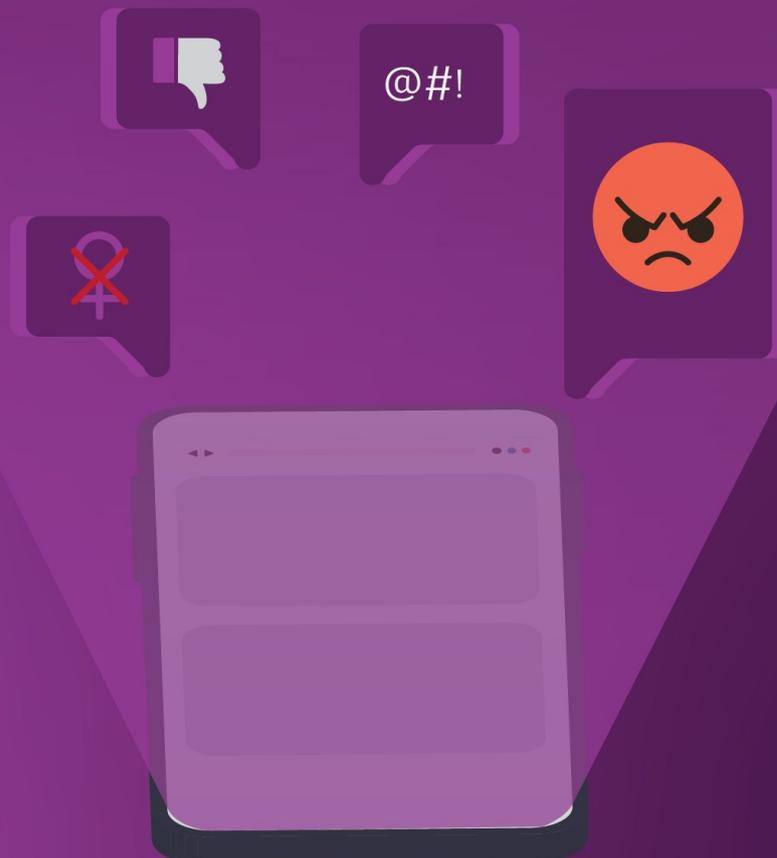# The Cost of Visibility: Online Violence against Women in Kosovo's Political Life

February 2026

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Introduction

Online political communication has become an increasingly central arena of electoral competition, shaping visibility, narratives, and voter engagement. Currently, it has emerged as a key environment for gender-based violence, where women political candidates are disproportionately exposed to hate speech, harassment, and discriminatory narratives. In Kosovo, as in many democratic contexts, this phenomenon poses growing risk not only to participation of women in politics but also to the quality, inclusiveness, and integrity of democratic processes.

This report examines online gender-based violence against women in politics (VAWP) during the 2025 electoral cycles of the national and local elections held in 2025. It situates online hate speech and discriminatory political communication not as isolated incidents or expressions of individual hostility, but as systemic and cumulative forms of political violence that shape who should participate in politics, under what conditions, and at what personal cost. By combining large-scale digital monitoring with in-depth qualitative interviews, the report seeks to capture both the scope of online violations and their lived impact on women political candidates.

The analysis builds on Democracy for Development's (D4D) long-standing experience in monitoring hate speech and harmful online content during electoral processes. Using a mixed-methods approach, the report documents patterns of media coverage, platform-specific dynamics, and the distribution of gender-based discriminatory content across municipalities, political actors, and time periods. Particular attention is given to the pre-campaign phase, and the final stages of electoral contests, where online hostility appears to intensify, while institutional safeguards are often the weakest.

Beyond quantitative trends, the report foregrounds the voices of women candidates themselves. Through qualitative interviews, the report explores the emotional, personal, and political consequences of online abuse, including cumulative psychological pressure, intrusion into private and family life, deterrent effects on political participation, and pressures to withdraw from public life. These findings illustrate how online hate speech reinforce gendered power structures, functions as a disciplining mechanism, and normalizing exclusionary political practices.

The report further examines the practical protection mechanisms, including family networks, political parties, solidarity among women, and formal reporting channels. The findings reveal significant gaps between formal commitments to gender equality and the practical protection offered to women candidates, with responsibility for managing harm often shifted onto individuals rather than institutions. These dynamics risk entrenching structural inequalities and discourage future generations of women from engaging in politics.

Finally, the report presents recommendations and reflections drawn directly from the experiences of women candidates, highlighting the need for coordinated legal, political, and societal responses to VAWP. These recommendation include stronger enforcement of

existing legal frameworks, clearer accountability within political parties, more responsible media practices, and collective solidarity that does not rely solely on women's resilience.

By documenting both the patterns and consequences of online gender-based violence, this report aims to contribute to evidence-based policymaking, informed public debate, and stronger institutional responses. Addressing VAWP is essential not only for advancing gender equality but for safeguarding democratic participation and ensuring that political competition remains open, substantive, and inclusive for all.

Methodology

This report applies a mixed-methods research design to systematically monitor, analyse, and document online gender-based violence targeting women candidates during the electoral process. Building on more than four years of experience in tracking hate speech and harmful digital content, Democracy for Development (D4D) employs an integrated methodological approach that combines large scale automated digital monitoring, systematic manual content review, and qualitative in-depth interviews with women candidates. This design ensures both breadth and depth of analysis, enabling the identification of structural patterns and trends in online discourse while also capturing the lived experiences and personal impact of gender-based attacks in the digital sphere.

The first component of the methodology consists of automated digital monitoring conducted through the Pikasa digital monitoring platform. Pikasa enables large-scale, real-time analysis of online content across digital media and social networks. During the electoral campaign period, the platform monitored content from more than 100 online media outlets as well as thousands of posts and user interactions across major social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter).

Using machine-learning algorithms and automated content analysis, the platform systematically scanned articles, posts, comments, and user interactions in order to detect potentially harmful or abusive content. Particular attention was given to identifying gender-based hate speech, sexist language, body-shaming, personal attacks, threats, and disinformation narratives targeting women candidates. Detected content was subsequently categorised according to the type of violation, patterns of occurrence (whether isolated incidents or repeated and potentially coordinated attacks), the specific target of the content (individual candidates, political parties, or broader groups of women candidates), and the level of engagement generated, including likes, shares, and comments. This layer of analysis enabled the measurement of both the scale and visibility of online gender-based violence and facilitated the identification of recurring narratives and high-risk periods during the campaign.

To complement automated monitoring and enhance contextual accuracy, the second component of the methodology involved systematic manual monitoring of political actors' online presence. A dedicated monitoring team conducted daily reviews of content published by political parties and individual candidates on their official digital accounts throughout the campaign period of the local elections 2025. This manual review focused not only on identifying explicitly abusive content but also on analyzing the tone, language, imagery, and framing in campaign communication. Particular attention was given to instances of discriminatory, derogatory, or sexist narratives, including content that targeted women on the basis of gender, physical appearance, family roles, or socially constructed expectations.

For systematic documentation, a structured monitoring dashboard was developed for each municipality included in the study. The dashboard contained a list of candidates and links to their official online accounts, as well as detailed records of identified

incidents of gender-based hate speech or harmful stereotyping. Each logged case included archived evidence, such as screenshots, date and time stamps, platform information, and source references. The primary platforms monitored were Facebook, TikTok, X, YouTube, and Instagram, reflecting their central role in political communication, audience mobilisation, and the amplification of gendered narratives in electoral discourse.

The third methodological component consisted of qualitative in-depth interviews designed to contextualise quantitative findings and examine the personal, emotional, and political consequences of online abuse. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 women candidates who participated in the electoral process, including 8 at the national level in 2025 and 10 at the local level elections in 2025. Participants were selected based on their visibility during the campaign and the extent of their exposure to online harassment.

The interviews explored the emotional and psychological impact of online hate speech, its influence on political engagement and campaign strategies, and the availability and effectiveness of support mechanisms within political parties, institutions, and families. Particular emphasis was placed on identifying gender-specific dimensions of targeting, such as attacks related to physical appearance, family life, morality, or advocacy for gender equality. The interviews also gathered the reflections of participants and recommendations regarding reporting mechanisms, institutional responses, and measures needed to strengthen protection against online gender-based violence.

By combining large-scale automated data analysis, systematic manual review, and in-depth qualitative insights, the methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of both the structural dynamics and the individual consequences of online gender-based violence in electoral contexts. This integrated approach ensures that statistical patterns are interpreted alongside personal narratives, enabling evidence-based and policy-relevant conclusions.

Methodological Limitations

While the mixed-methods approach strengthens the robustness of the analysis, certain limitations should be noted. Despite clearly defined coding criteria, distinctions between political criticism and gender-based violations may involve contextual interpretation. Automated detection, complemented by human verification, may still overlook nuanced, coded, or context-specific forms of abuse, particularly in Kosovo's multilingual environment. In addition, monitoring was limited to publicly accessible content on selected media outlets and major social media platforms, excluding private or deleted content and content shaped by platform-specific visibility algorithms. These constraints reflect the technical and access-related boundaries of digital monitoring research.

1. Automated digital monitoring

This section presents the findings generated through **automated digital monitoring** conducted using the Pikasa platform. The monitoring enabled large-scale and real-time analysis of online content published across digital media outlets and major social media platforms during the electoral period. By applying machine-learning-based content analysis, the system identified and categorised potentially harmful content, with a particular focus on gender-based hate speech, sexist narratives, personal attacks, threats, and disinformation targeting women candidates.

The results presented below provide an overview of the **scale, distribution, and visibility** of identified violations and serve as a descriptive basis for the subsequent analysis and interpretation of trends in gender-based online political communication.

1.1 Media coverage of mayoral candidates

Media Coverage of Women Mayoral Candidates

The monitoring of media coverage related to women candidates running for mayor during the pre-election and election campaign period in 2025 reveals significant disparities in visibility, thematic focus, and framing across candidates. Media attention is highly concentrated on a small number of women candidates, while the majority receive limited and narrowly framed coverage.

In the 2025 local elections for mayors, 20 women ran in 13 municipalities. Among all candidates, only one woman won a mayoral mandate in the small municipality of Ranillug. In all other municipalities, women candidates were defeated, largely because political parties nominated them in municipalities where the chances of victory were extremely low. This pattern suggests that women's candidacies are often used to formally demonstrate gender inclusion rather than reflecting a genuine electoral strategy aimed at winning mayoral races.

A small group of candidates-most notably Besa Shahini (306 articles) and Emilija Redžepi (250 articles)-dominate overall media visibility. Their coverage is extensive and largely shaped by high-salience national and political issues, rather than local governance agendas. For both candidates, topics related to the institutional and constitutional issues, and relations with Serbia account for a substantial share of reporting. This suggests that women candidates who are positioned within broader national or geopolitical debates tend to receive more sustained media attention.

Figure 1. Media coverage of women mayoral candidates in the 2025 local elections (number of articles)

Candidate	Number of articles
Emilija Redžepi	150
Xhevahire Izmaku	122
Albulena Balaj - Halimaj	75
Natyra Kuçi	62
Arta Vokshi Nallbani	48
Jona Arifi	34
Egzona Tërdevci	30
Vildane Latifi	23
Flutura Hamza Azemi	21
Tanja Antić	16
Katarina Ađančić	12
Vesna Pantovic	10
Slađana Pantović	10
Mirjana Vlašković	8
Hafize Sallahu	7
Ariana Hasani	1
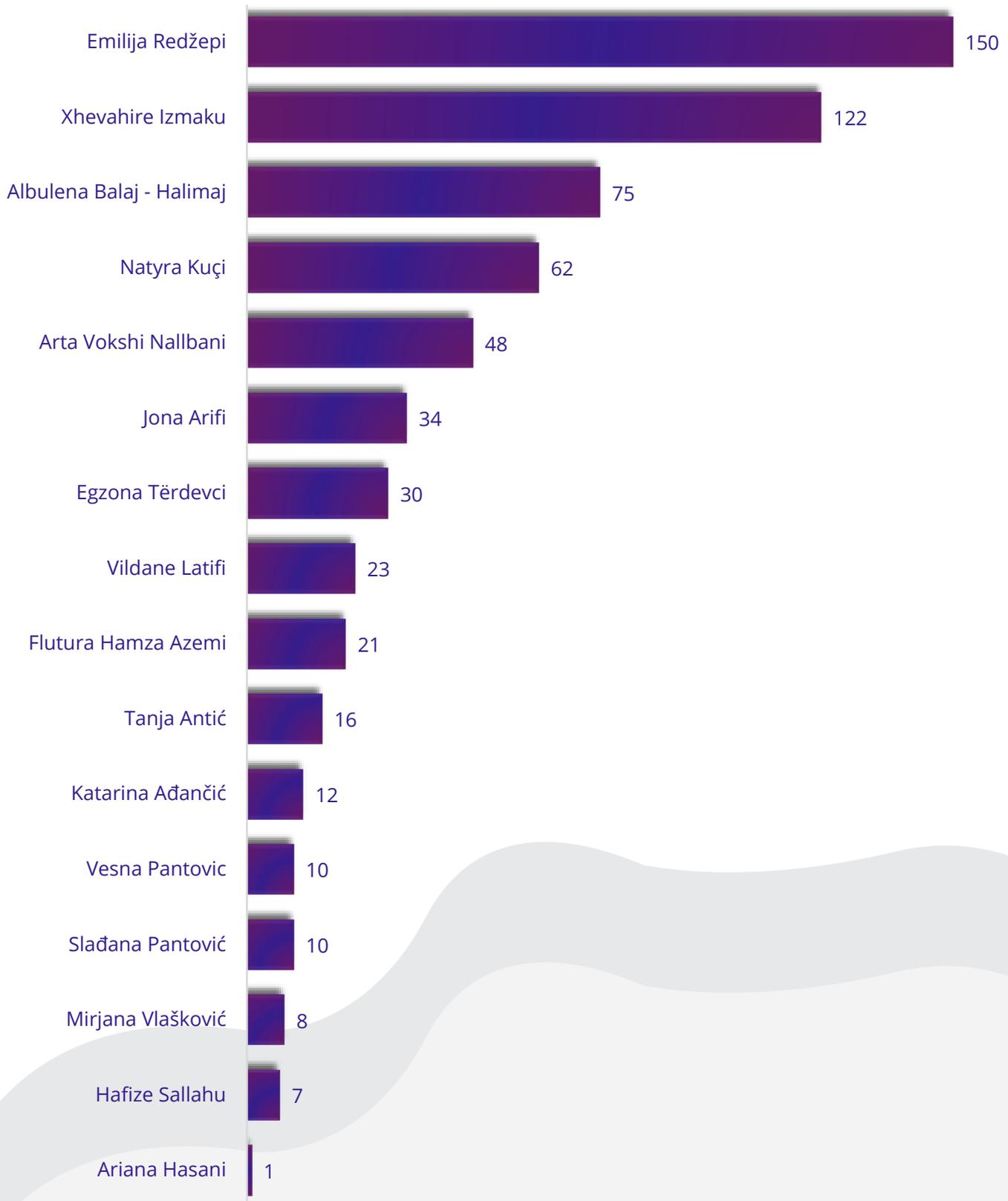
Candidates with moderate levels of Media coverage of women politicians such as Xhevahire Izmaku, Albulena Balaj-Halimaj, Natyra Kuçi, and Arta Vokshi Nallbani, are primarily covered across a mix of local development themes, including investments, employment, and diaspora engagement, as well as broader political narratives linked to northern Kosovo and inter-ethnic relations. References to gender equality appear across several candidates but remain secondary and marginal compared to security- or identity-related topics.

