

MISOGYNY IN THE ALBANIAN  
DIGITAL MANOSPHERE :  
THE CASE OF 'ALBKINGS'



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## INTRODUCTION

While digital platforms are praised for enabling universal self-expression and access, they have also become hotspots for exclusionary and violent discourses, often propagated anonymously. Digital violence can affect everyone, but evidence indicates that people and groups that already face discrimination, such as women, children, LGBTQI+ people and ethnic minorities, are more vulnerable to it, facing severe physical, sexual, psychological and economic consequences.

This violence drives many victims to retreat from digital spaces, limiting their educational, professional and support opportunities. Despite being often trivialized, digital violence is interconnected with offline violence and exists in a continuum of discrimination and violence, reflecting broader social inequalities.<sup>1</sup> The digital dimension of discrimination and violence against women and girls typically manifests itself through misogynistic and offensive comments on social media platforms, the non-consensual dissemination and manipulation of personal information, including photo- and video-edited sexualized content designed to humiliate women and girls in digital spaces, as well as online threats, stalking, non-consensual intimate image distribution and blackmail that create a pervasive atmosphere of fear and intimidation.<sup>2</sup>

The Western Balkans demonstrates how trends and contemporary forms of online violence against women and girls perpetuate long-standing patriarchal norms. From the 'spectacularization' and 'sensationalization' of femicide on online media to the use of social media platforms such as TikTok and Telegram to expose, shame and target women and girls, the Western Balkans has witnessed a surge in technology-facilitated gender-based violence.<sup>3</sup> Recent analysis carried out by BIRN reveals that TikTok is increasingly used in the region to shame women and girls through the sharing of videos and photos of them participating in everyday activities like dancing, singing and socializing with friends, who, in turn, are subjected to verbal harassment, ridicule, mockery and other derogatory comments

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<sup>1</sup> Marija Babovic, "The Dark Side of Digitalization: Technology-facilitated violence against women in Eastern Europe and Central Asia," UN Women, October 2023, [https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/research-tf-vaw\\_full-report\\_24-january2.pdf](https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/research-tf-vaw_full-report_24-january2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Goulds, "Free to be online? Girls' and young women's experiences of online harassment," Plan International, 2020, <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2022/02/sotwgr2020-commsreport-en-2.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Sara Milenkovska, "For Women in the Balkans, Digital Space is a Double-Edged Sword," Balkan Insight, June 7, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/07/for-women-in-the-balkans-digital-space-is-a-double-edged-sword/>

by other users engaging with the posts.<sup>4</sup> There are significant institutional setbacks across all Western Balkans countries in effectively addressing and preventing technology-facilitated gender-based violence. A prevailing attitude among law enforcement authorities, for instance, is the perception that threats made online are not 'real' and are not capable of causing actual physical harm, which helps explain why women and girls frequently encounter dismissive responses when reporting cases of online violence or harassment to the police.<sup>5</sup> Notably, most Western Balkan countries do not criminalize online gender-based violence and subsequently lack mechanisms to track incidents of this kind.<sup>6</sup>

In Kosovo, a developing case that has been in the media spotlight is that of the "Albkings" (short for "Albanian Kings"), a notorious group chat on the messaging app Telegram, which became active in January 2023. The group rapidly expanded to over 100,000 members, predominantly Albanian men residing in Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia, as well as men from the Albanian diaspora, who engaged in sharing personal information of women and girls without their consent, with some victims being underage girls.<sup>7</sup> This information included names and surnames, phone numbers, locations, and social media accounts. Members also distributed explicit photos and videos, some of which were edited into sexualized content using the "deep fake" method.

Following reports from multiple victims, including two female journalists, on May 30, 2024, the Basic Prosecution of Prishtina arrested seven suspects involved in the case, including the alleged main administrator and founder of the group. Screenshots capturing the language, imagery, and interactions within the Albkings group, along with public testimonies of some of the victims and members of the group, were widely circulated on online media in Kosovo. They have been focal in both shaping public opinion on the case and constituted one of the main pieces of evidence through which the Prosecution has built its arguments around the suspects.

