serbian discourse. In a nationally televised address in July 2016, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić crystallized this shift. His speech, broadcast across all major networks, explicitly aligned Serbia's migration policy with EU's security imperatives. Using calculated ambivalence (Wodak, 2021), the speech oscillated between humanitarian self-congratulation and explicit othering: "Serbia cannot be a parking lot for Afghans and Pakistanis whom no one else in Europe wants to see, let alone accept" (RTS, 2016). The metaphor cast Serbia as both a victim of European disinterest and a vigilant defender of national sovereignty. The speech framed the EU as the cause of Serbia's burden while simultaneously reinforcing Serbia's geopolitical alignment with it – exposing the neocolonial mimicry (cf. Bhabha, 1984).

This address exemplified the perlocutionary force of hate speech – not in the form of vulgar invective but as a legitimizing act that constructed exclusion as rational, necessary, and inevitable (Austin, 1990; Gagliardone et al., 2015): "the asylum procedure takes about 30 days, with minimal chances of being granted asylum"; "there will be no movement without documents"; "it is clear where the designated places for migrants are"; "we will maintain a good relationship, provide help and support, feed them, give them water, and we will not resemble those who have treated them poorly from the beginning"; "protect against illegal and criminal behaviour by Serbian and foreign human traffickers" (RTS, 2016). While seemingly policy-oriented, the speech performed exclusionary work by criminalizing facilitators of movement, vilifying entire national groups, and announcing pushbacks and deportations as defensive necessities. It not only narrated a new migration regime but catalyzed it, laying the groundwork for future practices of detention, surveillance, and mobility restriction.

Moreover, the Prime Minister introduced a new discursive formation: the *tolerated presence*. This formation redefined the provision of basic services – food, water, shelter – not as rights but as acts of state benevolence. Similar dynamics have been observed elsewhere, where humanitarian gestures are embedded in governance frameworks that sustain inequality and defer accountability (Fassin, 2011; Ticktin, 2011). Within this framing, the state retains the power to retract care at any moment, further subordinating people on the move and emptying rights of substantive meaning. The parking lot metaphor amplified this logic: it emphasized temporariness, stagnation, and burden, casting migrants as unwanted and unintegratable excess (De Genova, 2013; Tazzioli & Garelli, 2018).

In speech act terms, this address performed multiple audiences: it reassured the Serbian public, affirmed state control to the EU, and preemptively justified future human rights violations. It established discursive and institutional boundaries between Serbian citizens – legible and mobile – and people on the move – silent, stalled, and illegible. Through this mechanism, hate speech transcended individual utterance, becoming a governing logic embedded in law, security, and everyday policy.

Performing: spectacles and silences in anti-migrant governance

This section analyzes how hostile narratives and practices targeting people on the move in Serbia have been shaped by two primary forces: anti-migrant political and vigilante initiatives, and the state itself, through its institutions, laws, and symbolic performances. Central to these dynamics are two discursive modalities – spectacularization and invisibilization – which, although seemingly oppositional, work in tandem to produce a governance logic rooted in fear, dehumanization, and exclusion.

Spectacles, as elaborated by Stojić Mitrović (2024), function through visual amplification, abstraction, and emotional condensation. They distill complex political

realities into emotionally charged representations, often delivered through media, performative state action, and public performances of enforcement (De Genova, 2013). Spectacles are not merely expressive but performative acts with perlocutionary force (Austin, 1990): they generate knowledge, mobilize fear, and justify institutional responses. In the Serbian context, border raids, mass arrests, detentions, and staged media coverage of migrant "crackdowns" serve as such spectacles, presenting people on the move as hyper-visible threats requiring exceptional measures. As scholars have shown, such displays are integral to the symbolic enactment of sovereignty at the border (Andersson, 2014; Besteman, 2020).

Invisibilization, by contrast, operates through strategic silences, administrative euphemism, and bureaucratic filtering of visibility. It is not passive but represents a mode of governance: it governs by omission, suppressing the political subjectivity of people on the move. People on the move may be present in the landscape but absent from the public sphere, reduced to figures in surveillance data or passive objects of humanitarian discourse (Ticktin, 2011; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). These silences are particularly effective in stabilizing dominant narratives by foreclosing alternative interpretations or resistance.