For candidates with lower media visibility, coverage becomes increasingly narrow and repetitive, often dominated by a single political issue. This pattern is particularly evident among candidates from Serb-majority municipalities, where reporting overwhelmingly centres on the Serbian List, the Association of Serbian Municipalities, license plates, and governance in northern Kosovo. In these cases, women candidates are framed primarily as political representatives within ethnic or territorial disputes, rather than as contenders with distinct local policy platforms.

Notably, local governance priorities-such as social services, health, education, environment, or municipal management- are largely under-represented across the coverage of most women candidates. Even when issues such as investments or infrastructure are present, they are often framed in general political terms rather than through concrete, candidate-specific policy proposals.

Media Coverage of Candidates for Mayor of Prishtina

The media monitoring data for the Prishtina mayoral race reveal a highly unequal distribution of coverage among candidates, both in terms of volume and thematic framing. Media attention is strongly concentrated on a small group of leading male contenders, while female candidate received comparatively limited visibility and a narrower range of issue framing.

Among the candidates, Përparim Rama received the highest volume of coverage, with 2,215 articles. His media presence is dominated by investment-related topics, which account for the largest share of reporting, followed by corruption, expropriation, and infrastructure projects. This pattern suggests a framing that emphasizes executive governance, urban development, and administrative decision-making. His visibility is further reinforced by sustained attention from a limited number of highly active media outlets, indicating a strong editorial focus on his candidacy.

Uran Ismaili follows closely with 1,975 articles, reflecting similarly high media salience. While investments remain the dominant theme, his coverage includes a stronger focus on gender equality and human rights. This broader thematic spread suggests a more diversified policy framing that combines local development narratives with social and rights-based concerns, positioning him as both a managerial and reform-oriented candidate.

In contrast, Hajrulla Çeku received 538 articles, placing him well behind the two leading candidates. Although investments remain the most visible topic, his coverage includes greater emphasis on corruption, unemployment, and economic pressures such as

inflation. This indicates a framing that leans more towards socio-economic challenges and systemic issues than toward large-scale capital projects.

Bekë Berisha appears in 292 articles, with coverage largely concentrated on investments and institutional matters. The relatively limited volume and narrow thematic focus suggest reduced media salience and a more episodic presence in campaign reporting, offering fewer opportunities for sustained policy positioning.

Against this backdrop, the media coverage of Besa Shahini further illustrates gendered disparities in both visibility and framing. Shahini received 306 articles, placing her at a similar level of visibility to Bekë Berisha but significantly below the three leading male candidates. While investments remain the most prominent topic in her coverage (56 articles, 10%), her media presence is more fragmented and less thematically consolidated.

Unlike the leading male candidates, whose coverage is strongly anchored in governance performance and urban development, Shahini's media coverage is more frequently focused on nationally sensitive political issues. Gender equality appears only marginally in her coverage (6 articles, 1%), despite being a policy area often associated with women candidates, while issues such as hate speech, salary increases, and air pollution receive limited attention.

This pattern suggests that Shahini's candidacy is less frequently framed through her local policy agenda or executive leadership capacity, and more often contextualized within broader political debates. Compared to male candidates with similar or even lower levels of coverage, she receives less sustained attention on core municipal governance issues, reinforcing a media environment in which women candidates struggle to secure consistent, policy-focused visibility.

Figure 2. Number of Articles on Candidates for the Mayor of Pristina

Përparim Rama	Uran Ismaili	Hajrulla Çeku	Besa Shahini	Bekë Berisha
2215	1975	538	306	292
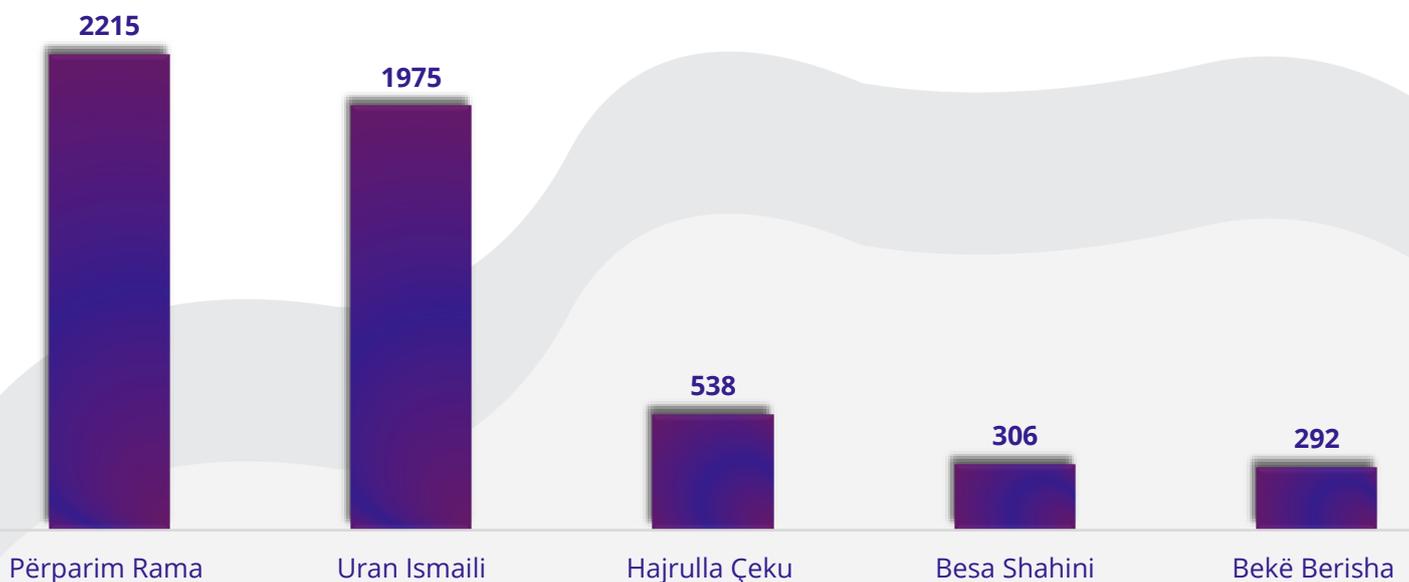
The comparison highlights a clear imbalance in media treatment. While male candidates – particularly those perceived as front-runners – benefit from extensive, thematically coherent coverage focused on investments and governance, the coverage of the sole woman candidate remains more limited, fragmented, and politicized. This disparity risks narrowing voters' exposure to women candidates' substantive policy positions and perpetuates structural inequalities in media representation within local electoral contests.

Media Coverage of Candidates for Mayor of Prizren

Media coverage of candidates in the Prizren mayoral race shows a moderate but uneven distribution of visibility, with notable differences in both the volume of coverage and the thematic framing of candidates' campaigns. Compared to Prishtina, overall coverage levels are lower; however, local and nationally oriented media outlets play a more pronounced role in shaping the narrative. Media attention is not evenly distributed and tends to privilege certain candidates and issue frames over others.

Shaqir Totaj emerges as the most visible candidate in the Prizren mayoral race, with a total of 910 articles in which he is mentioned. His media coverage is overwhelmingly centred on investments, which account for 328 references (23% of all thematic mentions). Investment-related content is diverse and locally grounded, encompassing infrastructure projects in Bazhderhane, investments in sports facilities, road construction, and improvements to rural road networks. Totaj's high visibility is driven by sustained coverage across several major national and local media outlets, indicating broad editorial attention rather than concentration in a single media source.

Among other male candidates, Artan Abrashi received a high but clearly secondary level of media attention, with 282 articles. His coverage is strongly dominated by investment-related topics, followed by expropriation, diaspora engagement, and corruption. References to gender equality and broader political issues appear only marginally. The thematic concentration and recurrence across a limited number of outlets position Abrashi as a prominent challenger in the media narrative, framed primarily through a development and governance lens.

Driton Selmanaj follows with 180 articles, reflecting moderate visibility. His media portrayal similarly centres on investments and infrastructure, with highways and capital projects featuring prominently. Additional themes such as religion, diaspora engagement, and economic recovery appear sporadically, suggesting a campaign narrative that combines development-oriented messaging with broader socio-political references, though with less consistency than observed in the coverage of Totaj or Abrashi.

In contrast, Besnik Krasniqi (75 articles) and Zafir Berisha (68 articles) received significantly less media attention. For both candidates, coverage is narrower in scope and largely dominated by investments, with occasional references to corruption, gender equality, unemployment, and national-level political issues such as Northern Kosovo. Their limited visibility suggests a more episodic media presence, offering fewer opportunities for sustained policy positioning or candidate differentiation.

While the tone of media coverage of Totaj is largely neutral or informational, the analysis indicates that the majority of hate speech associated with his candidacy originates from user comments on his own social media posts. Similarly, although portal articles do not display negative framing toward the candidate, user-generated comments on these posts frequently contain hate speech. This distinction highlights the gap between editorial media narratives and audience interaction spaces, underscoring the role of social media dynamics in amplifying hostile discourse independently of journalistic framing.

Against this backdrop, the media coverage of women candidates in Prizren reveals distinct gendered patterns in both visibility and framing. Emilija Redžepi received 250 articles, placing her among the most visible candidates in terms of volume - second only to Artan Abrashi and surpassing several male contenders. However, despite this relatively high visibility, the thematic framing of her coverage differs markedly from that of male candidates. Her media presence is overwhelmingly dominated by nationally sensitive political topics, and the Constitution of the Assembly (each accounting for 59% of coverage), followed by the Association of Serbian Municipalities, developments in Northern Kosovo, EU integration, and security-related issues involving KFOR. Investments and local economic issues appear only marginally in her coverage.

This pattern shows that Redžepi's candidacy is framed less through a local governance or municipal leadership lens and more as part of broader national and inter-ethnic political debates. As a result, her visibility does not translate into substantive exposure of a local policy agenda comparable to that of leading male candidates, despite the relatively high number of articles.

Albulena Balaj-Halimaj, by contrast, received only 75 articles, placing her at the same low level of visibility as Besnik Krasniqi and Zafir Berisha. Her coverage is fragmented and

Figure 3. Number of Articles on Candidates for the Mayor of Prizren
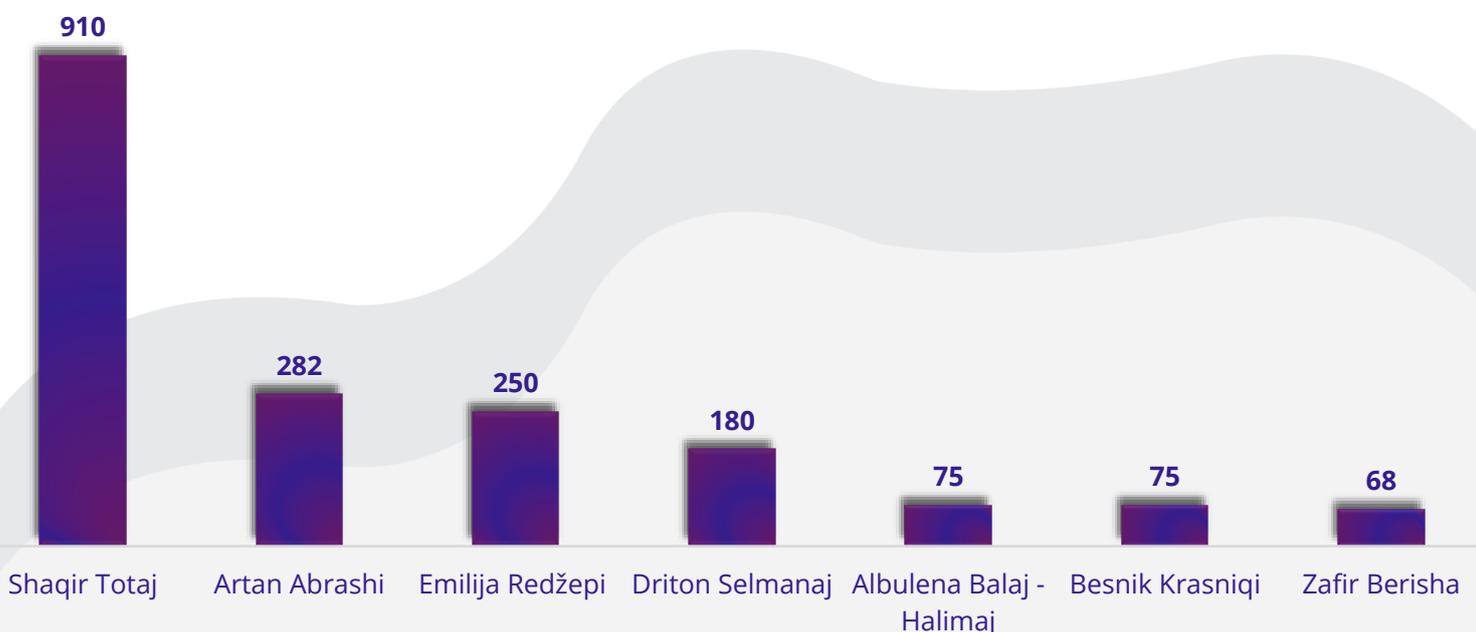
thematically dispersed, with investments appearing as the most frequent topic but accounting for only a small share of overall reporting. Issues such as diaspora engagement, corruption, gender equality, bullying, and hate speech appear sporadically, each in a very limited number of articles. Similar to Redžepi, elements of national-level politics, including Northern Kosovo and the Constitution of the Assembly, also feature in her coverage, though without a dominant narrative.

The comparison highlights a clear gendered imbalance in media treatment in the Prizren mayoral race. While male candidates, particularly front-runners, are primarily framed through investments, infrastructure, and executive governance capacity, women candidates are either strongly politicised through national and identity-related issues (as in the case of Redžepi) or marginalised through low and fragmented visibility (as in the case of Balaj-Halimaj). Topics related to gender equality, social policy, and local public services remain peripheral across all candidates and do not constitute a central element of campaign coverage.

This media environment risks limiting voters' exposure to women candidates' substantive local policy positions and reinforces structural inequalities in how political leadership is represented at the municipal level.