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<sup>4</sup> Xhorxhina Bami, "TikTok Used Across Balkans to 'Slutshame' Women and Girls," Balkan Insight, March 6, 2024. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/06/tiktok-used-across-balkans-to-slutshame-women-and-girls/#:~:text=A%20BIRN%20analysis%20of%20hundreds,sexual%20behaviour%20%2D%20'slutshaming'>.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Milenkovska, "For Women in the Balkans, Digital Space is a Double-Edged Sword," Balkan Insight, June 7, 2023. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/07/for-women-in-the-balkans-digital-space-is-a-double-edged-sword/>

<sup>6</sup> Leonora Aliu, "'Out of Control': Kosovo Struggles to Curb Online Sexual Harassment," Balkan Insight, May 28, 2024. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/28/out-of-control-kosovo-struggles-to-curb-online-sexual-harassment/>

<sup>7</sup> Xhorxhina Bami, "Kosovo Arrests Seven in Crackdown on Misogynistic Telegram Group," Balkan Insight, May 30, 2024. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/30/kosovo-arrests-seven-in-crackdown-on-misogynistic-telegram-group/>



The case of Albking gives an opportunity to analyze in-depth how online narratives around women and girls are constructed, allowing us to explore how Kosovar and Albanian patriarchal values can be read together with more global notions of misogyny in digital society. This paper thus presents a close study of the case, providing an overview of the Kosovar context and the legal frameworks through which the case is addressed; a first-hand account of a Kosovar journalist who was a victim of the group; as well as a discourse analysis that aims to unwrap the political and ideological stakes that operate within the case. We propose to read Albking within the framework of the phenomenon of the “manosphere”, a term used to designate a fragmented collection of blogs, chats, websites, forums and online communities promoting anti-feminist and misogynist discourse, often also encouraging extremist violence. The central argument of the paper is that although Albking is an extreme manifestation of misogyny facilitated by digital technology, the problematic ideology it promotes is not confined to the online space but is symptomatic of a patriarchal system that is deeply embedded in Kosovar society and Albanian culture.

## NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY AND APPROACH

A range of terms is used to describe and analyze the different forms of online gender-based violence against women and girls, including cyber violence against women and girls; cyber bullying, cyber harassment and cyber stalking; online gender-based hate speech; networked harassment; technology-facilitated violence; digital violence; online misogyny, etc. This terminological array draws both from wider frameworks that combat gender-based violence, and frameworks that address cyber violence by focusing on the specificity of its medium. The intersection between these two has given rise to many questions and grey areas regarding how legal and governmental responses define harm and violence online (as opposed to physical violence) and what kind of measures can be taken without breaching freedom of expression and of assembly.

We have chosen to use the wider term of (online) misogyny, which is cultural and political rather than legal and constitutional. This allows us to broaden the understanding of violence and harm, as well as to better acknowledge the continuum between online and offline social constructions. Furthermore, in the case of online violence enacted through the distribution of pornographic material and through the encouragement and facilitation of sexual advances and threats, as occurs in the case of Albking, what escapes legal frameworks and governmental responses is, to put it succinctly, desire. A cultural approach is necessary to ascertain how the ambivalences and contradictions of patriarchal desire give rise to violence.

Kate Manne defines misogyny as the enforcement of the ideology of the patriarchal order. Manne makes an important distinction between the psychological and the political or structural definitions of misogyny, which will be crucial to this study as well. According to the more common definition of the concept, which she calls the naïve conception, misogyny is “primarily a property of individual agents (typically, although not necessarily, men) who are prone to feel hatred, hostility, or other similar emotions toward any and every woman, or at least women generally, simply because they are women”.<sup>8</sup> This definition is ultimately *psychological* in nature and the implication is that a society and culture is misogynistic because misogynists dominate it. Manne proposes a political rather than psychological conceptualisation of misogyny instead, which is to be understood as “the system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance”.<sup>9</sup> This patriarchal system:

- (a) will tend to be faced by a (wider or narrower) class of girls and women because they are girls and women in that (more or less fully specified) social position; and*
- (b) serves to police and enforce a patriarchal order, instantiated in relation to other intersecting systems of domination and disadvantage that apply to the relevant class of girls and women (e.g., various forms of racism, xenophobia, classism, ageism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, and so on).<sup>10</sup>*

To summarize, Manne insists on understanding misogyny as a force that targets particular kinds of women, rather than merely “women”, for the challenges or violations they enact against patriarchal norms and expectations regarding their role in society. This is socially and historically determined, instead of simply being the result of the psychology of individual agents.

