

NON-FORMAL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR THE PREVENTION OF HATE SPEECH IN A POLYSEGMENTAL SOCIETY IN THE SITUATION OF GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICTS

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Abstract

The purpose of the presentation is to introduce the results of the study on public awareness regarding hate speech and educational measures for its prevention. The focus group of the study includes third-country nationals living in Latvia, who belong to different information spaces and social bubbles, and their understanding of hate speech, especially following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which intensified manifestations of hate speech.

The study results will highlight the issue of understanding the concept of hate speech. The ability of the focus group to recognize the structures of hate speech will be analyzed. Recommendations will be developed for the content of innovative educational programmes in lifelong learning and non-formal education on the prevention of hate speech in geopolitical conflict situations.

Hate speech is a (quasi-)communicative phenomenon. It more frequently manifests itself in a polysegmental society and becomes particularly prominent in geopolitical conflict situations that affect one or more societal segments (ethnic, religious, linguistic, etc.). Most frequently, hate speech is anonymized, which accelerates the circulation and infiltration of hate speech clichés and original content into communicative acts. Hate speech can be both a cause of conflict and a projection of it; it has far-reaching and dangerous impacts on human rights. The performative modes of hate speech are more prominently reflected in informal communication and digital environment. These can trigger a viral chain reaction in the form of public outrage, accusations and insults.

Hate speech can also be deliberately generated to incite groups and segments of society against one another, leading to violent moral or physical escalation, hate crimes, genocide, and other forms of conflict. It can also be used unconsciously, as part of social "mythology" narrative of a societal segment, by repeating clichés and stereotypes within a social bubble. Identifying, preventing, and combating hate speech affects not only the dignity and human rights of the target but also the self-respect and societal positioning of the perpetrator. Hate speech triggers and reveals dangerous divisions within society, impacting participation and inclusion processes, and exposing "blind spots" in the media literacy of the population.

In interpersonal communication and on social networks, hate speech often targets ethnic and linguistic relations between communities of third-country nationals, controversially labelling the object and the subject of the hate speech. This becomes particularly intense in situations of geopolitical conflict, especially when these conflicts occur in neighbouring countries. To avoid manifestations of hate speech, it is essential to carry out educational measures of preventing hate speech in society, particularly in segments that could be affected by these conflicts and potentially included in groups identified as subjects or objects of hate speech. Educational hate speech prevention measures must be implemented by developing and introducing innovative lifelong learning and non-formal education programmes.

Keywords: Hate speech, third-country nationals, non-formal education, hate speech prevention.

1 INTRODUCTION

Current geopolitical conflicts around the world and the related migration have caused social tension and the spread of hate speech (HS) globally, in Europe, and in Latvia - both online and offline in social bubbles and in-between-territories. Due to the speed and quantity of HS spread, our era is referred to as a "hate speech epidemic" [1], and the HS phenomenon is described as the "Achilles' heel" of the communication process [2]. HS can be defined as a false claim or statement based on an individual or a group's identity aspect, which can cause moral or material harm. Most frequently, HS is anonymized, which accelerates the circulation and infiltration of hate speech clichés and original content into communicative acts. Hate speech can be both a cause of conflict and its projection; it has far-reaching and dangerous impacts on human rights. Katharine Gelber and Luke McNamara point out that "the perspectives on hate speech acts

allow for connecting hate speech with structural inequality and distinguishing between the immediate and long-term impacts of hate speech acts on their targets" [3]. "Hate speech is often seen as a binary choice. This is partly due to attempts to automate its detection or censor/sanction it, thus needing clear demarcations to classify when a piece of communication is or is not hate speech" [4]. Hate speech mainly arises within a conceptual framework of "us - them", where individuals distinguish the group to which they feel they belong, also known as the "in-group", from the so-called "out-group". Hate speech against "out-groups" is manifested in several degrees of intensity: negative speech regarding the "out-group", the dehumanization and demonization of the "out-group" and its members, and a shift from the conceptual to the physical aspect, turning into incitement of violence against the "out-group". "Hate speech is topically focused (misogyny, sexism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, etc.), and each specific manifestation of hate speech targets different vulnerable groups based on characteristics such as gender (misogyny, sexism), ethnicity, race, religion (xenophobia, racism, Islamophobia), sexual orientation (homophobia), and so on" [5].