Figure 4. Popularity of Women Candidates on Facebook pages

Popular Facebook Fan Pages ⓘ

No.	Profile	Posts	Engagements
1	Natyra Kuçi	87	59,825
2	Besa Shahini	98	22,239
3	Xhevahire Izmaku	60	1,873
4	Vildane Latifi	49	1,701
5	Egzona Tërdevci	5	882

Most Active Websites ⓘ

1	Koha.net	1720	58
2	Klan Kosova	0	56
3	ATV Live	301	54
4	Indeks online	1390	50
5	Bota Sot	302	42
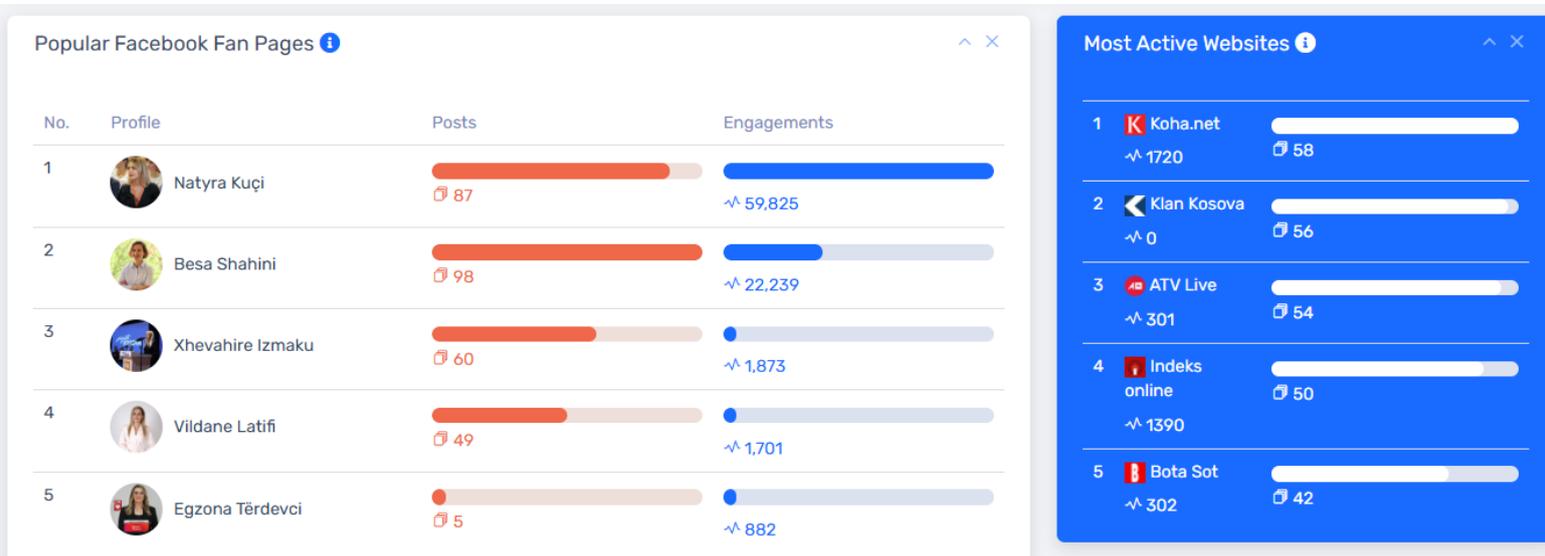
1.2 Popularity and Hate speech during the electoral campaign

Popularity of Women Candidates on Social Media

Social media data indicate notable differences in the popularity and audience engagement of women candidates during the electoral campaign. While posting activity varies across candidates, engagement levels suggest a clear hierarchy in public resonance and online reach.

Natyra Kuçi emerges as the most popular woman candidate in terms of overall engagement. With 87 posts generating 59,825 engagements, her content achieved significantly higher interaction rates than that of other women candidates. This suggests a strong ability to mobilize audiences and maintain sustained visibility, likely driven by a combination of high name recognition, polarising political positioning, and active supporter networks.

Besa Shahini ranks second in popularity, posting the most among women candidates (98 posts) and generating 22,239 engagements. Although her engagement levels are considerably lower than Kuçi's, they remain substantially higher than those of other women candidates. This pattern indicates consistent audience interest and a stable support base, reflecting her established public profile and a campaign narrative focused on social issues rather than confrontation.

A significant drop in engagement is observed among the remaining candidates. Xhevahire Izmaku (60 posts; 1,873 engagements) and Vildane Latifi (49 posts; 1,701 engagements) demonstrate moderate posting activity but limited audience interaction. This suggests that higher posting frequency alone does not necessarily translate into increased popularity or visibility without broader media amplification or political salience.

Egzona Tërdevci records the lowest levels of popularity, with only 5 posts generating 882 engagements. Her limited activity and low engagement indicate marginal presence in the online campaign space, reducing opportunities for voter outreach and message diffusion.

The data highlight a strong concentration of online popularity among a small number of women candidates. While Kuçi and Shahini succeeded in achieving substantial reach and engagement, other women candidates remained largely peripheral in the digital campaign. These disparities reflect broader structural inequalities in visibility, access to networks, and media amplification, reinforcing the challenges faced by women candidates – particularly those with lower public recognition – in leveraging social media as an effective campaign tool.

Hate Speech Targeting Women Candidates

The monitoring data indicate that women candidates were exposed to hate speech at varying levels, with significant differences in both the absolute number of hateful comments and their proportional share relative to total engagement.

Natyra Kuçi received the highest number of hate speech comments among women candidates (117 comments). However, these constitute only 2% of the total 5,175 comments across 100 social media posts, suggesting that while exposure is high in absolute terms, the proportion of hate speech remains comparatively limited relative to overall engagement.

By contrast, Emilija Redžepi recorded 17 hate speech comments, representing 5% of total comments across just 6 posts. This indicates a higher concentration of hate speech per post, pointing to more intense targeting despite lower overall visibility.

Other women candidates – such as Egzona Tërdevci (8 comments; 2%), Jona Arifi (2 comments; 4%), and Albulena Balaj-Halimaj (3 comments; 1%) – experienced lower levels of hate speech, both in absolute and proportional terms.

Notably, Besa Shahini, despite very high visibility (114 posts and 1,521 comments), recorded only one hate speech comment, indicating minimal hostile targeting relative to exposure.

In addition, Shahini's electoral campaign was largely non-polarising and focused on social issues rather than confrontational or identity-based narratives. Such a campaign profile may have reduced incentives for hostile mobilisation online, as polarisation is often a key driver of hate speech and coordinated attacks.

A further contributing factor may be Shahini's perceived position within the electoral race. Unlike leading male contenders, she was not widely framed as a direct threat to the electoral prospects of the main front-runners. As a result, her candidacy may have attracted less strategic or instrumental hostility from partisan networks seeking to

Figure 5. Top Candidates with Most Hate Speech Comments (13 September to 10 October 2025)

Top Politicans With Most Hate Speech Comments ⓘ

Comments	Hate Speech	Hate Speech %
8,845	157	2%

Search:

Competitors	Hate Speech Comments	Hate Speech %	Comments	Social Posts
Natyra Kuçi — Natyra Kuçi (115/4021), Deçani (2/104)	117	3	4,626	89
Emilija Redžepi — Kallxo.com (14/49), Welcome to prizren (3/292)	17	5	373	6
Arta Vokshi Nallbani — Info Peja (5/535), Peja City (3/234), Peja në Fokus (1/187)	9	1	1,049	56
Egzona Tërdevci — Albin Kurti (4/39), Fitore Pacolli (3/27), Lëvizja Vetëvendosje – Drenas (1/305)	8	2	375	34
Albulena Balaj - Halimaj — Welcome to prizren (3/292)	5	1	295	14

undermine competing candidates. Taken together, these factors suggest that both campaign style and perceived electoral competitiveness play an important role in shaping exposure to online hate, alongside gender.

Hate Speech in Monitored Municipal Races

Across monitored municipalities, hate speech levels are substantially higher in absolute terms, particularly in highly competitive mayoral races with strong online engagement.

In Prishtina, all leading candidates experienced very high volumes of hate speech, reflecting the intensity of the race.

- *Përparim Rama recorded 2,342 hate speech comments (7%) out of 31,788 comments.*

- *Hajrulla Çeku followed with 1,132 comments (7%), while*

- *Uran Ismaili registered 488 comments (4%).*

In South Mitrovica, Faton Peci stands out with 2,122 hate speech comments, accounting for 9% of all comments – the highest proportional share among high-visibility candidates – indicating a particularly hostile online environment. Arian Tahiri shows a much lower proportional rate (2%), despite significant engagement.

In Gjakova, hate speech levels are moderate but consistent across leading candidates, with Ardian Gjini and Ardian Gola each recording 6% of comments as hate speech, suggesting a relatively normalised level of hostile discourse.

In Prizren, patterns are mixed: while candidates such as Artan Abrashi experience a higher share (5%), others, despite large engagement, record much lower rates, pointing to candidate-specific targeting rather than municipality-wide trends.

In North Mitrovica, absolute numbers are lower, but proportional intensity can be high. Milan Radojevic recorded 16% hate speech, the highest percentage in the dataset, despite limited overall engagement. This highlights a highly polarised and hostile digital environment, even with relatively small audiences.

Taken together, the findings show that hate speech is strongly correlated with political salience and polarisation, rather than solely with volume of online activity. While high-profile races generate more hate speech in absolute terms, smaller or more polarised contexts can produce significantly higher proportional levels, intensifying the impact on candidates.

1.3 Conclusions

The findings reveal that media coverage of women mayoral candidates in the 2025 local elections is uneven, highly politicised and structurally constrained, with visibility shaped more by national political dynamics and polarising themes than by candidates' local agendas or governance capacities. Across municipalities, women candidates are

frequently framed through broader political conflicts - such as security, inter-ethnic relations or nationally salient issues - rather than through substantive discussion of municipal leadership, policy proposals or service delivery. This pattern risks distorting voter perceptions and limiting informed electoral choice by filtering women's political participation through lenses that are often detached from local governance realities.

Media environments across the analysed municipalities exhibit varying but consistent forms of polarisation and concentration of attention, typically favouring one or two leading candidates while marginalising others. In highly visible races such as Prishtina and South Mitrovica, media narratives are dominated by investments, security or national politics, narrowing the scope of debate and reducing space for alternative policy perspectives. In other contexts, such as Prizren, Gjakova, North Mitrovica and Gracanica, coverage remains similarly constrained - either centred on a single candidate or limited to a narrow set of themes - thereby restricting pluralism and suppressing discussion of social policy, public services and long-term municipal planning.

The findings also demonstrate that hate speech targeting women candidates does not correlate directly with visibility. In several cases, women with lower media exposure experienced a disproportionately high share of hostile or discriminatory content, suggesting deliberate targeting rather than incidental by-products of attention. This underscores the limitations of visibility-based assessments and highlights the need for candidate-level, gender-sensitive monitoring that captures targeted hostility even in low-volume media environments. Taken together, the findings point to structural biases in media coverage that shape both political visibility and vulnerability, with significant implications for gender equality, media pluralism and the quality of local democratic competition.

In addition to differences in exposure levels, the findings reveal gendered patterns in the nature of hate speech targeting candidates. Women candidates were more frequently exposed to personalised and identity-based forms of hostility, including gendered insults, delegitimisation of competence, and attacks related to appearance, morality, or perceived social roles. Such expressions, while not always numerous in absolute terms, tend to be more targeted and discriminatory in character, reinforcing structural stereotypes about women's participation in politics. By contrast, hate speech directed at male candidates was predominantly political in nature, focusing on party affiliation, policy positions, corruption allegations, or performance in office, and was more often embedded in broader partisan or ideological contestation rather than personal identity.

This distinction is significant, as gender-based hate speech has a qualitatively different impact than general political hostility. While political attacks are an expected feature of competitive electoral environments, gendered and identity-driven abuse functions to question women's legitimacy as political actors and may have a stronger deterrent effect on political participation. The findings therefore suggest that women candidates are not only exposed to different levels of hostility, but also to different types of hate speech, underscoring the need for monitoring frameworks and policy responses that distinguish between political criticism and gender-based abuse.

2. Manual monitoring of political actors' online presence

This section presents the results of manual monitoring of political party and candidate accounts on selected digital platforms during the electoral campaign period. The monitoring process focused on systematically tracking and documenting content published by political actors, with particular attention to the tone, language, and visual elements used in online communication. The data reflect daily observations recorded throughout the campaign and capture instances where political messaging intersected with gender-related narratives.

The findings are based on verified content collected from official party and candidate accounts and organised through municipality-specific dashboards. These dashboards document identified incidents of discriminatory, derogatory, or sexist content, including gendered hate speech and harmful stereotypes targeting women, and are supported by archived screenshots indicating the date, time, source, and platform. The results presented in this section aim to describe the scope, frequency, and distribution of observed content across platforms, without drawing conclusions or evaluative judgments at this stage. Interpretation and contextual analysis of these findings are addressed in the subsequent section.