Regarding the understanding of “cyber” or “digital” spaces, this study seeks to challenge the online/offline dichotomy which is so often produced in the research on online violence. While this dichotomy was perhaps useful when online communications and virtual realities were emerging, in today’s context the boundaries between “real” and “virtual” are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish. For this reason, we turn to the term “digital society”, as defined by Powell, Stratton and Cameron:

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<sup>8</sup> Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.



*Unlike earlier conceptualisations of cyberspace (as compared with 'real', 'terrestrial' or 'meat' space) as a distinct sphere of experience, the concept of digital society refers to the integrated whole represented by digital technologies and society — a whole that is more than the sum of its parts.<sup>11</sup>*

This conception of the dynamic between the “digital” and the “social” acknowledges the potential of technology to produce new social relations instead of existing outside of ‘real’ human interactions. In short, the “digital” and the “social” are intertwined and mutually condition one-another. Such an understanding helps us to move past the view that treats the issue of online violence as a problem isolated to cyberspace and therefore addressed through institutional responses tailored to cyber regulation. It also helps us move past the attitude, so pervasive in media reporting in Kosovo, that tends to over-emphasize the lack of information and education regarding the laws and regulations of online conduct as the culprit of online violence.

The choice of this terminology and the concepts they bring forth reflects the broader approach taken in our analysis. In the study of the case of Albkings, apart from offering an overview of the existing legal frameworks in Kosovo that are being used to prosecute the suspects, we also emphasize the need to turn to a discourse analysis. This is not only because the legal frameworks can be vague and flawed but also because it is important to emphasize how such a case is symptomatic of a deeply rooted structural patriarchy and misogynist systems of socialization that function in Kosovar society and Albanian culture. Therefore, a discourse analysis purports to examine the language used to discuss the issues at hand and how that language reflects social norms, expectations, ideologies, identities and power relations. Furthermore, the case of Albkings is still under investigation and has become the subject of lively public discussions and media reporting. This offers the opportunity to reflect on the discourse being developed around online violence, as well as to contextualize the socio-political climate.

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<sup>11</sup> Anastasia Powell, Gregory Stratton, Robin Cameron, *Digital Criminology: Crime and Justice in Digital Society*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), chapter 1, Apple Books.

## THE CASE OF ALBKINGS

On April 6, 2024, Ardiana Thaçi-Mehmeti, a journalist at Klan Kosova TV Channel, woke up to find over 60 missed calls on her phone. “The first thing that crosses your mind in such a situation” she recalls, “is that something bad has happened to your loved ones, in my case, my parents.”<sup>12</sup> As she went to open her phone, she met a barrage of disturbing text messages from unknown individuals, one of them asking: “Hey there pretty, how much do you charge for a night?” Thaçi-Mehmeti soon discovered that her personal information, including her phone number, had been shared without her consent in the Albkings group.

Ten days before receiving these unsolicited calls and messages on her phone, Thaçi-Mehmeti, who hosts the investigative show *KIKS Kosova*, aired a series of episodes exposing the illicit activities of the Albkings group. Together with a team of journalists from Klan Kosova, she gained direct access to the group and the content shared by its members. “We were stunned by what we came across in this group,” said Thaçi-Mehmeti. “It was like a marketplace where each woman was assigned a price for sexual services, there were requests from certain men for minor girls, aged between 14 and 15 ... there were clandestine pictures of women and girls of all ages in various locations.” Thaçi-Mehmeti’s detailed reporting on the case in her TV show sparked outrage among some of the Albkings members, who in turn disseminated her phone number within the group. Her phone has not stopped ringing since.

By February 9, Albkings had disseminated a staggering 20,993 photos and 19,516 videos.<sup>13</sup> Following this massive leak, the group transitioned to a private setting. In this environment, members, under the veil of anonymity, often requested images or personal details of specific women from other group members. The group’s rules, which are regularly shared by the admins, strictly enforced the sharing of Albanian women’s details, stating: “Send numbers, photos/videos, snaps, etc. Only Albanian. To send me photos/videos click here. Warning, if the photos/videos are not related to the group, you will be banned (expelled) automatically by the admins.”