In modern Latvian society, HS acts are more often related to the projection of geopolitical conflicts [6], as they directly and indirectly affect a large part of the Latvian population. At the same time, there are also regular manifestations of HS related to everyday personal needs, such as health conditions or physical and physiological characteristics [7]. In this article, we discuss the understanding of HS among third-country nationals living in Latvia, who, in the current geopolitical conflict situation, can simultaneously be positioned as both objects and subjects of HS. We also provide recommendations for the content of innovative education programs in lifelong learning and non-formal education regarding the prevention of HS in geopolitical conflict situations.

2 METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the study is based on a qualitative approach and analyzes data collected via a focus group survey "Hate speech awareness and prevention in a polysegmental society in the situation of geopolitical conflicts (Latvia's case)", which was conducted in September 2024 within the framework of the Small Grants Program project "Building Understanding of Hate Speech and Its Prevention in the Latvian Civic Community" (No. SLG75024GR0075) of US Embassy in Latvia [8].

A total of 74 respondents (N=74) participated in the focus group survey. The survey was aimed at third-country nationals residing in Latvia who represent various population clusters: 1) Ukrainian refugees who arrived in Latvia due to the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022; 2) Citizens of the Russian Federation and Belarus who were born or have been living in Latvia for an extended period on the basis of a residence permit; 3) Other third-country nationals who have a residence permit in Latvia and have been living in Latvia for a short period. These three target groups were selected for the study because preliminary research conducted in the media and online platforms indicated that cases of HS in Latvia are most often related to these population clusters in an ethnic, linguistic, and geopolitical context. As a result, a semi-structured questionnaire was created.

The focus group was offered closed questions, which provided quantitative data about the participants' age, length of stay in Latvia, and native language. Additionally, closed questions were used to obtain the focus group's responses to the following questions: "Are you familiar with the concept of 'hate speech'?"; "Do you think hate speech is common in Latvia?"; "Can comments on the internet contain signs of hate speech?"

The focus group was offered semi-open questions that allowed for text responses: "Is hate speech more dangerous in formal or informal communication?"; "Where does hate speech most often appear?" These questions give the interviewer the option to explore particular opinions or positions in more depth. With the combined answers, the ability of the focus group to recognize the structures of HS and their understanding of the performative modes of HS were assessed.

The focus group was also asked open-ended questions to gain insights into the respondents' viewpoints and attitudes toward HS as a (quasi-)communicative phenomenon: "What are the first three associations that come to mind with this concept?"; "In what situations does hate speech appear?"; "Which social groups most frequently produce hate speech?"; "Which social groups is hate speech most often directed towards?"

The survey data are stored in the data repository of Daugavpils University Lifelong Learning, Culture, and Science Communication Society "Park of Intellect".

3 RESULTS

3.1 Analysis of the Survey Conducted with the Third-Country Nationals Residing in Latvia

The analysis of the data from the survey “Hate speech awareness and prevention in a polysegmental society in the situation of geopolitical conflicts (Latvia’s case)” provides insight into the understanding of the HS phenomenon among third-country nationals residing in Latvia, their ability to identify it within different social groups, and their understanding of the relationship between HS and the geopolitical context.

74 respondents aged between 19 and 70 years participated in the survey.

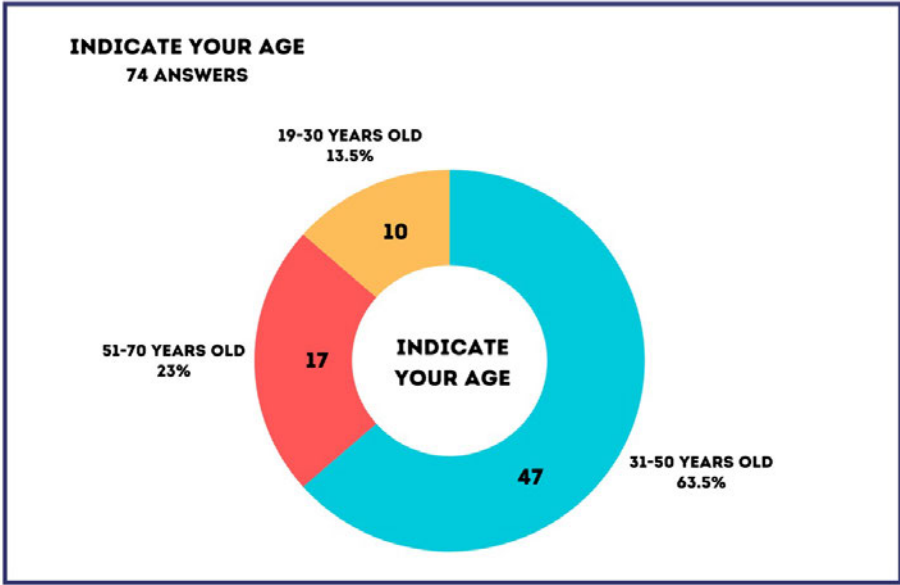


Fig. 1. Age of respondents.