The data indicate an uneven distribution of identified cases of discriminatory, sexist, or gender-stereotypical content across the monitored municipalities. In total, 117 cases were

Figure 6. Identification of cases at the municipal level

32	12	54	7	12	0
Prishtina	Gjakova	Prizren	South Mitrovica	North Mitrovica	Gracanica
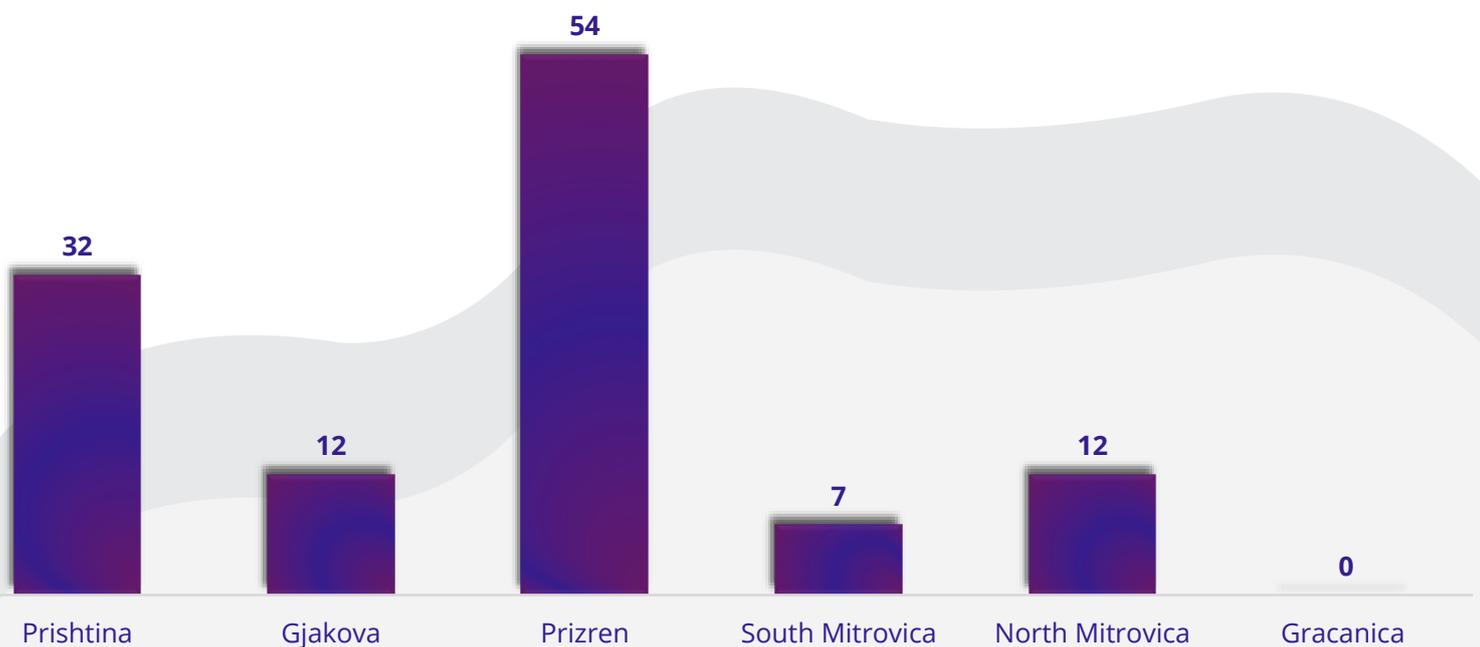
recorded, with notable differences in both intensity and geographic concentration.Prizren accounts for the highest number of identified cases (54 cases), representing nearly half of all recorded incidents. This suggests a higher level of digital campaign activity, as well as a more pronounced presence of problematic content related to gendered language and stereotypes targeting women.

Prishtina, as the main political and media centre, ranks second with 32 cases. This is consistent with the higher volume of political communication and public engagement on digital platforms, where visibility and interaction tend to be more intense.

Gjakova and North Mitrovica each recorded 12 cases, indicating a moderate presence of such content. In contrast, South Mitrovica registered a lower number (7 cases), which may reflect more limited online activity by candidates or comparatively more restrained communication practices.

Notably, Gracanica recorded no identified cases during the monitoring period. This may point either to a low level of digital campaign activity or to the absence of content meeting the identification criteria set out in the monitoring methodology.

The temporal distribution of reported violations indicates that harmful online behaviour was not confined to the official campaign period, but was already present and pronounced in the weeks leading up to it. The highest share of violations was recorded two weeks prior to the official start of the election campaign, accounting for 37% of all reported cases. This suggests that a substantial portion of problematic content emerged during the pre-campaign phase, when political messaging and positioning were already intensifying, but formal campaign regulations may have been less actively enforced.

Figure 7. Reported violations by time period

37%	11%	14%	9%	12%	17%
Two weeks prior to election campaign	One week prior to election campaign	First week of electionn campaign	Second week of electionn campaign	Third week of electionn campaign	Last week of electionn campaign
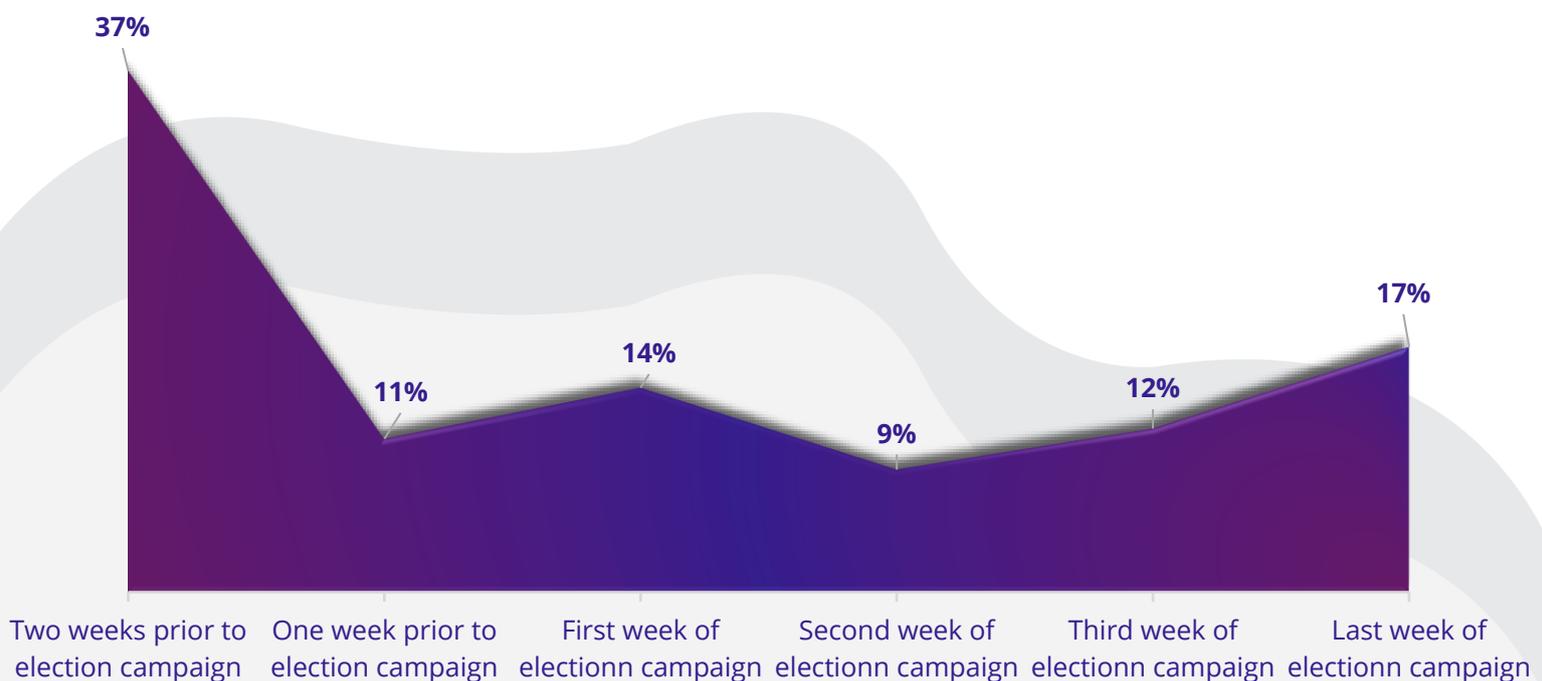
During the week immediately preceding the campaign, reported violations decreased significantly to 11%, indicating a temporary decline in recorded incidents. Once the campaign officially began, violations fluctuated across the campaign timeline rather than following a linear trend. The first week of the campaign accounted for 14% of cases, followed by a decrease in the second week (9%), and a subsequent increase in the third week (12%).

The final week of the election campaign saw a renewed rise in violations, representing 17% of the total. This increase likely reflects heightened political competition, intensified messaging, and greater emotional mobilisation as election day approached.

The distribution of identified violations across political parties reveals a highly uneven pattern in the occurrence of discriminatory, sexist, or gender-stereotypical content during the monitoring period. In total, 117 cases were identified.

Vetëvendosje (VV) accounts for by far the largest share of identified cases, with 77 incidents, representing approximately 65.8% of all recorded violations. This pronounced concentration indicates that nearly two-thirds of the monitored gender-related violations were associated with VV-affiliated party or candidate accounts.

The category "Other" political actors accounts for 18 cases, corresponding to 15.4% of the total. This suggests that while the majority of incidents are linked to major political actors, a notable portion also originates from smaller parties, independent candidates, or actors not categorised under the main parties.

Figure 8. Political parties with the highest number of violations
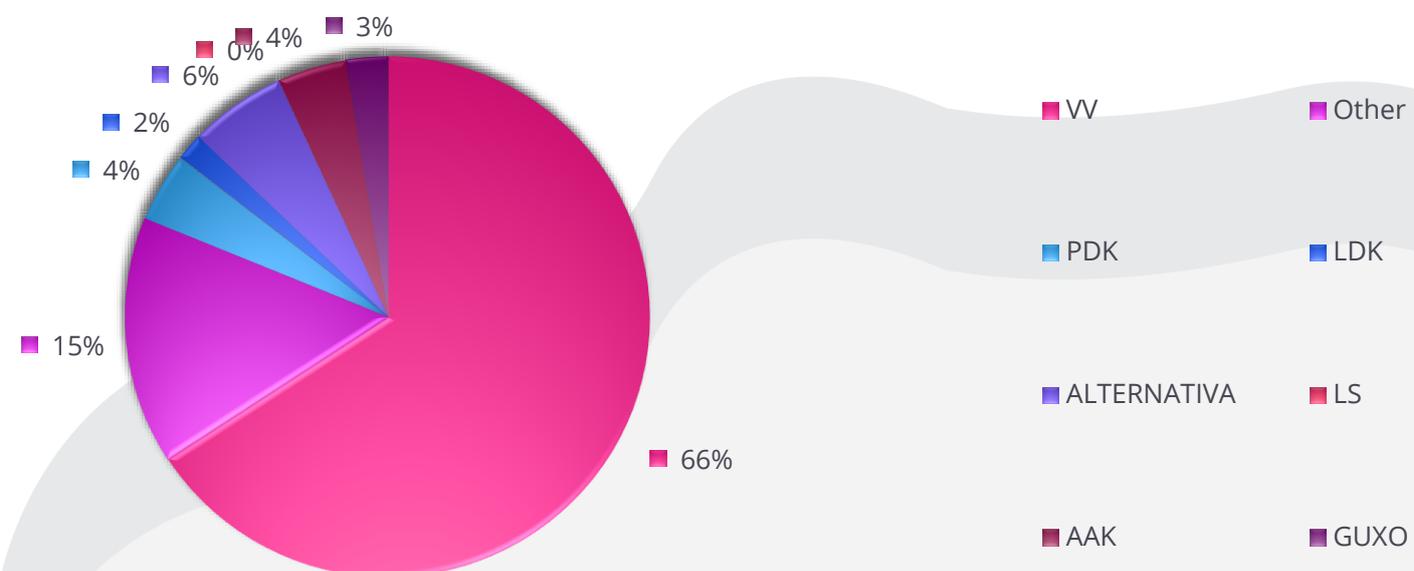
Alternativa recorded 7 cases (6.0%), while both Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) and Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) registered 5 cases each, representing 4.3% per party. Guxo accounted for 3 cases (2.6%), whereas Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) recorded 2 cases, or 1.7% of the total.

The distribution of cases by targeted political party highlights a concentration of abusive or discriminatory content directed at a limited number of political actors. Out of a total of 117 identified cases, the targeting is unevenly distributed across parties and other political actors.

The largest share of cases falls under the "Other" category, with 33 cases, accounting for approximately 28.2% of the total. This indicates that a substantial portion of abusive content targeted political figures or actors outside the main parliamentary parties, including smaller parties, independent candidates, or non-affiliated actors.

Among the main political parties, Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) was the most frequently targeted, with 31 cases, representing 26.5% of all identified cases. This is followed by Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) with 17 cases (14.5%) and Vetëvendosje (VV) with 15 cases (12.8%).

Lower levels of targeting were recorded for Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) (3 cases; 2.6%), Srpska Lista (2 cases; 1.7%), and Guxo (1 case; 0.9%). Alternativa was not targeted in any of the identified cases.

In addition, 15 cases (12.8%) involved targets outside political parties, such as public figures or actors not formally affiliated with a political organisation.

Figure 9. Most targeted political parties
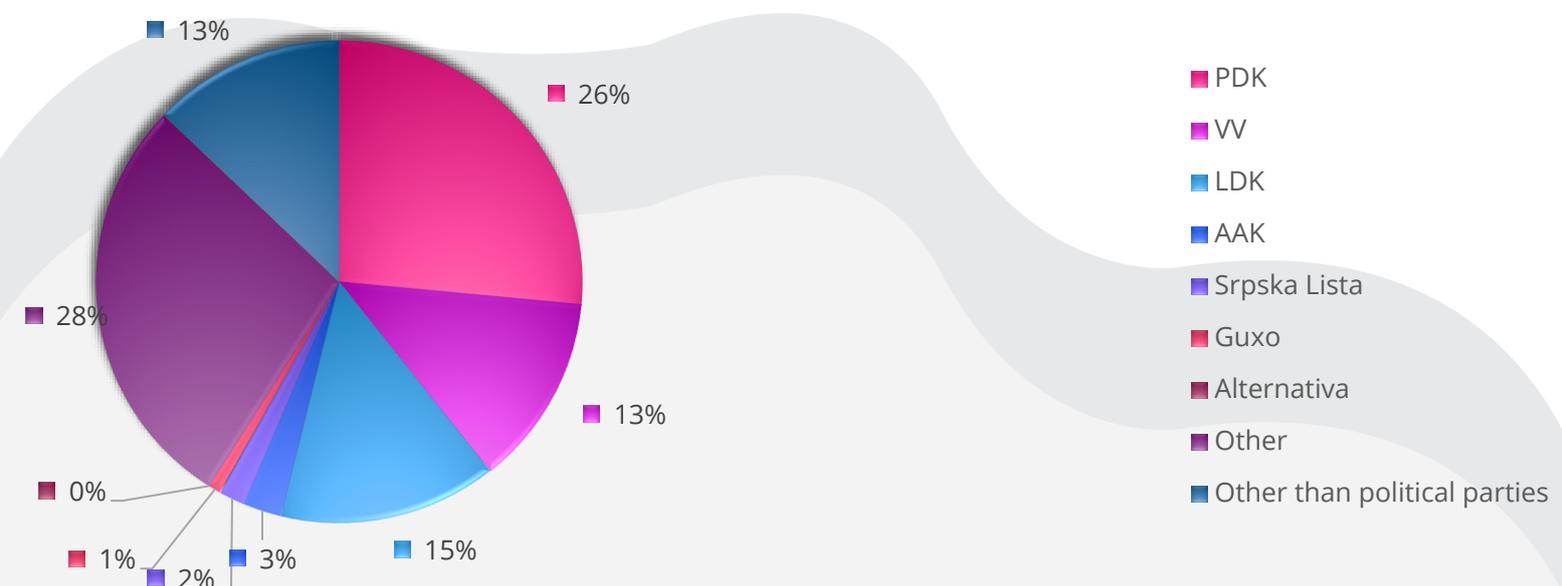
The distribution of registered violations across social media platforms demonstrates a strong concentration on a single platform, with significantly lower incidence elsewhere. Out of a total of 117 identified cases, the overwhelming majority were recorded on Facebook, which accounts for 110 cases, or approximately 94% of all identified violations.