Thaçi-Mehmeti has denounced every individual that has unsolicitedly called or messaged her since April 6 to the Kosovo Police. Their initial response to her concerns was to tell her, in an informal manner, to deactivate her social media accounts for a time and change her phone number. As the case was sent for review at the Kosovo Police’s Cyber Crime Unit, Thaçi-Mehmeti received the most unsettling message since her involvement with the case.

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<sup>12</sup> Personal interview with Ardiana Thaçi-Mehmeti, May 22, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> “Kosovo Detains Young Man for Unauthorized Denigrating Publication on ‘Telegram’,” Prishtina Insight, February 9, 2024, <https://prishtinainsight.com/kosovo-detains-young-man-for-unauthorised-denigrating-publication-on-telegram/>



She received a notice that had started making the rounds in the group, where members were requesting any personal information relating to Thaçi-Mehmeti's family members. "That was the first time I actually reconsidered my involvement with this case, for the sake of my family, my kids, my husband, my parents," she stated. "But I ultimately decided to go through with it," she continued, "not least because of all the messages I received in the meantime from other women who had been victims of this group." More than 10 women reached out to her to share their own stories of harassment as part of the AlbKings group. Unfortunately, these women hesitated to publicly disclose their cases and their identities out of concern that their partners or family members would find out.

The first significant breakthrough in law enforcement's crackdown on the group came in February when an 18-year-old man was arrested after a girl reported him for publishing her photos in the group following her refusal to comply with his demands.<sup>14</sup> This arrest marked the beginning of a series of law enforcement actions against the group. In April, two more arrests were made, both of whom were administrators of the group, including one woman. The crackdown intensified on May 30, when the Basic Prosecution of Prishtina arrested seven additional suspects – seven men and one woman – charged with "theft of identity and credentials", a criminal offence punishable by up to two years in prison under Article 336 of the Penal Code.<sup>15</sup> This concerted effort by the authorities culminated in the official shutdown of the AlbKings group on the same day.<sup>16</sup> Investigations are ongoing, and authorities have indicated there are "real possibilities to expand" the scope of arrests to include other individuals who may have been involved in this case.<sup>17</sup> However, a potential hindrance to this process lies in the possibility of new groups emerging on alternative platforms, as seen with AlbKings transitioning from Telegram to its sister-app Nicegram. Tracking and tracing individuals involved in these activities thus becomes increasingly challenging.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> CODE NO. 06/L-074 CRIMINAL CODE OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=18413>

<sup>16</sup> Ardit Kika, "'AlbKings' group is closed," Koha, May 30, 2024, <https://www.koha.net/en/lajmet-e-mbremjes-ktv/421332/mbyllet-grupi-albkings>

<sup>17</sup> "Autoritetet në Kosovë arrestojnë shtatë persona të përfshirë në grupin AlbKings," Radio Evropa e Lirë, May 30, 2024, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/arrestime-grupi-albkings-telegram-/32972104.html>

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN KOSOVO

This section offers an overview of Kosovo's national legal and policy framework addressing technology-facilitated discrimination and violence against women and girls. The overview will include an analysis of how often terms like “digital”, “online” and the like are used in key legislation, to create a picture of whether or not the online dimension of violence against women and girls is adequately accounted for in the framework.

The Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, amended in 2020, acknowledges the direct application of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), which serves as a crucial instrument for preventing violence against women and domestic violence, as well as protecting victims<sup>18</sup>. While the Convention doesn't explicitly mention online violence against women and girls, its scope extends to violence perpetrated in digital spaces. Several articles of the Convention, including Article 40 on sexual harassment and Article 34 on stalking, are applicable in the digital context. From a strictly constitutional point of view, one can argue that Kosovo is sufficiently advanced to effectively prevent and combat violence against women, including in the online realm.