The largest group of respondents, 63.5% (47 respondents), include third-country nationals residing in Latvia aged between 31 and 50 years. This is the most active social group, playing a significant role in the labor market and actively engaging in the creation and dissemination of content in the information space. The increase in this group of third-country nationals was influenced by the influx of Ukrainian refugees into Latvia. This population movement simultaneously marked a strong wave of HS among the long-term residents of the Russian Federation and newcomers from Ukraine in Latvian society.

The second-largest group of respondents, 23% (17 respondents), is made up of individuals aged between 51 and 70 years. The majority of this respondent group consists of third-country nationals from the Russian Federation and Belarus residing in Latvia. This population group has faced numerous linguistic, economic, mobility, and educational restrictions as a political message to the citizens of the aggressor state following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In the current geopolitical situation during the study, both of the largest survey respondent groups present simultaneously objects and subjects of HS.

The third-largest group of respondents, 13.5% (10 respondents), comprises individuals aged between 19 and 30 years, indicating the recognition of the HS phenomenon and an understanding of its issues among the youth.

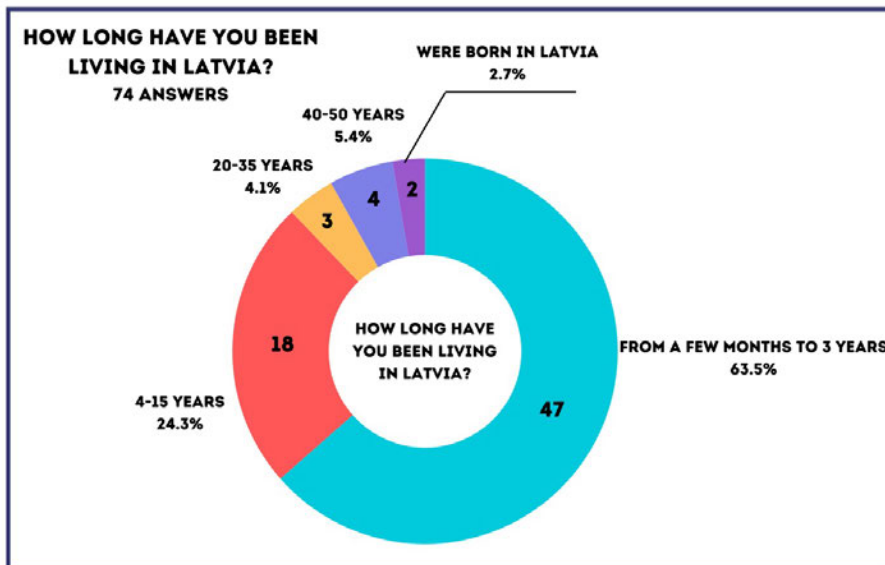


Fig. 2. Respondents' length of stay in Latvia.

Responses to the question about respondents' length of stay in Latvia highlight two clusters of third-country nationals: 1) 63.5% of respondents are recently arrived third-country nationals (from a few months to 3 years); the majority of respondents in this cluster are refugees from Ukraine; 2) 36.5% of respondents have been in Latvia for more than 4 years: 18 respondents have been in Latvia for 4-15 years; 3 respondents have been in Latvia for 20-35 years; 4 respondents have been in Latvia for 40-50 years; and 2 respondents were born in Latvia.

The respondents' native language plays a significant role in the study of the HS phenomenon in Latvia, as it determines their dominant information space and the circulating performative modes of HS within it.