This dominance reflects Facebook's role as the primary platform for political campaigning and public interaction during the electoral period. The platform's high user engagement, extensive use by political parties and candidates, and interactive comment sections create greater exposure to gendered language, discriminatory expressions, and harmful stereotypes.

In contrast, TikTok recorded 6 cases (around 5% of the total). While TikTok is increasingly influential, particularly among younger audiences, the lower number of identified violations may be linked to differences in content format, moderation practices, or campaign strategies that rely more on short-form video rather than direct textual interaction.

Only 1 case (less than 1%) was identified on Instagram, suggesting a limited presence of content meeting the monitoring criteria, potentially due to the platform's more curated and visual-oriented communication style.

Notably, no violations were recorded on X (formerly Twitter) during the monitoring period. This may indicate lower levels of campaign-related activity by monitored actors on the platform or differences in audience engagement and content dynamics within the Kosovo electoral context.

Figure 10. Proportion of violations by social media platform

94%   1%   0%   5%

Facebook   Instagram   X   Tiktok
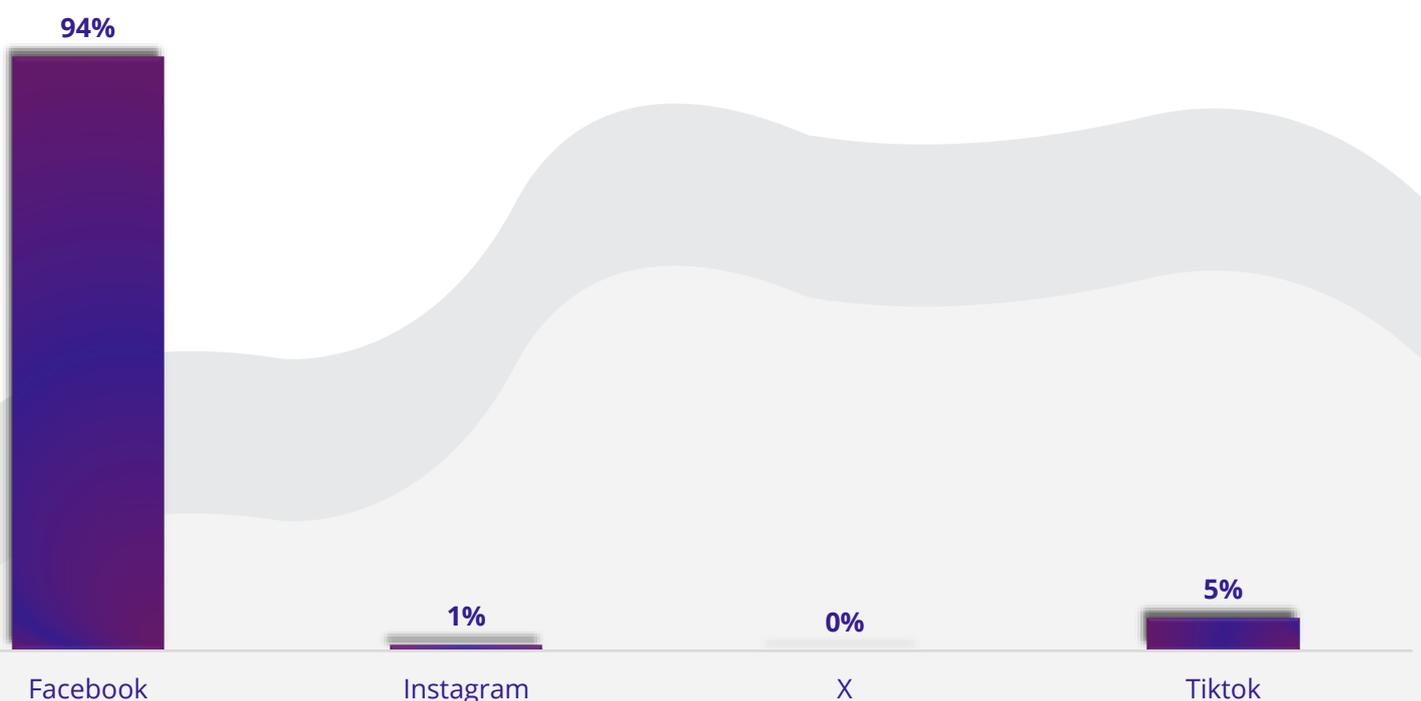
The analysis of online posts published by candidates for municipal assemblies and mayoral positions across the six monitored municipalities reveals a clear predominance of hate speech as the most common form of violation. Out of a total of 117 identified cases, hate speech accounts for 82 cases (70.1%), indicating that discriminatory and hostile language is the primary manifestation of harmful online political communication during the campaign period.

Personal bullying and harassment represent the second most frequent category, with 18 cases (15.4%). These cases typically involve direct attacks on individuals, contributing to a toxic online environment and undermining respectful political debate.

Disinformation was identified in 10 cases (8.5%), suggesting that while false or misleading content is present, it is less prevalent than overtly hostile language. Nevertheless, even limited instances of disinformation may have a disproportionate impact on voter perceptions and trust in the electoral process.

Only 0.9% involved a call for violence, indicating that explicit incitement to physical harm is rare within the monitored content. However, the presence of any such case remains a serious concern due to its potential to escalate tensions and legitimise aggressive behaviour.

The "other" category, comprising 6 cases (5.1%), includes violations that do not fall neatly within the main classifications but still contravene standards of ethical and inclusive political communication.

Figure 11. Proportion of reported violations by type of violation

- Personal bullying/harassment — 15%
- Hate speech — 70%
- Disinformation — 9%
- Calls for violence — 1%
- Other — 5%
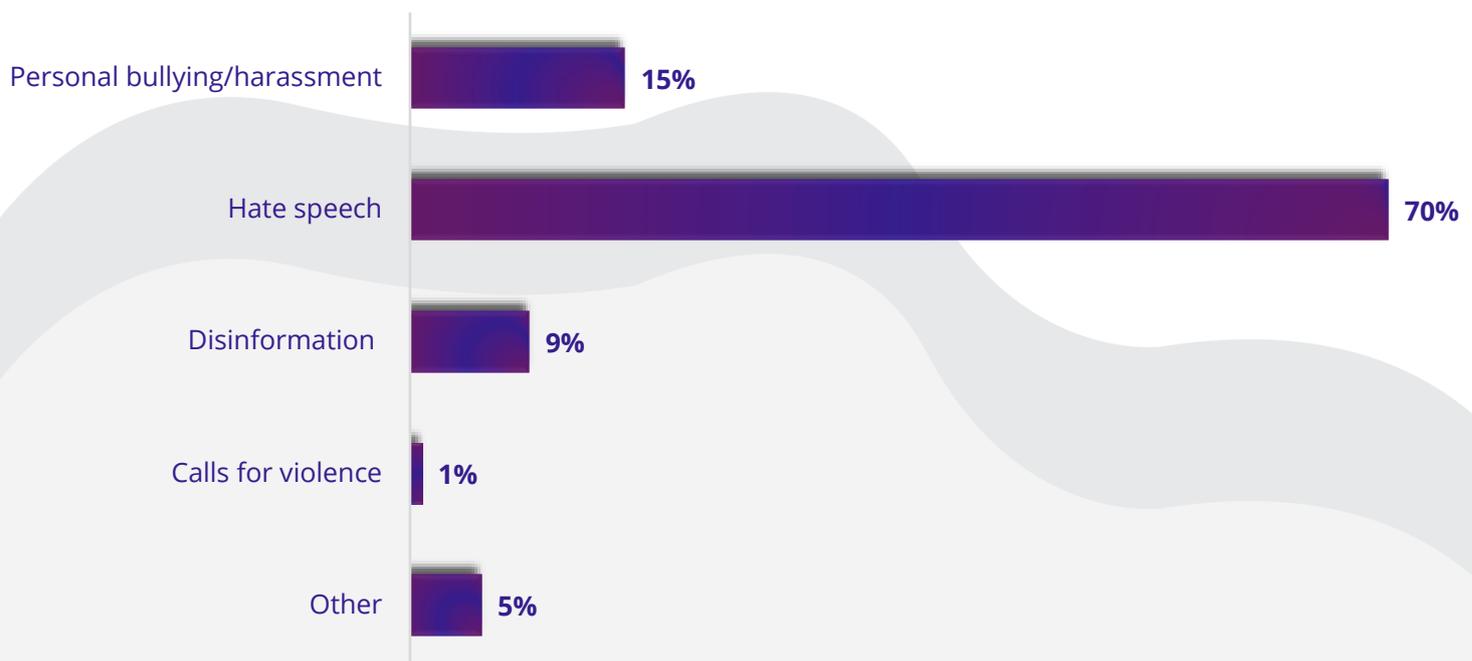
2.1 Conclusions

The findings indicate that online violations and gender-based discriminatory content in political communication are shaped by both electoral dynamics and platform-specific conditions, rather than occurring randomly or evenly across time, space and actors. Online hostility tends to intensify during periods of heightened political tension, particularly in the pre-campaign phase and the final days of electoral contests, underscoring the need to extend monitoring and preventive measures beyond the formal campaign period. These temporal patterns suggest that early warning and rapid response mechanisms are critical to mitigating harm before violations escalate.

The analysis further shows that gender-based discriminatory content is unevenly distributed, concentrating in municipalities with higher levels of political activity and digital engagement, as well as around highly visible or politically salient actors. While a majority of identified cases targeted a limited number of political actors and parties, these patterns must be interpreted in relation to overall campaign intensity, online presence and content volume. Absolute numbers alone do not capture the full picture and require qualitative assessment to understand the nature, severity and intent of violations.

Platform analysis highlights Facebook as the primary locus of gender-based discriminatory and sexist political content, confirming its central role in shaping electoral discourse and public perception. This finding points to the importance of prioritising Facebook-focused monitoring and mitigation efforts, while maintaining vigilance over emerging trends on other platforms, particularly TikTok.

Finally, the data suggest that harmful online conduct is more commonly expressed through normalised hostile and discriminatory rhetoric than through extreme incitement or coordinated disinformation. Addressing such everyday forms of abuse is therefore essential, as their cumulative impact contributes to the normalisation of exclusionary political discourse and poses long-term risks to inclusive participation and democratic quality.

3. Women's Experiences at the National Level

To complement the quantitative monitoring of online hate speech, this section presents findings from in-depth interviews with eight women candidates in the 2025 national elections. The interviews provide a qualitative lens through which to understand how women in politics experience online abuse and how it shapes their participation, visibility, and resilience during electoral campaigns.

The interviews were structured around five core thematic areas: (i) emotional and personal impact, exploring how hate speech affected candidates' wellbeing, families, and motivation; (ii) support mechanisms, including the role of political parties, colleagues, families, and reporting tools; (iii) political and campaign-related impact, assessing whether online abuse influenced electoral outcomes, campaign strategies, or public engagement; (iv) gender-based targeting, focusing on sexist narratives, personal attacks, and issue-based harassment linked to women's advocacy; and (v) reflections and recommendations, capturing candidates' perspectives on needed protective measures and institutional responses.

Together, these findings translate monitoring data into lived experiences, highlighting both individual coping strategies and broader structural gaps that continue to limit women's equal participation in political life.

3.1 Emotional and personal impact

Cumulative emotional and psychological pressure

Interviewees consistently described online hate speech as a persistent and cumulative form of pressure, rather than a series of isolated incidents. This reflects the architecture of digital platforms, where abusive content is easily amplified, reproduced, and sustained over time. While political hostility has long been part of electoral competition, candidates emphasised that digitalisation has transformed hate speech into a scalable and continuous mechanism of VAWP, capable of reaching wide audiences instantly and remaining accessible long after the initial attack. The result is prolonged emotional strain, characterised by stress, emotional exhaustion, and diminished capacity during campaign periods.

"Despite everything, my message is not to give up. Politics needs women, and change only happens when women stay engaged, even when the cost is high."

Intrusion into private and family life

A defining characteristic of the harm described is the extension of abuse into candidates' private and family spheres. Interviewees reported that attacks frequently targeted parents,

children, and partners, imposing emotional distress not only on the candidates themselves but also on those closest to them. This spillover is a distinctly gendered tactic, exploiting social expectations around women's caregiving roles and amplifying guilt, fear and responsibility. For many candidates, concern for family well-being intensified the emotional impact more than attacks directed at them personally.

Deterrence and disciplining effects on women's participation

Beyond direct emotional harm, candidates identified deterrence as one of the most damaging consequences of online hate speech. Interviewees repeatedly stressed that the primary harm lies in its impact on other women and girls, particularly those considering entering politics for the first time. Several reported concrete difficulties in recruiting women candidates, especially at the local level, citing fear of public exposure, misogynistic attacks and reputational damage. In this sense, online hate speech functions as a disciplining mechanism, signalling that political participation carries a high personal and social cost for women.

> *"Yes, it is difficult, and yes, there are moments when you question whether it is worth it – but looking back, every challenge was worth facing."*

Withdrawal pressures and emotional exhaustion

The interviews reveal that online hate speech frequently generates withdrawal pressures, even when candidates ultimately remain politically active. Importantly, the idea of withdrawal was often raised by family members rather than by the candidates themselves, reflecting the indirect coercive power of VAWP. Periods of intensified abuse, particularly when combined with threats, intimidation, disinformation or mainstream media amplification, placed families under significant emotional strain, sometimes leading to explicit requests that candidates consider withdrawing for their own safety.

A smaller number of interviewees reported seriously contemplating withdrawal following sustained exposure to abuse, including threats involving personal addresses, offline harassment, and coordinated disinformation campaigns. These experiences illustrate how online hate speech can cross into coercive pressure, blurring the boundary between political hostility and political violence, and aligning with a central objective of VAWP: the silencing or removal of women from political space.

Resilience, uneven capacity, and normalisation of harm

While many candidates described their continued engagement as an act of resistance, this resilience should not be interpreted as an absence of harm. Interviewees consistently cautioned that their ability to cope reflects unequal capacities shaped by political experience, institutional position, and access to family or party support. Younger women, first-time candidates, and those without strong support structures were identified as particularly vulnerable. Some candidates described emotional distancing or desensitisation as coping strategies, which may enable individual survival but risk normalising VAWP as an inevitable feature of political life.

Impact on political discourse and democratic quality

Interviewees also linked online hate speech to a broader deterioration of political discourse. By shifting debate from policies and accountability to personal attacks, sexist narratives and moral stigmatisation, VAWP undermines substantive democratic deliberation and discourages political renewal. Several candidates described coordinated campaigns combining online abuse with disinformation, nationalist framing and, in some cases, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, further increasing the scale and sophistication of attacks.