Together, spectacularization and invisibilization function as complementary technologies of racialized governance (Garneau, 2024; Fassin, 2011; M'charek et al., 2014). They work through selective visibility and affective manipulation, shaping who is seen, how, and under what terms. Anti-migrant narratives in Serbia consistently frame people on the move as existential threats to an imagined "Serbian way of life"—a protean notion encompassing fears about economic precarity, religious difference, demographic change, cultural loss, and national sovereignty (Wimmer, 2002). These anxieties are not unique to Serbia, but part of a wider pattern of racial bordering in contemporary Europe (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).

These narratives also operate through conspiracy tropes, attributing the presence of people on the move to hostile global forces – from the EU and "foreign financiers" like George Soros, to faceless international institutions. People on the move are framed either as naïve pawns or intentional disruptors. Such depictions construct them as a homogenized, mobile threat, denying them individuality and flattening their motivations into a single, suspicious presence (Wodak, 2021; van Dijk, 1993).

Crucially, anti-migrant discourse relies heavily on speculative futurity (Amoore, 2006; Aradau & Van Munster, 2007): it does not claim that people on the move are causing harm now, but that they will. The emphasis is on potentiality – what migrants could do. This preemptive logic justifies repression, exclusion, and securitization in the name of protection and risk management. Even isolated incidents are deployed as proof of imminent collapse, fueling moral panic and normalizing the expansion of state power.

Whether articulated through policy, media, protest, or legal frameworks, these narratives generate material effects. They shape institutional practices, public sentiment, and policy priorities. They determine who is protected and who is punishable; who is granted presence and who is rendered absent. In doing so, they perform a world-making function, delineating boundaries of political membership and humanity itself (Butler, 2009). People on the move are marked as non-citizens, non-subjects – figures of contamination to be managed, contained, or erased.

"We won't let them stay": hate speech, vigilantism, and the great replacement narrative

From the outset, Serbia's EU accession negotiations involved the management of returnees: both Serbian citizens without legal status in the EU and so-called third-country nationals who had entered the EU via Serbian territory. Public discourse initially focused on the former, framed as essential for visa liberalization (Stojić Mitrović, 2020). In contrast, the issue of third-country nationals remained largely invisible until 2015, when it emerged as a latent source of anxiety – especially in the wake of the "migrant crisis" and under the influence of securitarian and racializing discourses from the EU (Mudde, 2019).

The stereotype of Serbia as a site of migrant settlement – unwanted, imposed, and externally orchestrated – became a recurring theme in anti-migrant narratives. This imaginary was revitalized in 2019 during the European Parliament elections, when Austrian right-wing Interior Minister Herbert Kickl proposed returning denied asylum seekers to Serbia. Serbian far-right parties reacted by warning of the imminent return of "a million migrants" (Dosta je bilo, 2020). These claims reactivated a core trope: Serbia as Europe's dumping ground, forced into demographic and cultural transformation against its will.

This discourse not only invoked geopolitical victimhood but also cast migrants as agents of demographic sabotage. In the 2020 election campaigns, right-wing parties such as *Dosta je bilo* and *Dveri* mobilized migration as a central issue, displacing traditional topics like Kosovo or LGBTQ+ rights (Petrović & Ignjatijević, 2022). *Dosta je bilo* linked migration to "banking-corporate globalism", alleging that Serbia was becoming a peripheral colony exploited for cheap labor (Dosta je bilo, 2019). *Dveri* took a more bio-nationalist approach, accusing the government of planning to "solve" Serbia's demographic crisis by settling migrants in depopulated villages. Their leader claimed this policy was a covert attempt to replace the Serbian population and culture – an interpretation that strongly echoed the racialized "great replacement" theory (Ekman, 2022).

These narratives enacted a form of calculated ambivalence (Wodak, 2021): people on the move were simultaneously positioned as helpless pawns (used by

global actors) and as dangerous colonizers, culturally and biologically incompatible with the Serbian nation. Their projected "settlement" was portrayed not as humanitarian integration but as strategic demographic invasion – threatening Serbian identity, faith, and reproductive future.