A significant legislative development in this context was the criminalization of domestic violence and sexual harassment with the amendment of the Kosovo Penal Code in 2019.<sup>19</sup> Although terms like “digital”, “online”, or “cyber” are seldom if ever mentioned in the Penal Code, significant issues pertaining to technology-facilitated violence against women and girls, such as harassment, intimidation, and blackmail, are acknowledged as criminal offences. However, concerns relating to non-consensual image-based sexual abuse, which pose a growing and immediate digital threat to women and girls, lack explicit regulation in the Criminal Code. While Article 202 addresses unauthorized photographing and recording, as well as the unauthorized distribution of images in a general manner, it fails to prescribe how “authorization” is to be obtained, nor does it cover scenarios where these images are acquired through alternative means or via third parties. This latter concern is particularly critical,<sup>20</sup> considering that image-based sexual abuse primarily occurs on social media platforms where images and videos are frequently shared by individuals other than the

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<sup>18</sup> CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO, [http://old.kuvendikosoves.org/common/docs/Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo with amend.I-XXV 2017.pdf](http://old.kuvendikosoves.org/common/docs/Constitution%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Kosovo%20with%20amend.I-XXV%202017.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> CODE NO. 06/L-074 CRIMINAL CODE OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO, <https://md.rks-gov.net/desk/inc/media/A5713395-507E-4538-BED6-2FA2510F3FCD.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> “Regulatory Framework in the Field of Digital Rights - Comparative Analysis: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia,” Share Foundation, December, 2021, [https://www.sharefoundation.info/wp-content/uploads/Digital-rights-legal-analysis\\_EN-1.pdf](https://www.sharefoundation.info/wp-content/uploads/Digital-rights-legal-analysis_EN-1.pdf)



victims. Coupled with the fact that they are being shared on social media platforms with questionable data and personal privacy safeguards, such as TikTok, Telegram and similar platforms, this gives perpetrators easily exploitable loopholes to evade accountability for their actions in the digital sphere.

There is currently no law or specific policy addressing internet regulation in Kosovo. Furthermore, the fact that major social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok, do not have representatives based in this part of Europe poses significant challenges. Without local representatives, these platforms may be less responsive to the needs and concerns of Kosovan users, particularly in addressing issues like online harassment, misinformation, and data privacy. Additionally, the absence of specific internet regulations can result in a legal vacuum, making it difficult for authorities to effectively govern digital spaces and protect users from online abuses.

TikTok provides an interesting case. In April 2023, the Kosovo Information and Privacy Agency initiated meetings with Kosovo's security institutions to analyze whether the TikTok application poses a risk to state security, following bans in the US and EU. Under Commissioner Krenare Sogojeva, the agency successfully translated TikTok's privacy policies into Albanian, which the platform previously lacked. Furthermore, the agency raised the minimum age of use from 13 to 16, aligning it with local laws. According to Sogojeva, the absence of a TikTok representative or liaison officer in Kosovo is problematic. She highlighted that Kosovo does not have its own domain on TikTok, and that the personal data collected from Kosovan users is managed by TikTok's Singapore office, with which Kosovo has no communication.<sup>21</sup>

What perhaps is even more worrying is that Kosovo's legal and policy framework dealing exclusively with issues of domestic and gender-based violence does not sufficiently address technology-facilitated abuse of women and girls. For instance, consider Kosovo's Law on Protection Against Domestic Violence. Violence in the digital world is often an extension of domestic violence committed by an intimate partner, who may use digital means such as intimidation, control, harassment, or bullying to humiliate victims. Despite this reality, the law on protection against domestic violence does not address this form of violence, with no mention of cyber violence or related terms in the legislation. Similarly, the Law on Gender Equality also fails to address the specific challenges posed by technology-facilitated abuse, leaving a significant gap in the legal protection framework for women and girls facing digital harassment and violence.

On a more promising note, the National Strategy for Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence against Women 2022-2026, approved in January this year, addresses the issue of

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<sup>21</sup> Personal interview with Krenare Sogojeva, May 21, 2024.

digital violence in some parts of its action plan. This includes the upgrading and development of community policing and intelligence-led policing related to domestic violence and violence against women. The Strategy also emphasizes training for the Police Cybercrime Investigation Unit on addressing online violence against women. Furthermore, the strategy outlines plans to collaborate with media and information technology companies to prevent violence, sexual harassment, and harassment of women and girls through social media and the internet, thereby creating a safer digital space for them.

## THE LOGIC OF THE 'MANOSPHERE'

Even in the case of improvements to the legal and institutional frameworks that tackle online misogyny, the radical openness of the digital world provides a breeding ground for networked, decentralized and dispersed forms of misogyny that are difficult to govern. This difficulty can be discerned in the rise of phenomena such as the “manosphere”, which present the need to supplement legal and institutional points of view with a cultural and ideological critique.