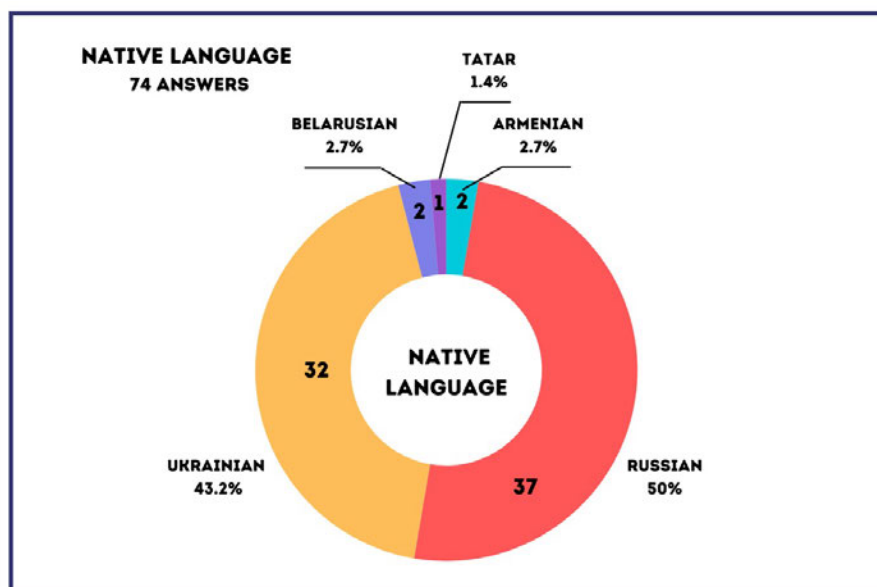


Fig. 3. Native language of respondents.

In the survey focus group, 37 respondents have Russian as their native language; 32 respondents have Ukrainian; 2 respondents have Armenian; 2 respondents have Belarusian; and 1 respondent has Tatar as their native language. Thus, all survey participants have experience in shaping public opinion and engaging in formal and informal discussions and debates, including representations of HS, not only in media and social networks that are primarily in Latvia.

The assessment of respondents' understanding of the concept of HS was initiated with the question: "Are you familiar with the concept of 'hate speech'?"

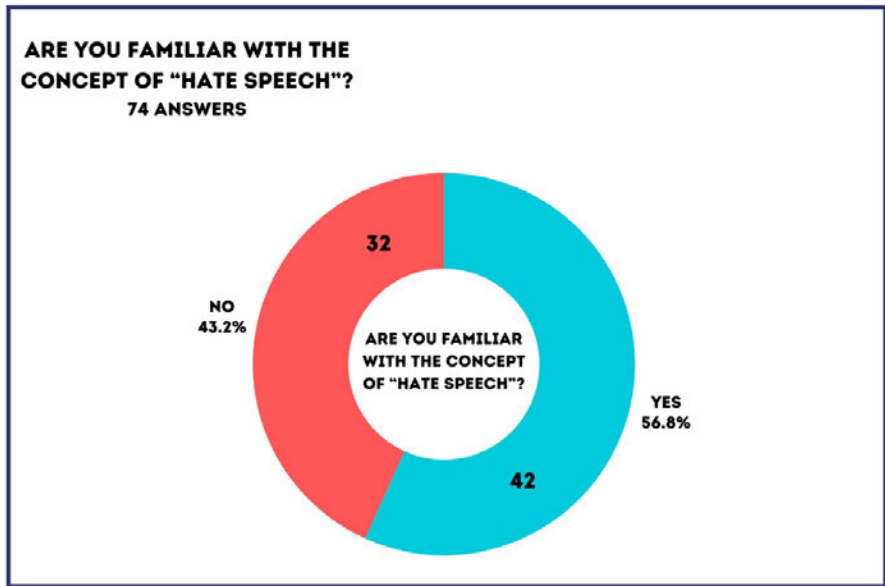


Fig. 4. Respondents' answers to the question of whether they are familiar with the concept of "hate speech".

The majority of respondents, 56.8% (42 respondents), are not familiar with the concept of "hate speech", while 43.2% (32 respondents) are familiar with it. Despite the fact that since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, the focus group has regularly encountered manifestations of HS in the public space, the representatives of the focus group do not have the competence to identify HS, which also results in their inability to produce and prevent it.

Even though not all respondents are familiar with the concept of "hate speech", they continued to answer the survey questions based on the associative components triggered by the concept and the geopolitical context related to "hate speech". In this context, the survey encouraged the focus group to delve into the origins, spread, and further prevention of the HS phenomenon in their current host country - Latvia. The survey question regarding the focus group's understanding of whether HS is widespread in Latvia can be analyzed in relation to their linguistic belonging to various information spaces. Limited knowledge of the Latvian language restricts integration into the information environment that operates in Latvian.