The affective resonance of this framing was intensified by physical protests and acts of aggression in early 2020. In cities like Sombor and Subotica, protests demanded physical containment and exclusion of people on the move, relying on fabricated threats and racialized stereotypes (Kovačev, 2019).

In Subotica, the group United Citizens of Subotica used edited video propaganda – featuring armed figures cast as terrorists – to invite the residents to attend the "Big Protest Against the Settlement of Migrants in Subotica and Serbia" while inciting fear and moral panic (Jakovljević, 2020):

> *The world as we know it is disappearing; there is an obvious invasion of Islamists into Europe and Serbia. Are we leaving our children and grandchildren with jihad warriors disguised as 'refugees'? A corrupt government turns a blind eye and pretends that all of this is normal. The police are powerless; Islamists are above us, above our laws and Constitution. They will settle jihad fighters in our Serbia. Stop! We won't allow it.*

People on the move were framed as "Islamist invaders": the threat attributed to them was outsized relative to their public visibility or actual actions, and it mobilized institutional responses without requiring their direct involvement.

In Pirot, narratives of "cursed Serbian mothers," ruined orchards, and vulgar insults reactivated gendered and nationalist scripts in which Serbian women needed protection from racialized outsiders.

> *They came from who knows where and here they curse our Serbian mother. This is how they thank us for our hospitality. Let the officials see what they will do with them; they should just move them out of here. Since they've been here, no vineyard in the area can be harvested properly because they are plundering both the vineyards and orchards, and now they've even started attacking people*. (Ćirić, 2019)

> *I am here to support the taxi drivers and citizens due to the violence and safety concerns. I fear for my safety. The other day, I was walking with my son in the city centre. Two drunk migrants were sitting on a bench and insulting the Serbian people, swearing. They were talking about how they would rape Serbian women. They move around in groups of 10 to 15. They cause incidents in markets and stores, insulting the female workers. Our children have to leave the country, while someone has allowed them everything here. Where do they get the money to buy things?* (Panić, 2019)

These stories, while often unverifiable, had clear perlocutionary force: they incited protest, justified police action, and enabled public and institutional complicity (Austin, 1990).

This symbolic order was further reinforced by groups like "No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija", later renamed into "People's Patrol" (Bogdanović, 2020), who distributed vigilante leaflets in Belgrade and beyond.

> *We know that you are in Serbia passing through on your way to the EU and that you do not wish to stay longer in our country. While you are here, do not harm our women, our children, or our citizens, and no one will harm you. If you attack anyone, we will respond. We are not the state, nor the police; we are the people. And our response will be severe. From now on, our patrols will occasionally monitor Belgrade, where you will be, and they will respond if there is violence on your part. Do not harm anyone, and you can continue your journey in peace. Just as we must respect the laws and customs in your country, respect ours, or you will face a response similar to what you would give us in your country if we were to mistreat you. Spread this message to your compatriots. We wish you all the best and a safe journey.* (Srbin Info, 2020)

They approached individuals, distributed leaflets and claimed: "The movement of migrants outside migrant centers is prohibited from 10 PM to 6 AM and in groups of more than three people", while warning them of potential repercussions if they harmed Serbian people (Srbin Info, 2020).

Their pseudo-legal warnings, invoking curfews and group restrictions for people on the move, mimicked state authority and framed their presence as both unlawful and temporary. These groups capitalized on the migrant settlement stereotype by asserting that Serbia had become a "migrant parking lot", a holding space in which the undesired were to be tolerated only under threat of violence.

Meanwhile, the state's securitarian response reinforced this logic. Following border tensions between Turkey and Greece in March 2020, Serbia sealed its southern border and began forcibly relocating people on the move into camps (Tomčić, 2020). Protests staged by People's Patrol followed, blending anti-migrant, anti-EU, and anti-Kosovo slogans with religious symbolism, further entrenching the idea that people on the move were vectors of territorial and cultural loss and ethno-national

suffering in general. Protesters held Serbian and Greek flags and banners saying: "terrorists not welcome" and "you will not replace us". They shouted slogans such as "we don't want migrants"; "Serbia for Serbs"; "fences for migrants, freedom for citizens"; as well as "no division of Kosovo. Kosovo is the heart of Serbia" and "we won't give up our holy sites" (Mondo, 2020). After protesting in front of the Serbian Government, protesters stoned the premises of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migrations of the Republic of Serbia, a special organization within the state administration system responsible for migration issues.