3.2 Support mechanisms

Family support as a key resilience mechanism

A common and nearly universal finding across the interviews is the central role of family support as the primary source of emotional and psychological resilience. For most candidates, partners, parents and close relatives functioned as a stabilising force and a prerequisite for sustaining political engagement, particularly during periods of intense pressure, public attacks or threats. Several interviewees stated explicitly that without family support, their political careers would not have been possible, framing the family not merely as an emotional network but as a protective buffer against political violence.

> *"Do not let the brutality of language discourage you. That language is designed to push women out. Staying is already part of the change."*

At the same time, the interviews highlight a paradox: while family support is essential, the exposure of non-public family members – especially parents and children – represents one of the most painful dimensions of VAWP. Attacks directed at family members significantly increase emotional strain and feelings of guilt, reinforcing the gendered nature of political violence by exploiting women's perceived responsibility for family wellbeing.

Party support: selective, inconsistent, and often insufficient

In contrast to family support, support from political parties emerges as fragmented and inconsistent. Only a small number of interviewees reported receiving clear, institutional backing, while most described individual support from certain colleagues, silence from party structures, or deliberate hesitation to engage due to perceived political costs.

An important analytical pattern is that parties are more likely to react when attacks are direct, personal and clearly identifiable, but tend to avoid engagement when attacks are linked to sensitive social or moral issues such as sexual education, LGBTI+ rights or gender equality. In such cases, women candidates are often left politically isolated, with attacks reframed as "public opinion" or "social debate", effectively stripping them of their gender-based violence dimension. In some instances, this absence of solidarity goes further, with party figures publicly positioning themselves against the targeted candidate, reinforcing stigma and portraying her as "anti-family", "anti-tradition" or "outside accepted norms".

Solidarity among women as an informal support mechanism

A particularly significant finding concerns the role of horizontal solidarity among women politicians, which often compensates for the lack of formal mechanisms. Several interviewees described their most meaningful support as coming from other women who had experienced similar attacks, through informal conversations, personal outreach and the sharing of coping strategies.

This solidarity provides emotional support, validates experiences of violence and helps women develop psychological self-management strategies. However, it remains informal, personalised and dependent on individual networks. As such, it cannot guarantee systematic protection or replace institutional responsibility, and risks overburdening women with supporting one another in the absence of formal safeguards.

Reporting abuse: selective and conditional use of formal mechanisms

The interviews indicate that women candidates engage with formal reporting mechanisms selectively and conditionally. A clear distinction is made between insults and hate speech – which are often normalised, ignored or managed through blocking – and serious threats, which are more likely to result in criminal complaints or civil lawsuits.

Commonly used tools include reporting and blocking on social media platforms, filing criminal complaints with the police, initiating defamation or hate-speech lawsuits, and submitting complaints to media regulatory bodies. In some cases, civil-society platforms are also used. A critical finding, however, is that judicial and institutional responses are frequently slow, inconsistent or selective, generating frustration and mistrust. Several interviewees reported that action was taken only after public pressure or persistent personal follow-up, while other cases were closed without thorough assessment, even when credible indications of manipulation or defamation existed.

Normalisation of violence and self-management as survival strategies

Some interviewees reported developing personal coping and emotional distancing strategies over time, interpreting online abuse as a reflection of perpetrators' ignorance or lack of education. While these strategies enable continued political engagement, they also contribute to the normalisation of violence as an inevitable cost of political participation. This risks entrenching VAWP at a structural level, shifting responsibility for managing harm from institutions to individual women.

"Be prepared, educate yourself, and believe in your values. Enter politics with knowledge, courage and clarity about why you are there."

3.3 Political and campaign-related impact

Electoral impact of hate speech

The interviews reveal that the electoral impact of hate speech on women candidates is mixed and context-dependent, with no single pattern applying across all cases. Some candidates perceive hate speech as having caused relative electoral harm, particularly where their vote share stagnated despite increased visibility or senior political roles. In these cases, hate campaigns are interpreted as deliberate strategies aimed at diminishing political credibility, trivialising professional performance and mobilising socially sensitive narratives to undermine public trust. Candidates emphasise that such impacts are often visible only in comparison with broader party growth, rather than in absolute vote loss.

Conversely, several respondents report significant increases in electoral support, including substantial growth compared to previous elections. These candidates reject the notion that hate speech reduced their electoral appeal and instead attribute their results to consistency, competence and long-term voter trust. Nonetheless, even among those who experienced electoral gains, there is recognition that the true effect of hate speech cannot be fully measured. Candidates acknowledge the possibility that some voters may have been discouraged by hostile discourse, while others were mobilised through empathy or solidarity. This underlines that electoral growth does not negate the presence of harm, but may conceal countervailing effects operating simultaneously.

Impact on campaign strategy and conduct

In terms of campaign strategy, most candidates did not report fundamental changes to political messaging or positioning. However, the interviews highlight behavioural and operational adjustments designed to manage the pressures created by hate speech. A common strategy involved limiting exposure to online commentary, particularly during highly polarised periods, in order to protect emotional well-being and sustain campaigning capacity. This form of self-regulation is framed not as avoidance, but as a practical necessity to maintain focus and effectiveness.

Several candidates also described the need for active moderation of online spaces, including removing offensive comments, blocking or reporting abusive accounts and relying on campaign teams to manage digital platforms. These practices indicate that hate speech introduces an additional, often invisible workload for candidates and their teams. Some respondents further noted that sustained attacks created pressure to project increased confidence and resilience in public appearances, not as a shift in substance but as a means of countering narratives of weakness or vulnerability. Across interviews, a clear distinction was drawn between legitimate political criticism, which was generally accepted, and defamatory or false personal allegations, which were viewed as requiring correction to prevent lasting reputational harm.

> *"Do not compromise your personal or professional integrity to fit expectations. Politics needs authenticity, not obedience."*

Visibility and media attention

Most respondents expressed scepticism toward the idea that attention generated by hate speech could be electorally beneficial. Particularly when attacks were linked to sensitive issues such as children, education or moral values, candidates argued that negative publicity does not translate into meaningful voter outreach. Many explicitly rejected victimisation as a campaign tool and were unwilling to leverage hostile attention to attract support from audiences that normalise hateful discourse.

One respondent, however, articulated a more nuanced perspective, suggesting that increased visibility can, in certain circumstances, be redirected toward demonstrating competence and political maturity. In this view, the effect of attention depends on a candidate's capacity to reframe the narrative and move beyond the emotional shock of the attack. This perspective remains an exception rather than the norm, and it highlights how uneven access to media skills, institutional support and public platforms can shape whether visibility becomes a liability or an asset.

Gendered narratives and thematic targeting

The interviews consistently indicate that the impact of hate speech is shaped by thematic targeting and gendered framing, rather than volume alone. Attacks related to religion, morality, sexuality education or LGBTI+ rights were described as particularly potent, as they mobilise broader social anxieties and can isolate candidates politically. Such framing often shifts debate away from policy performance toward identity-based delegitimization.

Several candidates also emphasised the persistence of misogynistic narratives that undermine women's political agency. These include portrayals of women as dependent on male political figures, as manipulative or morally suspect, or as figures whose appearance is more relevant than their competence. Respondents widely perceived these patterns as intensifying over time, reinforcing structural barriers to women's political participation and limiting the space in which women can be evaluated on professional merit alone.

3.4 Gender-based targeting

Online engagement and exposure to targeting

Women candidates largely describe their online engagement as deliberate, controlled and policy-focused, aimed at presenting institutional work, political positions and citizen engagement rather than engaging in confrontation. Many people consciously avoid responding to comments or engaging in online disputes, preferring positive messaging, direct communication through private messages, or a stronger emphasis on offline campaigning. Reduced activity is sometimes linked to personal circumstances, but also reflects strategic choices to manage hostility and protect capacity.

Importantly, the findings show that gender-based targeting is not contingent on aggressive online behaviour. Candidates who pursued restrained and constructive communication styles were still exposed to gendered attacks, suggesting that online presence itself – rather than its tone – can be sufficient to trigger hostility toward women in public roles.

Tone of online discourse and its gendered nature

Across interviews, the tone of online discourse about women in politics is described as markedly more hostile and degrading than that directed at men. Respondents consistently refer to sexist, vulgar and denigrating language, as well as polarised reactions that oscillate between outright abuse and exaggerated praise. This dynamic is experienced as demotivating and exclusionary, particularly for younger women and professionals considering political engagement.

"The price is high, but so is the impact. Women bring ideas, energy and leadership that politics cannot afford to lose."

Several candidates note that attacks are often organised and amplified, including through fake accounts and coordinated messaging, reinforcing the perception that gendered hostility is not merely spontaneous but can be strategically mobilised. The resulting environment is described as toxic and emotionally exhausting, shrinking the space for substantive political debate and meaningful engagement.

Drivers of targeting: political activity intersecting with gender

While some candidates attribute attacks primarily to their political work, institutional roles or the interests they have challenged, most acknowledge that gender acts as a multiplier. Women are widely perceived as "easier targets", and similar political actions tend to provoke more personalised and aggressive reactions when undertaken by women than by men.

Several respondents emphasise that challenging entrenched interests – through anti-corruption measures, legislative reform, oversight of public institutions or sensitive socio-economic policies – correlates with intensified attacks. However, these attacks frequently adopt gendered forms, drawing on patriarchal norms and social expectations. Even candidates who do not frame gender as the main driver of attacks recognise that it significantly shapes how hostility is expressed and legitimised.

Content of attacks: appearance, family and competence

A strikingly consistent finding is that gender-based targeting focuses on three interlinked domains: physical appearance, family life and professional competence. Many candidates report comments on clothing, body or facial expressions, often amplified by selective media imagery. Family-related attacks include rumours and insinuations about marital status, relationships or domestic roles, calibrated to exploit social judgement and stigma, particularly outside urban centres.

Professional competence is also frequently undermined through dismissive claims that women "do not know enough" or lack authority, even in contexts where criticism is unsupported by substantive arguments. These forms of targeting are widely understood by respondents as gendered, reflecting persistent stereotypes about women's suitability for leadership and decision-making roles.

Broader effects on participation and democratic space

Beyond individual harm, the interviews highlight wider deterrent effects. The expectation of gender-based attacks leads many women to self-censor, limit their online presence, or avoid specific platforms altogether. Candidates describe developing coping strategies - moderation, emotional distancing, or desensitisation – not as solutions, but as survival mechanisms within a hostile environment.

"Politics is challenging because it disrupts old interests. The stronger your positions, the stronger the reactions will be. This means you are doing something right."

Several respondents stress that this climate discourages capable women from entering politics and narrows the quality of public debate. Rather than engaging with policy and performance, online discourse frequently shifts toward personal degradation, reinforcing structural barriers to women's equal political participation.

3.5 Women's recommendations and reflections

Strengthening legal protection and institutional enforcement

A dominant recommendation across interviews is the need for stronger and more consistent enforcement of existing legal frameworks addressing violence, threats and hate speech against women in politics. Several interviewees stressed that legal provisions already exist - including specific references to psychological violence and hate speech - but remain largely unimplemented. The absence of visible enforcement was seen as a key factor contributing to the normalisation of abuse. Interviewees repeatedly noted that even a small number of well-handled cases, resulting in clear institutional responses or sanctions, would have a deterrent effect and signal that such behaviour carries consequences.

At the same time, respondents emphasised that freedom of expression must not be conflated with the right to abuse or intimidate. Calls were made for faster institutional reactions, greater professionalism within law-enforcement bodies, and clearer accountability when abuse originates from public figures or occurs in institutional settings such as parliaments or televised debates. Some interviewees also highlighted the need to revisit parliamentary immunity and legal thresholds where offensive or degrading language is currently justified as "political speech".

Role of political parties: from rhetoric to responsibility

Interviewees consistently argued that political parties bear a central responsibility in addressing VAWP, yet often fail to act beyond declarative commitments to gender equality. Parties were encouraged to move from symbolic support to internal accountability mechanisms, including codes of conduct on language, clear sanctions for violations, and leadership-level condemnation of gendered abuse, regardless of whether the targeted woman belongs to the same party.

Several women stressed that parties should treat women as political actors and leaders, not as decorative figures for electoral lists or media appearances. Tokenistic inclusion, selective promotion of "obedient" or "presentable" women, and silence in the face of abuse were described as reinforcing rather than challenging gendered power hierarchies. Interviewees also called for parties to invest more systematically in political education, media literacy, and leadership development, particularly for young women.

Media responsibility, platforms, and civic education

Another strong theme concerns the role of media, digital platforms and civic education in shaping the environment in which VAWP occurs. Interviewees highlighted irresponsible media practices, selective amplification of conflictual moments, and the normalisation of degrading language in public debate. These dynamics were seen as directly influencing online behaviour and legitimising abuse at the societal level.

Recommendations include stronger media ethics, fact-based reporting, and proactive responses to disinformation and coordinated attacks. Several interviewees stressed that civil society organisations have a crucial role to play in monitoring discourse, denouncing abuse consistently and without political bias, and creating spaces for informed public discussion. Education - both formal (in schools) and informal (through public debate) - was repeatedly identified as a long-term preventive measure against misogyny and political violence.

Solidarity, alliances, and collective responsibility

Interviewees placed strong emphasis on solidarity, among women and across society, as a necessary counterweight to VAWP. While personal resilience and informal support networks were described as essential for survival, women stressed that responsibility must not rest solely on those targeted. Several interviewees called for men in politics to actively denounce gender-based abuse and for society as a whole to treat such behaviour as unacceptable, rather than as a normal feature of political competition.

"Many women before us had it even harder. Our responsibility is to make the public space easier for the women who come after us."

Solidarity among women was described not only as emotional support, but as a strategic necessity to counter isolation and stigmatisation. At the same time, interviewees cautioned that informal solidarity cannot substitute institutional action and should not become an additional burden placed on women to protect one another in the absence of systemic safeguards.

Messages to women considering political candidacy

Despite the challenges described, interviewees overwhelmingly encouraged women to remain engaged and not withdraw from political life. Their messages combine realism with resolve: politics is difficult, polarised and often hostile, but withdrawal would reinforce the very structures that enable VAWP. Many framed persistence as an act of resistance and responsibility toward future generations of women.

At the same time, interviewees emphasised the importance of preparation, education, alliances and clarity of purpose. Entering politics was repeatedly linked to having a cause, strong personal values and awareness of the personal costs involved. Several women explicitly noted that their own resilience should not be idealised or expected of all women, and that structural change is necessary to ensure that political participation does not depend on exceptional endurance.

Reflections on campaigning and self-positioning

In retrospect, some interviewees reflected that online abuse led them to become more cautious in their communication style or more strategic in framing positions, particularly in highly polarised environments. However, most rejected the idea that abuse should or did fundamentally alter their political stance or values. Continued engagement was consistently framed as commitment to public interest, accountability and democratic principles, not as a reaction to attacks.