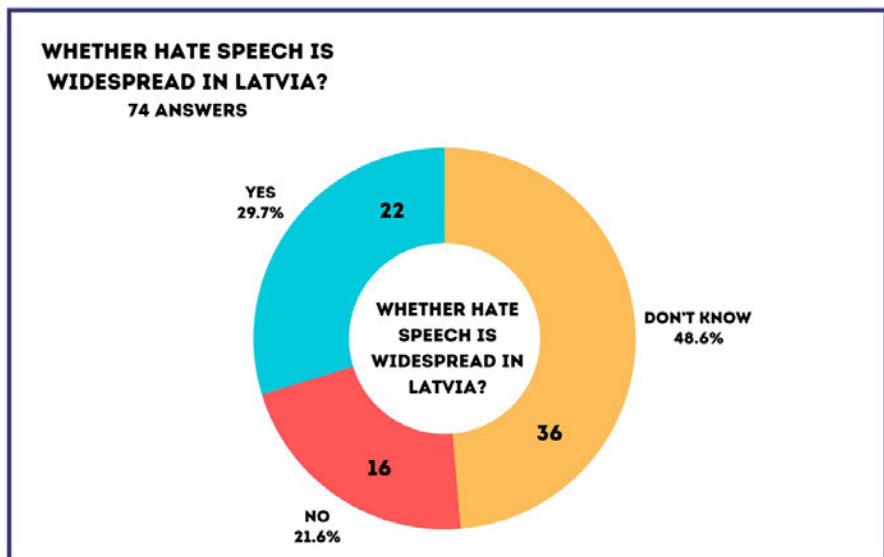


Fig. 5. Respondents' answers to the question of whether hate speech is widespread in Latvia.

The majority of respondents, 48.6% (36 respondents), do not know whether HS is widespread in Latvia, 29.7% (22 respondents) admitted that HS is widespread in Latvia, and 21.6% (16 respondents) believe that HS is not widespread in Latvia. Thus, the majority of the focus group has no understanding of what

is happening in the information space in the Latvian language, including the forms, targets, and frequency of HS.

Studies on HS indicate that the phenomenon of HS most prominently appears in the digital environment in interpersonal communication and on social networks: “The digital age has ushered in a new frontier of communication where the rapid exchange of ideas and information has transformed social interactions. However, this development has also amplified the spread of hate speech” [9]. HS often targets ethnic and linguistic relations between communities of third-country nationals, controversially labeling the object and the subject of the HS. The frequency of HS fixation in the digital environment can be attributed to information spaces in all languages. The majority of respondents are able to identify the phenomenon of HS or its associated components as signs of HS.

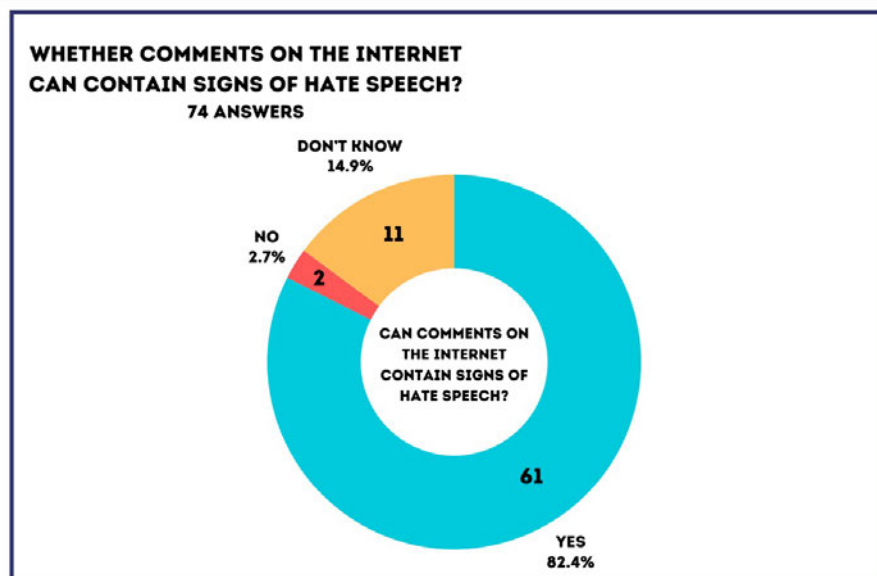


Fig. 6. Respondents' answers to the question of whether comments on the internet can contain signs of hate speech.