The COVID-19 lockdown, which commenced only a week after this stoning, became a fertile ground for conspiracy theories. The Facebook group "STOP settlement of migrants" grew to over 300,000 members, functioning as a digital platform for hate speech, disinformation, and fantasies of armed revolt against both people on the move and the state (Vučić, 2021). Users frequently accused the government of secretly importing migrants while citizens were confined to their homes – a claim central to localized adaptations of the great replacement narrative. The state was framed not only as ineffective but as treacherous – complicit in erasing the Serbian people and the Serbian Orthodox faith. People on the move were portrayed as violent terrorists, Muslim extremists who hate Serbs/Christians, rapists of women and children, sodomites, and part of a global, regional, or national plot to replace Orthodox Serbian Christians with migrants.

These posts, filled with xenophobic, Islamophobic, and eliminationist rhetoric, exemplify hate speech as a diffuse and performative infrastructure. It operated not just through formal discourse but through rumor, visual propaganda, and bureaucratic silence – precisely the mechanisms of racialized governance that Garneau (2024) identifies as structuring exclusion beyond legality or individual intent.

> *Hello people, we are the ones who decide, not the government or the president. According to the constitution, we have the absolute legal right to do so. This means no migrants will live in Serbia under any circumstances. Serbia is not a sanctuary for Islamic terrorists or their jihadis, and no mosque will ever be built in Serbia again, because their blood will flow to their knees. We will show them who the Serbs are and what we are ready to do to defend our land and orthodoxy. If the government won't protect us, we will protect ourselves, as we know how and will use any means necessary.* (STOP MIGRANTIMA!!!, 2020)

In these discourses, the imagined "settlement" of migrants became shorthand for national decline. Their alleged presence in Serbian villages, institutions, and cities was projected as a slow, inevitable process of erasure – of culture, population, and sovereignty. Hate speech thus did not only target individual migrants; it redefined the symbolic terrain of national belonging (Butler, 2009). It presented people on the move as inherently incompatible with Serbian life – not because of what they did, but because of who they were presumed to be. This is the performative work of hate speech in

Figure 1: Screenshot of a Facebook group created in March 2020 as a backup for the main group STOP naseljavanju migranata, which hosted 300,000 members at its peak. The group shown here was part of a network of numerous groups formed when administrators feared the main page could be shut down for hate-speech violations.

action: structuring the world through speech, silencing through spectacle, and governing through fear.

Hate made visible: the performative logic of migrant policing

During the COVID-19 state of emergency in Serbia, hate speech did not remain confined to online platforms. Instead, it materialized in public space through highly visible and symbolic acts of containment, policing, and militarization directed at people on the move. These practices – ranging from everyday harassment to large-scale raids – constituted what can be described as border spectacles: performative displays of state sovereignty and punitive power that reaffirm the logic of exclusion and racialized suspicion (De Genova, 2013; Stojić Mitrović, 2024).

Even prior to the imposition of emergency measures in March 2020, people on the move were subjected to forcible removal from public spaces – streets, parks, squats – and relocated to remote, state-run accommodation centers. Once the state of emergency was declared, these spaces were transformed into fortified sites. Encampments were fenced off, guarded by armed soldiers and armored vehicles, and subjected to enhanced surveillance. The Ministry of Defense issued regular photo-reports showcasing its enforcement activities, reinforcing a visual narrative of order, control, and national protection. When Aleksandar Vulin, then Minister of Defense, became Minister of the Interior, these performances intensified: raids on border squats and urban apprehensions were broadcast through official YouTube channels, solidifying the spectacle of containment as a state communication strategy.