“Manosphere” is a term used to designate a fragmented collection of blogs, chats, websites, forums and online communities promoting misogynist discourse. The Manosphere includes a wide range of sub-communities, which sometimes conflict and sometimes overlap, such as men’s rights activists (MRAs), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Pick-Up Artists (PUA’s), Fathers for Justice, Involuntary Celibates (Incels), Tradcons, etc. Although the tone and ideas promoted in these communities vary from more moderate expressions of male loneliness and frustration to advocations of rape and extremist violence, they all encourage a culture of blame towards women and embrace anti-feminist and alt-right ideologies. As such, “their philosophies about women’s rights and society are inevitably political”, although they often deny connections with the alt-right or having any political purposes.<sup>22</sup>

In recent years, research, academic scrutiny, and media attention around the manosphere and its many sub-communities have increased due to their involvement in several cases of mass murder, thus raising alarms over the security risks posed by these groups’ role in grooming, radicalisation, and the incitement of extremist violence and domestic terrorism. In 2014, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger became the most famous incel (“involuntary celibate” men who believe themselves deprived of sex due to no fault of their own and encourage a culture of blame towards women) when he went on a murdering spree, killing six people and then himself. Rodger first stabbed his two roommates to death and wounded their friend. He then

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<sup>22</sup> Lisa Sugiura, *The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women*, (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), chapter 2, Apple Books.



went to Starbucks and had coffee while uploading a video, "Elliot Rodger's Retribution," and sending out his 107,000-word manifesto "My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger." Rodger then drove to the Alpha Phi sorority in the UC Santa Barbara campus, shooting three women and killing two of them, and then continued on a shooting spree around Isla Vista, injuring 14 people and killing one. In the end, he crashed his car and shot himself dead. "All I ever wanted was to fit in and live a happy life," he wrote in his memoir, "but I was cast out and rejected, forced to endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance, all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me."<sup>23</sup> Rodger became a hero of the incel community. Men flocked to the manosphere, writing how what had happened was the fault of women and feminism. This could all have been avoided if only women had not denied him sex.

Elliot Rodger's story is an extreme example, but it tells us a lot about the logic of incels and of the Manosphere more generally. The narrative that is pushed relies on the belief that women owe men: men have the right to women's bodies, identities, sexuality and reputation. Feminine and/or feminist values and attitudes that deny this right are responsible for the moral corruption of society. Male victimization is one of the key characteristics of this narrative, which is then used to justify abuse. Women, and feminists more particularly, only pretend to be moral and just, but in fact are shallow, corrupt, and only flock to the alpha males of society that can provide them with status and material gain. In response to this perceived injustice, various sub-communities of the Manosphere often encourage revenge and a "war on women": women need to be exposed, punished, raped. Furthermore, this narrative is deeply rooted in the logic of a gendered market society. Women are presented as a resource, a commodity, that circulates in exchange for social value.

The discourse of the Manosphere reveals a crucial tension and contradiction within patriarchal sexual and gender politics: the constant oscillation between desire and hatred towards women. Kolano has pointed out how within the logic of misogyny that rules the Manosphere, women are "simultaneously overbearing and disempowered".<sup>24</sup> They exert both a corrupt and a powerful influence, simultaneously seductive and threatening, carrying the power to denigrate society and to save it. Kolano characterizes this as "the myth of the totalizing woman, from whom one expects immediate gratification and on whom one's psychic stability depends," which reveals:

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<sup>23</sup> Cited in Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-first Century*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 74.

<sup>24</sup> Megan Kolano, "The Pleasure of Misogyny: Incels, Castration, and Sexual Difference," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 42(7), 2022, p. 549.

- 1) *A fundamental fantasy that one's self-esteem, quality of life, and even will to live rise and fall according to what one does and does not have with a woman; and*
- 2) *A belief that one is entitled to have unmitigated access to pleasure provided by a woman.*<sup>25</sup>

Rodger's statement that his isolation and subsequent violence were "all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me"<sup>26</sup> illustrates this myth clearly. Women are amplified into a total being and then punished for not meeting this impossible expectation. As such, they will always, inevitably, be a disappointment. But what seems to hinge on this disappointment is the men's self-alienation. That is to say, it is through the breakdown of the myth of the totalizing woman that men's own lack is exposed. And it is precisely this perception of impotence that erupts into violence.