The majority, 82.4% (61 respondents), indicated that comments on the internet can contain signs of HS; 14.9% (11 respondents) stated that they do not know if comments on the internet can contain features of HS, and only 2.7% (2 respondents) noted that comments on the internet cannot contain signs of HS. It can be concluded that although some respondents are not familiar with the concept of “hate speech” and do not have the competence to identify its signs in the information space, the name of the concept and the included category of “hate”, along with the communicative process expressed by the term “speech”, evoke certain associations in respondents. These associations allow them to indirectly recognize HS in online comments and other formal and informal situations.

Previous studies have concluded that “Hate speech can be defined as any form of expression that seeks to humiliate people based on group characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation). Whether manifested through text, memes, or any other communicative medium, hate speech has become a pressing issue with significant societal implications” [10].

To gain insight into the situations in which third-country nationals in Latvia may consciously or unconsciously become objects or subjects of HS, respondents were asked the question, “Is hate speech more dangerous in formal or informal communication?” The responses received indicate that 45.9% (34 respondents) believe that HS is more dangerous in informal communication. Meanwhile, 21.6% (16 respondents) indicated that HS is more dangerous in formal communication. This ratio among the responses suggests that individuals as recipients are more sensitive to and identify more with HS in informal communication, such as anonymous online comments following publications on social or political topics that address ethnic, linguistic, and gender issues. At the same time, 32.5% (24 respondents) provided other answers: in both forms of communication; that “formal manifestations of hate speech lead to informal manifestations, and vice versa, so both manifestations are interconnected and both are dangerous”; that “Hatred is dangerous in any form and type”; and 7 respondents did not provide an answer to the question.

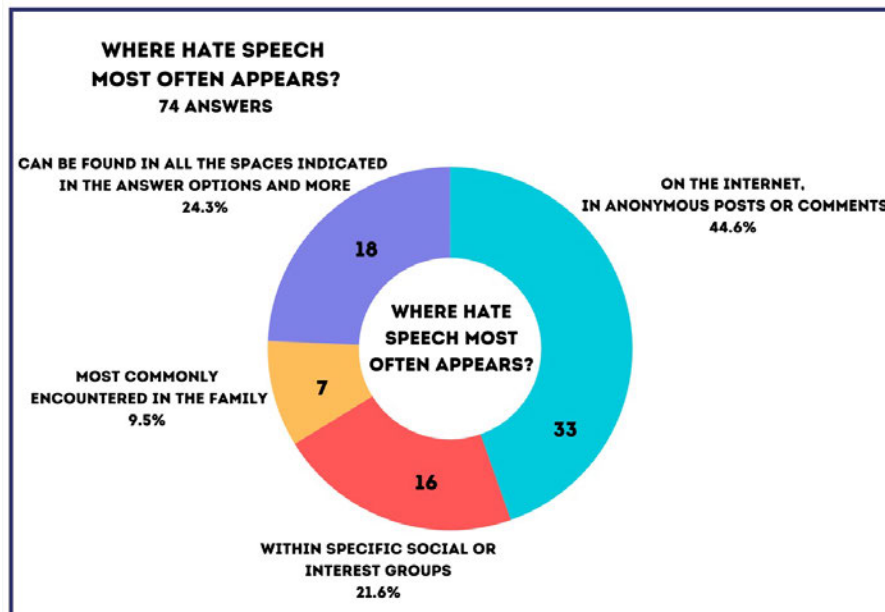


Fig. 7. Respondents' answers to the question of where hate speech most often appears.

To gain insight into the interactions of third-country nationals with forms of HS in the information space and social structures, respondents were asked the question, "Where does hate speech most often appear?" providing answer options as well as the opportunity to indicate other responses. 44.6% (33 respondents) noted that HS most often appears on the Internet, in anonymous posts or comments; 21.6% (16 respondents) indicated that HS most often appears within specific social or interest groups; and 9.5% (7 respondents) believe that HS is most commonly encountered in the family. In this perspective, HS is often used unconsciously, as part of the social "mythology" narrative of a societal segment, by repeating inherited clichés and stereotypes from previous generations within a social bubble.

Several respondents noted that HS can be found in all the spaces indicated in the answer options. The answer options offered by the researchers were supplemented by respondents with other spheres for identifying HS, such as professional sphere and the service sector.