These practices inflicted profound material and symbolic harm. Healthcare access for people on the move was minimal; those infected with COVID-19 were typically isolated rather than treated (Marinković, 2020). Attempts to leave the camps were met with punitive violence. Media documented individuals lying bound in the mud, surrounded by armed officers (Republika, 2020). While certain violent practices – beatings, relocations, and firearm use – remained unreported by official institutions, solidarity groups (Transbalkanska solidarnost, 2020) documented widespread abuse. These policing actions, though framed as neutral or humanitarian, reproduced the governing logic of hate speech: the rendering of people on the move as inherently dangerous and undeserving of rights.

Spectacle reached an unprecedented intensity in May 2020 when a man rammed his car through the fence of the Obrenovac camp, livestreaming his actions and declaring his refusal to tolerate migrants, Islam, or the army guarding "them":"I don't want migrants attacking my girlfriend, I don't want an Islamic state, I don't want my army guarding them in my city. I don't want to see people fleeing in my city, I don't want to endure this, the punishment will be severe" (Lokalne novine, 2020). His rhetoric echoed the broader ecosystem of hate speech: invoking moral panic, racialized fear, and masculine protectionism. He was soon supported by a rally led by the far-right group Levijatan, known for combining anti-migrant and anti-Roma violence with animal rights discourse. "Gathered in front of the migrant camp, they sang 'Hriste Bože', a hymn dedicated to Kosovo, vowing to liberate it from Albanians" (Dukić, 2020).

Vigilante group People's Patrol also staged policing performances. They operated under the guise of protecting citizens, simulating law enforcement by harassing people on the move – demanding documents, verbally abusing them, and attempting to forcibly place them into camps. In one incident, they kidnapped people from a squat at the Sombor train station, only to be denied entry at the state-run migrant accommodation camp gates (Balać, 2021). These acts were intended not only to intimidate but to provoke a reaction that would justify the narrative of migrant criminality. The group also targeted local residents who provided shelter to people on the move, publicly shaming them through posters with names, photos, and addresses. "Sombor residents, these are your neighbours who illegally rent accommodation to migrants. For their own profit, they contribute to the accumulation of these migrants in your city," instilled fear in those targeted (Komarčević, 2021). These acts, while framed as civilian initiative, mirror the performative force of state violence and amplify its logic.

Following the lifting of the state of emergency, closed borders and mobility restrictions drove many people on the move to rely on smuggling networks. Competition over routes and clients escalated into violent confrontations, particularly in northern Serbia. Shootouts that had previously occurred in forests and peripheral zones began spilling into villages and towns (Subotica.com, 2022). In response, the state orchestrated highly mediatized crackdowns: police operations involving the arrest of hundreds were captured on camera, showing detainees kneeling with raised hands, surrounded by special forces (BBC na srpskom, 2022). These images – circulated widely – functioned as state-sanctioned spectacles of discipline, portraying people on the move as dangerous subjects requiring exceptional force.

These events did not produce sustainable solutions to either smuggling or insecurity. Rather, they reinforced a visual and discursive economy of racialized governance: one that fuses spectacle, silence, and punishment in managing unwanted mobility. The performative choreography of raids, arrests, and public shaming – whether by the state or its proxies – reproduces and legitimizes exclusion as a routine logic of rule.

Hate by absence: silence, bureaucracy, and the invisibilization of violence

The institutionalization of hate speech in Serbia's migration governance has not only taken the form of

Figure 2: Belgrade city center, 11 May 2022. The building pictured—once a squat used by people on the move and later a location where police gathered individuals apprehended in raids—was extensively marked with anti-migrant graffiti and Nazi symbols. Visible here is the inscription СТОП МИГРАНТИМА ("Stop migrants") in Cyrillic, beneath the redacted Latin-script fragment MIGRA. It is readable from the inside of the building (Photo: Marta Stojić Mitrović).

public spectacle or explicit hostility. It also operates through silence, technocratic language, and the strategic withdrawal of visibility – what Parmar (2021) calls absent presence. These are not signs of resolution or depoliticization, but rhetorical strategies that render structural violence invisible while continuing to produce its effects.