Crucially, no interviewee described online abuse as a positive motivator. Where women remained politically active, this was despite abuse, not because of it. This distinction reinforces the understanding that resilience does not negate harm, but rather reflects uneven capacities to absorb VAWP.

3.6 Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that online hate speech and gender-based targeting operate as cumulative and systemic forms of Violence Against Women in Politics, reshaping political participation not only through direct emotional harm but by mobilising family pressure, constraining decision-making, and raising the personal costs of remaining in public life. Even when such violence does not result in immediate withdrawal, it produces lasting effects on women's political trajectories, influencing how they communicate, campaign, and assess the sustainability of continued engagement, with long-term consequences for political representation, renewal, and democratic quality.

In the absence of structured and credible support mechanisms, women candidates rely predominantly on family support, informal solidarity, and individual resilience, while political parties and justice institutions often fail to provide consistent, principled, and timely protection. This reliance on personal coping strategies shifts responsibility from institutions to individuals, increasing the emotional and social burden on women and reinforcing structural inequalities within electoral and representative processes. Rather than being exceptional, gender-based targeting emerges as a persistent feature of women's political participation, shaping the form and intensity of attacks by directing

hostility toward women's appearance, family roles, and perceived competence, and lowering the threshold for personal and degrading language.

Beyond individual campaigns, the interviews point to broader democratic costs. Online abuse and hate speech narrow the space for substantive political debate, reward polarisation and sensationalism, and create incentives for simplified or performative communication over nuanced policy engagement. Even candidates who achieved strong electoral outcomes described this environment as damaging to democratic deliberation and inclusive political competition.

Taken together, the findings underline that VAWP is not an individual problem requiring individual toughness, but a structural form of political violence demanding coordinated legal, political, and societal responses. Women's persistence in politics should be recognised as resistance rather than resilience expected by default. Without credible enforcement of laws, responsible political leadership, ethical media practices, and collective solidarity, VAWP will continue to shape who is willing – and able – to participate in politics, under what conditions and at what personal cost, undermining both gender equality and the quality of democratic processes.

4. Women's Experiences at the Local Level

This section examines women candidates' lived experiences during local electoral campaigns, drawing on in-depth interviews across multiple municipalities. While local elections are often perceived as less polarised and less visible than national contests, the findings reveal that women encounter persistent gendered pressures that shape not only their emotional well-being but also their campaign strategies, political positioning, and long-term engagement. The proximity of local politics – where candidates are personally known within their communities – creates a distinct dynamic in which online abuse, informal commentary, and reputational narratives intersect directly with private and family life.

The analysis that follows explores the emotional and psychological impact of hate speech, available support mechanisms, political and campaign-related consequences, patterns of gender-based targeting, and women's own recommendations for reform. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that while many women display strong resilience and determination, their participation continues to unfold within structural constraints shaped by entrenched gender norms, uneven institutional responses, and a political culture that often subjects women to heightened scrutiny and disproportionate judgment.

4.1. Emotional and personal impact at the local level

Cumulative emotional and psychological pressure

Although local elections are generally less mediatized than national contests, interviewees described hate speech and negative commentary as emotionally burdensome and cumulative rather than isolated incidents. Even when attacks were not coordinated or viral, their repetition across campaign periods created sustained psychological strain.

Several candidates reported heightened self-consciousness as a direct consequence of sexist and appearance-based remarks. Private digital messages – often sexualised or vulgar – were described as particularly intrusive. One candidate explained that she became unusually aware of how she dressed and presented herself publicly, fearing that voters were focusing more on her appearance than on her political message. This pressure led to reduced public visibility and altered campaign dynamics.

Others spoke of emotional fatigue and discouragement when criticism centred on personal traits rather than policy or performance. Even experienced candidates acknowledged that negative comments can "easily touch you", regardless of attempts to ignore them. The cumulative nature of such exposure, particularly during intense campaign periods, resulted in stress, emotional exhaustion and diminished capacity.

Intrusion into private and family life

At the local level, the proximity between candidates and their communities creates a distinct form of exposure. In smaller municipalities, candidates are personally known, and their families are often embedded within the same social networks. This proximity intensifies the spillover of abuse into private life.

Interviewees described how defamatory comments, sexist remarks, and online hostility affected not only them but also their family members, who follow local media and social platforms. For women who are mothers, the emotional burden was amplified by concerns about children's exposure to public hostility and the broader social consequences of political visibility.

In several cases, family members expressed concern or questioned whether continued political engagement was worth the emotional cost. Even where candidates themselves did not seriously consider withdrawal, the distress experienced by relatives deepened the psychological impact. This spillover reflects gendered expectations around caregiving roles and reinforces feelings of responsibility, guilt, and protective instinct.

Deterrence and disciplining effects on women's participation

Interviewees consistently identified deterrence as one of the most significant consequences of hate speech at the local level. While many remained politically active, they observed hesitation among other women considering engagement.

Politics was frequently described as a "toxic" and polarised environment, discouraging women from accepting invitations to stand as candidates or even to participate in party activities. In small communities, reputational risks and fear of public scrutiny can be particularly powerful deterrents.

The normalisation of sexist commentary, fake profiles spreading defamatory remarks, and appearance-based criticism signals that political participation carries personal and social costs. In this sense, hate speech functions as a disciplining mechanism at the municipal level, shaping who feels able – or willing – to enter public life. This dynamic undermines inclusive representation and weakens democratic renewal.

Withdrawal pressures and emotional exhaustion

Although most interviewed candidates did not ultimately withdraw from politics, many described moments of hesitation, fatigue, or strategic retreat. Withdrawal pressures often manifested indirectly through emotional exhaustion, self-doubt, or family concern rather than explicit threats.

Some candidates reduced public appearances to minimise exposure. Others reflected on whether the emotional cost – particularly when combined with family responsibilities – was justified. The question of "whether it is worth it" emerged repeatedly, especially among those balancing political engagement with caregiving roles.

Importantly, these pressures can reshape campaign strategies and visibility, even without leading to formal withdrawal. Reduced exposure or delegated representation may limit women's direct presence in electoral competition, subtly reinforcing gender imbalances in political space.

Resilience, uneven capacity, and normalisation of harm

Experience emerged as a key factor influencing coping capacity. Candidates in their second or third mandates reported increased confidence and greater ability to manage hostile commentary compared to their first campaigns. Over time, some developed coping strategies such as emotional distancing, selective engagement with comments, or redirecting focus toward concrete policy work.

However, interviewees emphasised that resilience is uneven. First-time candidates, younger women, and those without strong party or family support were identified as particularly vulnerable. While emotional distancing may enable individual endurance, it risks normalising hostility as an inevitable component of political participation.

Crucially, resilience should not be interpreted as the absence of harm. Even candidates who stated that attacks no longer affected them personally recognised the broader structural consequences for women's representation and democratic culture.

Impact on political discourse and local democratic quality

Interviewees linked their personal experiences to broader concerns about the quality of local democratic discourse. When campaigns shift from policy proposals and service delivery to sexist commentary, disinformation, and personal attacks, substantive debate is undermined.

In local elections, typically centred on practical issues such as infrastructure, services, and community needs, such distortions are particularly detrimental. Personalised and gendered attacks distract voters, influence undecided citizens, and weaken trust in democratic processes.

Moreover, when hate speech becomes normalised within local online environments, it establishes a precedent for future campaigns. Women and young people observing these dynamics may be discouraged from political engagement altogether, limiting diversity and representation in municipal assemblies.

4.2 Support mechanisms

Family support as a key resilience mechanism

Across interviews, family support emerged as the most consistent and decisive resilience mechanism for women candidates at the local level. Emotional, psychological, and practical backing from spouses, parents, and close relatives was described as the primary pillar enabling continued political engagement.

Several candidates emphasised that they processed abusive messages together with their partners, sometimes transforming offensive content into humour as a coping strategy. One interviewee explained that she and her husband turned vulgar messages into private jokes in order to "lighten the weight" of the experience. While initially shocked by the explicitness of some messages, her spouse later became an active supporter of her public visibility, insisting that she continue appearing in public despite harassment.

For women who are mothers, family support was described not only as emotional encouragement but as practical redistribution of responsibilities. Campaign periods require time, mobility, and financial resources. Interviewees stressed that without family members stepping in to assume childcare and household duties, sustained campaigning would be nearly impossible. In this sense, family backing functioned as both an emotional buffer and an enabling structure.

However, support was not always free of strain. Some candidates noted that family members felt more emotionally burdened than they did themselves. Relatives sometimes urged caution or encouraged disengagement, reflecting protective instincts amid public hostility. Nevertheless, family solidarity remained the most stable source of resilience.

Party support: selective, inconsistent, and often insufficient

In contrast to the strong role of family networks, support from local party branches was described as uneven, selective, and in many cases insufficient.

Some candidates reported positive experiences, particularly in branches that had prioritised gender balance, offered training and mentoring, and actively encouraged women's participation. In at least one municipality, structured mentoring helped women be elected beyond the gender quota.

However, many others described limited or minimal institutional backing. Several candidates indicated that local party structures provided little structured support in responding to hate speech. Organising campaign events, securing venues, and mobilising voters were often left to candidates themselves. Financial support, when provided, was symbolic and inconsistent. One interviewee noted that in a previous campaign, women candidates had received a modest financial contribution, which – although small – signalled recognition. In subsequent campaigns, even this minimal differentiation was absent.

Candidates also emphasised the absence of collective party responses to attacks. Where hate speech or disinformation targeted an individual candidate, there was rarely a coordinated public reaction from the party structure. Interviewees suggested that political subjects have an obligation to respond collectively when their representatives are attacked, particularly in cases of defamation or gendered abuse. The lack of such responses reinforced a sense that candidates must manage hostility independently.

In some cases, internal party dynamics compounded vulnerability. Women who had changed parties or were perceived as "newcomers" reported facing additional scepticism within party ranks, which limited internal solidarity and access to established voter bases.

Solidarity among women as an informal support mechanism

Beyond family and formal party structures, solidarity among women and informal peer networks played a protective role. Support often came from colleagues, friends or community members who publicly challenged offensive comments or offered moral encouragement.

In certain instances, other women reacted directly to abusive comments in online spaces, confronting perpetrators or expressing public support. This informal solidarity helped counter isolation and signalled that hostile narratives were not universally accepted.

Nevertheless, such solidarity was not consistently institutionalised. It remained largely spontaneous and dependent on individual initiative rather than organised intra-party or cross-party women's networks. While valuable, it did not replace the need for structured party or institutional backing.

Reporting abuse: selective and conditional use of formal mechanisms

The majority of interviewees reported not having formally reported cases of hate speech or abuse. Several reasons were cited for this pattern.

First, many incidents were perceived as falling below the legal threshold of criminal conduct. Candidates distinguished between offensive or sexist remarks and explicit threats that might trigger penal procedures. In cases involving fake profiles or indirect attacks, interviewees felt there was insufficient basis for a formal complaint.

Second, some candidates acknowledged regret for not reporting incidents, recognising in hindsight that silence may contribute to normalisation. Others described the reporting process itself as discouraging. One interviewee who reported a threat recounted being asked whether the perpetrator had explicitly threatened to kill her, suggesting a narrow interpretation of what constitutes actionable harm. Such procedural responses were described as demotivating.

Instead of formal reporting, several candidates opted for reactive strategies: publicly responding in comment sections, presenting factual corrections to disinformation, or directly requesting media outlets to filter defamatory comments. In some cases, local media withdrew inaccurate stories following factual rebuttal.

Overall, reporting was selective and conditional, shaped by perceptions of effectiveness, legal thresholds, and the anticipated emotional cost of pursuing formal mechanisms.

Normalisation of violence and self-management as survival strategies

A recurring theme across interviews was the normalisation of hostility as an expected element of political life. Many candidates described developing individual coping strategies rather than seeking institutional intervention.

Common strategies included ignoring abusive comments, emotionally distancing from attacks, reframing hostility as a sign of political relevance, or transforming criticism into

motivation. Family members frequently advised candidates to "ignore it", reinforcing self-management rather than escalation.

While these strategies enabled continued participation, they also risk entrenching a culture in which hate speech is treated as inevitable. The absence of structured institutional responses, combined with reliance on personal resilience, shifts responsibility for managing systemic hostility onto individual women.

This dynamic reflects a broader pattern: survival often depends on private support systems and personal endurance rather than collective accountability. Although many candidates demonstrated resilience and agency, the burden of managing abuse remains disproportionately individualised.

4.3 Political and campaign-related impact

Electoral impact of hate speech

Interviewees provided nuanced assessments of whether hate speech influenced their electoral outcomes. In most cases, candidates did not perceive a direct negative impact on their final results. Several explicitly stated that, had hate speech significantly affected voters, they would not have achieved strong electoral performances, including being among the most voted candidates in their municipalities.

In some cases, candidates argued that attacks had a counterproductive effect for perpetrators. Perceived injustices, defamatory narratives, or visible hostility mobilised segments of the electorate in solidarity. Voters who personally knew the candidate or were familiar with her professional record interpreted attacks as unfair, which reinforced their support. One interviewee noted that efforts to undermine her credibility ultimately strengthened her position, as voters reacted against what they saw as deliberate attempts to damage her reputation.

However, interviewees also acknowledged more complex dynamics. Hate speech can simultaneously mobilise loyal supporters while discouraging undecided voters who lack detailed knowledge of the candidate. In smaller municipalities, where personal networks matter, familiarity may neutralise negative narratives. Where such familiarity is weaker, disinformation may create confusion or doubt, requiring additional effort to counteract.

While most interviewed women did not attribute electoral loss directly to hate speech, they recognised that its effects are context-dependent and may vary depending on visibility, incumbency status, and community proximity.

Impact on campaign strategy and conduct

While the direct electoral impact was often perceived as limited or even positive, hate speech clearly influenced campaign strategies and conduct.

Several candidates described shifting their campaign methods in response to hostile narratives. Instead of relying heavily on social media or large public rallies, some

intensified direct, face-to-face engagement with citizens. Door-to-door meetings, small gatherings, and informal conversations were used as strategies to bypass online hostility and rebuild trust directly with voters. In certain cases, candidates spent extensive hours in personal meetings throughout the campaign period, prioritising direct communication over digital self-promotion.

Others reported becoming more vigilant and cautious in public communication. Awareness of potential "gaps" that opponents could exploit led to more controlled messaging and formalised social media communication. One candidate reduced her public appearances during the campaign, while another limited online visibility to essential announcements and programme-related content.

Hate speech also diverted time and energy away from policy promotion. Instead of focusing exclusively on programme proposals, some candidates had to allocate significant effort to correcting disinformation, defending their reputation, and protecting their credibility. This redirection of emotional and strategic energy represents a tangible campaign-related cost.

At the same time, several interviewees framed these adaptations as strengthening their campaigns. By shifting their focus to factual communication, project-based messaging, and personal interaction, they felt they built stronger, more resilient voter relationships.