The focus group was presented with open-ended questions to gain insights into respondents' viewpoints and attitudes toward HS as a (quasi-)communicative phenomenon: "What are the first three associations that come to mind with this concept?" The respondents provided the following associations: *anger; intolerance; ignorance; anti-Semitism; homophobia; disappointment; hidden resentment; discrimination; ignoring; aggression; discomfort; danger; risk; language that is not loved; unwillingness to hear; feeling of hostility toward something or someone; humiliation, coercion, and imposing one's position; Russophobia; war; genocide; deportation; quarrel; scandal; hissing; violation of rights; misunderstanding; propaganda; negative attitude toward someone; bullying; stereotypes; rudeness; unwillingness to engage in dialogue; populism; aggressive expressions toward another person; humiliation due to nationality, race or religion; cursing; mockery; discrimination; integration; respect; sorrow and experiences; division in society.* The respondents' answers create a register of associative components for the concept of "hate speech", which reveals several semantic fields: psycho-emotional reactions, political processes, and social structures. However, it should be noted that the focus group understands the HS phenomenon in general terms, from the perspective of the current geopolitical situation, but does not demonstrate the competence to connect universal associative components of HS with specific language structures, such as expressive lexicon, tropes (metaphors, metonymy, similes, allusions), and established social "mythology" narratives within certain social bubbles - clichés and stereotypes about other ethnic groups, interpretations of historical events, rituals, mass culture, etc.

To ascertain the focus group's opinion on the situations in which HS originates, the respondents provided answers to the question, "In what situations does hate speech appear?" A wide range of responses was received: *in crisis; in disputes to assert one's correctness; during war, aggression, misunderstandings, anger, hatred; during the clash of different nationalities; due to sexual orientation; due to language and religion; in politics and political matters; national hatred; racial; when one group of people treats another with disrespect; in social networks; when two completely different viewpoints arise; in situations of military/social/ethnic/personal or other conflicts; on the Internet; in the mass media;*

rejection of a person; most often when the conversation turns to the war between the Russian and Ukrainian states; when communicating with people in Russian; incitement of hatred; language issues.

The response options indicate that the focus group projects HS onto current socio-political contexts, geopolitical conflicts, and also relates them to communication experiences within their social bubbles or in-between spaces. As explained by Aldo Van Eyck and Herman Hertzberger, “‘In-between space’ is an intermediate space between opposite elements such as whole and parts, inside and outside, open and close, central and decentral” [11].

The phenomenon of HS is multilayered; discussions and case studies often focus on HS objects, which are referred to as victims. However, insufficient attention is given to the producers of HS, the reasons that contribute to the generation of HS, and its prevention.

In response to the question ‘Which social groups most frequently produce hate speech?’, the focus group provided the following answers: *individuals with low income; poorly educated individuals; asocial persons; pensioners; I assume it depends on the personality of the individual rather than the social group; people who do not have their own opinion, absorbing information from social media and propaganda channels on television; individuals over 50 (Soviet people); Russian-speaking residents of Latvia; those who watch a lot of news; alcoholics; homeless individuals; disabled people; children; the older the age, the more frequently hate speech manifests; conservatives; patriarchal individuals; socially vulnerable groups; those who consider themselves superior to others; marginal individuals; those who have achieved little in life; racists; xenophobes; in the form of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-LGBTQ+ movements, misogyny, and other forms of intolerance.*

The wide spectrum of identifiers for social groups represented in the responses indicates that, on the one hand, the understanding of the HS concept among the focus group is blurred and vague, lacking clear boundaries. On the other hand, HS is reduced to current situations, personal experiences, and the most sensitive segments of one’s identity.

In order to ascertain the focus group’s opinion on the social groups that are most often subjected to HS, the respondents were asked the following question: “Which social groups is hate speech most often directed toward?”

Respondents provided the following answers: *immigrants; those who are weaker than they are; the unprotected; recently directed at Ukrainians; youth; elderly people; whoever propaganda points out from television and the internet; the lower and middle class; groups of people who cannot speak for themselves; those who can barely defend themselves; women; gender-related; based on religion; Russians and Belarusians who are oppositional; vulnerable groups, such as refugees; the uneducated; the “others”, “those who are different”, distinguished by any characteristic; national minorities.*

Just like the answers to previous questions, the responses to this question also primarily demonstrate a connection to the respondents’ current geopolitical situation and its projection in manifestations of HS. Moreover, the entire set of responses covers the majority of individuals and social groups subjected to HS manifestations. This indicates that although some respondents indicated they are not familiar with the concept of HS (56.8%, Fig. 4), their answers regarding the producers and victims of HS show that the focus group has the competence to successfully identify manifestations of HS, which serves as an effective basis for acquiring skills of HS prevention.