A major turning point occurred in 2022, when the EU and its "Western Balkan partners" launched the Joint Coordination Platform's Ministerial Return Conference – a policy initiative seeking to transform the region into a buffer-deportation zone for returning people on the move from the EU to their countries of origin (Statewatch, 2023). This marked the shift from spectacular control to silent logistics, aligning Serbian governance with the EU's Action Plan for the Western Balkans – a precursor to the Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Accompanying this shift was a significant change in Serbia's institutional tone. After a long period of continuity, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration underwent its first major leadership change in decades. Open statements and media presence gave way to minimalist announcements, restricted access for journalists and researchers (Martinović, 2023), and a heavily sanitized public discourse. Bureaucratic euphemisms replaced politically charged language. Expressions such as "automated regional return mechanism", "comprehensive, people-centered approach", "360-degree management strategy" and "humanitarian border governance" (Skopje Declaration, 2022; IOM, 2022) obscured the coercive nature of detention, deportation, and forced returns.

This technocratic vocabulary functioned as a mode of invisibilization, defusing the emotional and political charge of migration by shifting attention from human suffering to abstract "coordination" and "efficiency." As Wodak (2021) notes, this calculated ambivalence allows exclusionary measures to appear both rational and humanitarian, veiling harm beneath a veneer of administrative neutrality.

Yet on the ground, violence continued – and escalated. Shootings between smuggling networks near Serbia's northern borders became more frequent and deadly, prompting intensified police operations. Following a fatal clash in October 2023, a large-scale raid removed hundreds of people on the move from border areas, effectively pushing migration routes further south and deeper underground (Jovanović, 2024). These operations coincided with increased silence: while armed actions were sometimes reported, the broader social implications and human consequences of such enforcement remained absent from national discourse.

The criminalization of people on the move – often framed through the trope of "illegal migrants" disrupting national security – reinforced social distance and public apathy. In 2024, aside from brief mentions of smuggling or isolated crimes, migration largely disappeared from Serbian public debate. The dominant narrative suggested the problem had been "solved," requiring only technical maintenance.

But this silence was broken briefly in February 2024, when North Macedonian authorities reported a group of 70 pushbacked individuals, some beaten and stripped of clothing in freezing weather. Serbian officials deflected responsibility, noting that Austrian and Hungarian officers, jointly patrolling the Serbian border, had reported "no irregularities" (Fallon & Tondo, 2024; Radoja & Anđelković, 2024). The matter was quickly closed. The physical suffering and exposure to extreme cold endured by these individuals was effectively erased – folded into institutional silence, with no political, legal or public consequence.

Meanwhile, in a telling move, the Commissariat announced the closure of over half of Serbia's asylum camps, citing "lack of demand" (Jovanović, 2024). In reality, the increasing restrictions on aid, mobility, and visibility, alongside economic dependency on smugglers, had created a context in which camp life became unsustainable – not unnecessary. As migrants disappeared from public space, they also vanished from concern.

This disappearing act extended to digital spaces as well. Even People's Patrol, once among the most active purveyors of street-level hate, shifted its focus to Kosovo, lithium mining, and state betrayal. Migrants, once vilified as existential threats, had become too invisible to hate – a clear indication of successful routinization of violence. The perlocutionary force of earlier hate speech – its ability to incite fear, restructure discourse, and justify exclusion – had now migrated into silence, bureaucracy, and institutional inertia.

The legal adoption of the Pact on Migration and Asylum may have further reduced the discursive centrality of migration, but its infrastructural effects persist. Camps remain closed, deportations occur without documentation, and border patrols are carried out by foreign forces operating without public oversight. Whether by spectacle or by silence, racialized governance continues to organize violence, producing what Garneau (2024) calls infrastructures of exclusion: routinized systems that are no longer seen, precisely because they work.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that hate speech in Serbia is not an aberration, nor is it reducible to isolated verbal attacks or criminalized incitement. Rather, it constitutes a central mechanism of governance – dispersed, routinized, and often invisible – that undergirds migration management and sustains structural inequalities. Through an analysis of political narratives, public spectacles, vigilante action, and bureaucratic silences, we have seen how hate is not merely expressed but designed: embedded in policies, enacted through institutions, and circulated via media, administrative vocabulary, and public affect.