Visibility and media attention

Unlike at the national level, interviewees generally did not report that hate speech generated beneficial media visibility. In many cases, attacks occurred in private digital spaces or through limited local online platforms, without escalating into broader public controversy.

For some candidates, negative commentary remained largely confined to personal channels and did not translate into public debate or amplified attention. In such cases, the experience was described as "silent" and individually targeted rather than politically instrumentalised.

However, in certain contexts, public controversy indirectly increased attention and recognition. When defamatory narratives became visible within the community, some voters responded by reaching out directly to express support. In these instances, attention functioned as a solidarity mechanism rather than reputational damage.

The relationship between hate speech and visibility at the local level appears more fragmented than at the national level. While attacks rarely generated structured media amplification, they sometimes shaped perceptions within smaller community networks.

Gendered narratives and thematic targeting

Although not all interviewees experienced explicitly gender-based attacks, gendered narratives remained present in several accounts. Appearance-based comments, insinuations about moral integrity, and stereotypes about women's competence were recurring themes.

In some cases, attacks focused on perceived "fit" within party structures or questioned legitimacy as a woman in political space. Candidates reported that their credibility, loyalty, or personal character were scrutinised more intensely than their policy proposals. One interviewee referred to being labelled in ways that implicitly positioned her as disruptive or non-conforming within male-dominated environments.

Other attacks targeted professional credibility, particularly when women had held executive roles. In these instances, disinformation campaigns focused on undermining past performance or administrative decisions, requiring substantial effort to rebut.

Importantly, even when hostility was framed in partisan terms rather than explicitly gendered language, candidates noted that women often bear disproportionate reputational consequences. In smaller municipalities, moral judgment and social narratives can attach more readily to women's public identities.

4.4 Gender-based targeting

Online engagement and exposure to targeting

Interviewees reported varying levels of online activity during local campaigns, which shaped both their exposure to abuse and their ability to manage public interaction. Some candidates were highly active, using Facebook (and to a lesser extent TikTok) to disseminate programme content, announce meetings, share videos, and gather citizen concerns through polls and surveys. Others described limited engagement due to time constraints or lack of prior experience, relying instead on offline campaigning and direct voter contact.

Where online engagement was higher, candidates described greater exposure to hostile commentary, particularly after posting speeches, campaign materials, or public appearances. Some adopted avoidance behaviours – reducing time on social media for days at a time – to protect their emotional wellbeing. In contrast, candidates who intentionally limited self-promotion online perceived lower exposure, often framing this as a protective strategy informed by observing what other women had experienced.

The findings indicate that online presence is not only a campaign tool but also a risk factor: increased visibility and activity can amplify exposure to gendered targeting, while reduced digital engagement can function as a harm-reduction tactic – though often at the expense of broader outreach.

Tone of online discourse and its gendered nature

Across municipalities, interviewees characterised the tone of online discourse about women in politics as frequently hostile, low-quality, and gendered. Descriptions ranged from "inappropriate" and "unprofessional" to "toxic" and emotionally draining. Several interviewees emphasised that women were routinely subjected to commentary that was vulgar, objectifying, or explicitly sexist.

Even when criticism was not overtly sexualised, candidates described pervasive judgemental and dismissive tones directed towards politically active women. Some linked this to wider social polarisation, arguing that increasing political polarisation encourages hostile language and normalises hate speech across identity categories – including gender.

Importantly, the gendered nature of discourse was evident not only in the language used but also in the standards applied: women were assessed through personal and moral lenses more often than through policy or competence-based frames.

Drivers of targeting: political activity intersecting with gender

Interviewees consistently indicated that targeting is driven by an interaction between being a woman and being politically visible or active. Several stated that women are easier to target "at a banal level" because everyday behaviours – gestures, tone of voice, clothing choices – are treated as legitimate objects of scrutiny.

A recurring view was that the more vocal, assertive, or visible a woman becomes, the more likely she is to be targeted. Candidates linked this to both misogyny and political competition: women perceived as strong contenders or highly active in municipal assemblies were more frequently attacked. In this sense, gender-based targeting operates as both discrimination and political control, signalling that women's public presence will be punished socially.

Some interviewees also emphasised that gender intersects with perceptions of legitimacy within political structures. Women who were viewed as "outsiders" within party structures, or who challenged dominant practices within municipal assemblies, described heightened vulnerability to discrediting narratives.

Content of attacks: appearance, family, and competence

The most consistently reported content of gender-based attacks related to appearance and femininity. Interviewees described remarks about clothing, hair, nails, physical attributes, and bodily presentation as a routine feature of online commentary. Some reported that even trivial details were turned into objects of ridicule and, in at least one case, local media amplified such commentary by producing content based on mocking remarks.

Competence-based attacks were also present but tended to be expressed through gendered stereotypes rather than substantive critique – for example, insinuations that women "do not understand" technical municipal issues such as infrastructure. Several interviewees noted that if attacks were focused on policy substance, they would be more legitimate; instead, comments often defaulted to sexist frames that undermine women's authority regardless of performance.

Family and private life appeared less consistently across accounts. Some candidates stated that they were not targeted directly through family-related remarks, while others described attacks framed around marital status, moral reputation, or insinuations

intended to damage social standing. Where family was implicated, the harm extended beyond the candidate to relatives who felt compelled to disengage from social media to avoid exposure to degrading content.

The interviews suggest a clear gendered division in attack content: men are more often accused of corruption or incompetence, while women are more often attacked through appearance, sexuality, morality, and gendered stereotypes of capability.

Broader effects on participation and democratic space

Interviewees linked gender-based targeting to wider consequences for political participation and democratic quality at the local level. Several noted that hostile online environments discourage women – especially first-time candidates – from entering politics due to fear of reputational damage and emotional harm. The sense that women are "not taken seriously" was repeatedly cited as both a cause and consequence of gendered targeting.

Candidates also highlighted the impact on democratic deliberation. When discussion is shaped by sexist ridicule rather than programme debate, public attention is diverted from municipal priorities and policy choices. This weakens accountability and contributes to a political culture where personal attacks replace substantive competition.

In addition, some interviewees stressed that normalising this discourse creates a chilling effect within municipal assemblies, with some women becoming more cautious or less vocal early in their mandates. The cumulative outcome is a narrowing of political space: fewer women feel safe to participate fully, and the quality of local democratic representation is undermined.

4.5 Women's recommendations and reflections

Strengthening legal protection and institutional enforcement

Across interviews, women emphasised that legal frameworks formally exist but require stronger enforcement and visible consequences. Several interviewees stressed that awareness campaigns alone are insufficient; concrete cases of sanctioning hate speech would have a stronger deterrent effect. Public examples of investigation and punishment, in accordance with human rights and integrity legislation, were identified as necessary signals that abuse carries consequences.

Some candidates explicitly called for criminal follow-up in cases of serious hate speech, arguing that only enforcement can reduce the phenomenon. Others highlighted the gap between formal equality in law and informal inequality in practice. While institutional mechanisms are formally in place, women noted that social norms and patriarchal attitudes undermine their practical effectiveness. The perception that women "cannot afford to make mistakes" in public life reflects structural inequality that legal tools alone cannot easily address.

Recommendations pointed to the need for stronger institutional will, clearer reporting pathways, and more consistent follow-up in cases of online abuse and disinformation.

Role of political parties: from rhetoric to responsibility

Interviewees repeatedly emphasised that political parties must move beyond rhetorical commitments to gender equality and assume active responsibility for protecting women candidates.

Proposals included:

♦ *Establishing internal mechanisms within party branches to identify, report, and publicly respond to hate speech;*

♦ *Providing structured mentoring and training for women entering politics;*

♦ *Offering financial and logistical support during campaigns;*

♦ *Ensuring equal treatment of women candidates based on merit rather than loyalty or "servility";*

♦ *Publicly defending candidates subjected to disinformation or sexist attacks.*

Several women stressed that collective party reactions to attacks are essential. Silence from party leadership when a woman candidate is targeted reinforces the normalisation of abuse and leaves candidates isolated. Parties were urged to proactively counter false narratives, reject sexist discourse, and amplify women's voices through media exposure and campaign platforms.

Additionally, some interviewees proposed cross-party platforms of women representatives to advance shared legislative initiatives and jointly address hate speech and gender-based violence in politics. This reflects a recognition that gender-based targeting transcends party lines.

Media responsibility, platforms, and civic education

Interviewees highlighted the responsibility of local media and digital platforms in shaping political discourse. Several pointed to the need for stricter moderation of comment sections and greater accountability for publishing defamatory or degrading content.

Recommendations included:

♦ *Filtering or removing denigrating and sexist comments;*

♦ *Avoiding sensationalist amplification of trivial or appearance-based narratives;*

♦ *Promoting balanced representation of women candidates;*

♦ *Providing more media space for women to articulate policy priorities.*

Beyond media institutions, interviewees emphasised the importance of broader civic education. Normalisation of misogynistic language in informal conversations was identified as a root cause that later manifests in online environments. Women stressed that societal change must begin with everyday language and attitudes, particularly among younger generations.

Public awareness campaigns, especially those highlighting the psychological harm of online abuse, were seen as important components of long-term cultural change.

Solidarity, alliances, and collective responsibility

Solidarity emerged as a recurring theme. Candidates stressed the importance of women organising collectively, both within and across parties, to reduce isolation and increase visibility. Being "more numerous" in municipal assemblies was framed not only as representation but as protection: the greater the presence of women, the harder it becomes to single out individuals.

Family support was again acknowledged as foundational, particularly emotional backing during campaign periods. However, several interviewees argued that solidarity must extend beyond family and informal networks to institutional and cross-party alliances.

Collective responsibility was also framed at the societal level. Citizens were encouraged to reflect on their own language and avoid normalising degrading commentary. Interviewees suggested that cultural transformation requires participation from voters, civil society, party members, and media actors alike.

Messages to women considering political candidacy

Despite describing hostile environments, interviewees conveyed strong messages of encouragement to women considering municipal candidacy.

Common themes included:

♦ *Do not be discouraged by negative comments;*

♦ *Remain authentic and true to your values;*

♦ *Persevere, particularly in the face of stereotypes;*

♦ *Focus on competence, preparation, and concrete goals;*

♦ *Seek supportive networks and mentoring opportunities.*

Several women stressed the importance of authenticity, particularly in engaging younger generations who value sincerity and transparency. Others encouraged women to view political engagement as an opportunity to generate real change within their communities.

The message of perseverance was prominent. Interviewees emphasised that many women have succeeded despite obstacles and that continued participation itself challenges discriminatory norms.

Reflections on campaigning and self-positioning

When reflecting retrospectively, interviewees offered mixed assessments of how online abuse influenced their campaign self-positioning.

Some reported that abuse did not alter their core messaging or campaign identity. They remained focused on programme content, governance ideas and policy proposals, deliberately refusing to centre their campaigns on personal defence.

Others acknowledged tangible adjustments. Online hostility led some to reduce social media activity, limit self-promotion, or avoid reactive engagement. In certain cases, candidates shifted emphasis towards direct, one-to-one meetings with voters, prioritising personal interaction over digital exposure. Some consciously avoided emotional responses and instead concentrated on fact-based communication and project-based messaging.

A few described more strategic responses, such as publicly exposing coordinated attacks from fake profiles, which in some cases reduced subsequent targeting.

Reflections reveal a tension between resilience and adaptation. While many women refused to allow abuse to redefine their political identity, several altered communication strategies to mitigate risk and protect credibility. These adjustments illustrate how gendered hostility indirectly shapes campaign design and public positioning.

4.6 Conclusions

The findings from the local-level analysis demonstrate that hate speech and gender-based targeting constitute a persistent structural challenge to women's political participation the local level. Although local campaigns are often less mediatized and less visibly polarised than national contests, the emotional, political, and democratic consequences of online abuse remain substantial.

First, at the personal level, hate speech generates cumulative psychological pressure, intrudes into family life, and creates withdrawal pressures - even where women ultimately remain politically active. The burden is not limited to candidates themselves; it extends to relatives and close networks, reinforcing gendered expectations around caregiving and reputational responsibility. While many women demonstrate resilience and transform hostility into motivation, this resilience should not obscure the disproportionate emotional cost imposed on them.

Second, support mechanisms at local level are predominantly informal and family-centred. Institutional and party-based responses are uneven, reactive and frequently insufficient. Formal reporting mechanisms are rarely used due to perceived ineffectiveness, high evidentiary thresholds and procedural discouragement. As a result, women rely on self-management strategies and informal solidarity rather than structured institutional protection. This individualisation of response reflects both strength and systemic weakness.

Third, hate speech does not uniformly determine electoral outcomes. In several cases, it mobilised supporters and reinforced perceptions of injustice. However, its influence lies

less in final vote counts and more in shaping campaign conditions. Women adjusted their strategies - reducing digital visibility, intensifying direct voter engagement, reallocating energy towards reputational defence and factual rebuttals. These adaptations, while sometimes effective, represent reactive responses to hostility rather than freely chosen political strategies. Hate speech, therefore, functions as a structural pressure that shapes how women campaign, how visible they choose to be, and how they distribute political energy.

Fourth, gender-based targeting at the local level is characterised by a clear pattern: attacks centre predominantly on appearance, sexuality, moral reputation, and gendered stereotypes of competence. Even when framed as political criticism, commentary frequently reflects differential standards applied to women and men. Targeting intensifies for women who are vocal, visible or politically competitive, reinforcing the disciplining function of online abuse. This dynamic distorts electoral competition and weakens the quality of democratic discourse in municipal politics.

Finally, women candidates articulated coherent recommendations centred on stronger enforcement of legal protections, greater accountability from political parties, responsible media moderation, mentoring and training for new entrants, and cross-party solidarity among women. Their reflections highlight a dual reality: women remain determined to participate and lead, yet they continue to operate within environments shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms and insufficient institutional backing.

In conclusion, hate speech at the local level increases the personal cost of political engagement for women and constrains inclusive democratic participation. Addressing these dynamics requires not only individual resilience but systemic reform - strengthening enforcement mechanisms, enhancing party responsibility, improving media practices, and fostering collective accountability. Without such changes, local democracy risks remaining formally inclusive yet substantively unequal.

The Democracy for Development (D4D) Institute was established in April 2010 by a group of analysts were increasingly worried that the state-building exercise had neglected democracy. D4D's vision is to promote an active and educated citizenry that participates fully in the public space and utilizes the public arena of representation and decision-making to deliberate and build consensus over resource allocation that is efficient, smart, long-term, and that brings about equitable development. D4D influences specific policy, promotes a cross-sectorial approach to problem solving, and tackles the institutional routine of decision making by recommending incremental improvements and operates with maximum effectiveness in order to fully promote Kosovo's stabilization and democratic development.

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