3.2 Recommendations for innovative educational programmes in lifelong learning and non-formal education on the prevention of hate speech

Based on the conclusions of the survey “Hate speech awareness and prevention in a polysegmental society in the situation of geopolitical conflicts (Latvia’s case)”, recommendations have been developed for the content of innovative educational programs in lifelong learning and non-formal education on the prevention of HS in geopolitical conflict situations. Since the study found that the focus group does not demonstrate the competence to connect universal HS associative components with specific language structures, such as expressive lexicon, tropes (metaphors, metonymy, similes, allusions), and narratives of social “mythology” stabilized within certain social bubbles - clichés and stereotypes about other ethnicities, interpretations of historical events, rituals, mass culture, etc., the identification and prevention of HS should be included as a horizontal priority in lifelong learning and non-formal education programs.

The recommendations are included in a 12-hour training module “Hate Speech and Hate Crimes”, which can be adapted to the needs of third-country nationals and used in training for specialists working with refugees within lifelong learning and non-formal education programs. The implementation of the program is intended to be ensured by educators, i.e. experts who have mastered the interdisciplinary aspects of

HS: legal, communication, linguistic, intercultural, etc. The developers of the recommendations suggest engaging third-country nationals as guest participants in classes on HS to share their experiences regarding specific HS cases.

3.2.1 Themes of the module “Hate Speech and Hate Crimes” with a Brief Content Annotation

1 “Hate speech: definition, theory, and practice”.

The lecturer presents the students with statements related to the content of the lesson, and each student works independently to confirm or deny the provided statements. While listening to the interactive lecture “Hate Speech: Theory and Reality”, students, including third-country nationals, are tasked with verifying whether their initial opinion is correct by confirming or denying the statements. The students, including third-country nationals, discuss which statements their initial opinion was incorrect about.

2 “Signs of Hate Speech and Targets of Hate: Political, Ethnic, and Professional Aspects”.

Course participants work in groups to receive information prepared by the lecturer about the sociological and psychological aspects of HS (features and groups targeted by hate crimes, motivations for hate crimes, identification of hate crimes, and obstacles) and summarize it using graphic organizers to present to the other groups. A third-country national participates in the group work. In the group presentation, the third-country national provides comments on what they have heard and supplements the students’ reports with his/her own personal experience.

3 “Third-Country Nationals in Latvia”.

Debate game. A third-country national participates in a debate game, and at the end, together with the lecturer, concludes on the highlighted issues and expresses opinions on possible solutions. The lecturer organizes a discussion on “Forms of hate-motivated crimes”, inviting both the third-country national and course participants to engage.

Practical assignment: “Recognition of hate crimes, examples of linguistic expertise”.

Course participants evaluate the examples prepared by the lecturer using the criteria for recognizing HS. The third-country national, along with the lecturer, provides support to the students in their groups.

Assessment test at the end of the course. This test aims to verify how well the learners have achieved the expected learning outcomes of the course.

Satisfaction surveys for each group of course participants are prepared. Test results are evaluated and learners are provided feedback. Learners reflect on the opportunity of transferring the course content to professional activity.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Within the framework of the project study, the survey method was used to determine the ability of the focus group to recognize the phenomenon of HS. The survey indicates that, in the context of current geopolitical conflicts, third-country residents of Latvia can simultaneously be positioned as both objects and subjects of HS, and that the performative modes of HS are more prominently reflected in informal communication and digital environments.

It can be concluded that, although some respondents are not familiar with the concept of “hate speech” and lack the competence to identify its signs in the information space, the name of the concept and the included category of “hate”, as well as the communicative process expressed by the term “speech”, evoke certain associations in the respondents. This allows them to indirectly recognize HS in internet comments and other formal and informal situations.

It was identified what competencies are necessary to improve the ability to identify HS, to avoid becoming a victim or object of manipulation, and to actively engage in the prevention of HS. Based on this, recommendations were developed for the content of the innovative educational program in lifelong learning and non-formal education on the prevention of HS in geopolitical conflict situations within the framework of the 12-hour module “Hate Speech and Hate Crimes”.

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