Framed by Austin's (1990) concept of the perlocutionary force of speech acts, hate speech in the Serbian context has produced tangible effects: it has legitimized violence, normalized exclusion, and restructured the political landscape in ways that deny people on the move visibility, rights, and subjecthood. The move from overt verbal hostility to bureaucratic silence and technocratic abstraction does not signify progress or depoliticization – it signals the institutionalization of discrimination. Hate, in this framework, operates not only through what is said, but through what is rendered unsayable, unseeable, and ungovernable.

Drawing on Wodak's (2021) "calculated ambivalence", we observed how narratives toggle between humanitarianism and securitization, between benevolence and threat, enabling states to oscillate between inclusionary rhetoric and exclusionary practices. Parmar's (2021) concept of "absent presence" further illuminated how racialized governance often works through silence – through omitted subjects, inaccessible camps, and concealed violence – rendering people on the move hyper-visible as problems, but invisible as political actors and as human beings. These dynamics are not accidental, but central to a broader regime of racialized governance (Garneau, 2024) that relies on ambiguity, spectacle, and apathy to maintain the boundaries of (national) belonging.

As Serbia consolidates its role within the externalized European border regime, the governance of migration becomes increasingly technocratic, militarized, and opaque. The adoption of the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum may promise "humane border management", but on the ground, it deepens the infrastructural and epistemic violence that defines mobility control today. Public silence, bureaucratic euphemism, and visual performances of control do not replace hate speech – they extend it.

In conclusion, hate speech in Serbia functions not as a deviation from democratic norms, but as a discursive and institutional logic through which the state governs unwanted mobility. Its effects are durable, its forms are adaptive, and its consequences are grave. Understanding hate speech as a policy design – as a performative and systemic force – requires us to attend not only to what is said, but to the infrastructures that make violence possible, the silences that conceal it, and the publics desensitized to its presence. Without this recognition, efforts to counter hate risk addressing symptoms while leaving the system that produces them intact.

SOVRAŽNI GOVOR IN NAČRTOVANO SOVRAŠTVO: PROTIMIGRANTSKI DISKURZ V SRBIJI

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POVZETEK

To besedilo preučuje sovražni govor v Srbiji kot konceptualno orodje, ki presega izolirana dejanja sovražnosti in vpliva na politike, legitimizira neenakopravne strukture moči ter ohranja izključevalne prakse in sistemsko nasilje. Diskurzivna analiza protimigrantskih narativov razkriva, kako sovražni govor deluje znotraj širšega okvira upravljanja migracij, javnih narativov in institucionalnih praks. Te oblike sovražnega govora niso naključne, temveč so sistematični rezultati, ki temeljijo na konceptualnih okvirih, ki oblikujejo srbsko migracijsko politiko. Prehod Srbije iz tranzitne države v aktivno udeleženko v evropskem mejnem režimu je institucionaliziral sovražni govor in normaliziral sistemsko izključevanje ljudi na poti. Javni spektakli, kot so aretacije, zapiranja in omejen dostop do namestitvenih kampov, služijo kot performativna dejanja, ki zakrivajo strukturno diskriminacijo, ki je podlaga migracijskim politikam. Medtem birokratska tišina in nevidne institucionalne prakse še dodatno krepijo izključevanje in dehumanizacijo. Protimigrantski narativi so se širili prek družbenih medijev in javnih protestov, kar je okrepilo teorije zarote, sovražni govor in spodbujanje k nasilju. Družbene platforme so ljudi na poti prikazovale kot eksistencialno grožnjo srbski identiteti in kulturi, medtem ko so lokalne skupine zabrisale meje med državnim policijskim nadzorom in vigilantizmom. Srbija se je uskladila z migracijsko politiko EU in sprejela varnostni pristop, ki je zasnovan kot zaščita nacionalnih interesov. Ta strategija marginalizira ljudi na poti in preusmerja pozornost na nadzor meja, s čimer legitimizira diskriminatorne prakse. Prepletanje sovražnega govora, izključujočih politik, protimigrantskih narativov in javnega molka, ki ga spodbuja javna brezbrižnost, ohranja sistemske neenakosti in ljudi na poti zreducira na predmete političnih agend.

Ključne besede: sovražni govor, performativnost, migracije, izključenost, nasilje, Srbija

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