## ALBKINGS — AN ALBANIAN MANOSPHERE?

While it is important to recognize that Albkings does not use the specific language and terminology that has come to characterize the sub-communities of the manosphere, and it lacks the explicit engagement with the male victimization narrative, it is productive to read the discourse of the Albkings together with the misogynist logic of the Manosphere to unwrap the political and ideological stakes that might be implicit in the group and better understand how narratives around women and girls are constructed online. This also allows us to explore how more global notions of misogyny in digital society can interact and combine with more local – Balkan and Albanian – patriarchal values.

In a phone conversation with Insajderi TV under conditions of anonymity, one of the admins of Albkings, who calls himself "the main man," responds to accusations that the Telegram group has become a space for pornography, prostitution and pedophilia. He insists that the group has "clear rules," that pedophilia is not tolerated, and that anyone who breaks these rules will be "banned" by the admin. Although these "rules" do not appear to have been as strict as he might present them, as the elaborated examples show, it is notable how much the admin insists on the group's purpose, to expose the moral corruption of women:

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, op. cit.



*The group is not there to extort money from women or to blackmail them in order to go out with them. The group is simply there to show their real faces and that they pretend to be moral, when in fact they're not. And that the prostitution that happens in Kosovo [can be exposed]. [...] If you write to me asking to delete your photos, or offer money, or offer to go out with me, I will neither delete the photos, nor go out with you. The pictures stay there so people can see what and who you are and that's it.*<sup>27</sup>

This line of argument – with pointed expressions such as “show their real faces,” so people can see “what and who [these women] are,” or that “they pretend to be moral, when in fact they’re not” – functions within the paranoid obsession with exposing and revealing, which, as explained above, is central to the logic of the manosphere. Disenchanted men thus set on a mission to expose the “truth” of society and expose how certain women pretend to be moral, but in fact are “sluts”.

Recognising the disciplinary and punitive nature of the group is fundamental to understanding its political stakes and investment in dynamics of power that go way beyond the consumption of pornographic content for mere sexual enjoyment. To return to Manne’s concept of misogyny, we can view the enactment of online violence here as the effort to police women that fail to fulfill the gender roles that are expected of them. The function of policing is further emphasized in the fact that the group was used to extract revenge on two female journalists that reported on issues of gendered violence – one of them, Ardiana Thaçi-Mehmeti, reported on the case of AlbKings, and the other, a journalist working for Kallxo.com who prefers to remain unnamed, reported on domestic violence. The admin admitted that he posted the picture of one of the journalists and called on the members of the group to initiate a campaign of harassment. “If you meddle with our business,” he stated, “we meddle with yours.”<sup>28</sup> In the same conversation, he also spoke about waging a war against a known feminist because “she’s been saying that there’s pedophilia in the group”.<sup>29</sup> From these examples we may also observe how crucial to the way in which the admin gives the group a mandate to discipline and punish is a perceived sense of injustice and the subsequent need to retaliate, which in turn are used to moralize and justify abuse and violence.

The question of the reinforcement and policing of gender roles and expectations becomes all the more relevant when considered through the context of Albanian heteropatriarchal norms and nuclear family values, where the “myth of the totalizing woman,” that Kolano discusses in relation to the ambivalence of patriarchal desire in the manosphere, as

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<sup>27</sup> One of the admins of ‘AlbKings’ recorded by Insajderi TV, April 18, 2024.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obM9NqpxiKg&ab\\_channel=INSAJDERITV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obM9NqpxiKg&ab_channel=INSAJDERITV) Accessed May 24, 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

elaborated above, also comes into play. Here, it is instructive to turn to not only the figure of women that was being constructed by Albking (as deceiving and morally corrupt “whores”), but also to the manner in which media discourse counteracted this figure of the “whore” with the figure of the “mother” embedded in nuclear family values. *Kiks Kosova*, the show that Adriana Thaçi co-hosts, titled their episode dedicated to Albking, “Mother of three children attacked,”<sup>30</sup> referring to Thaçi’s harassment, a title that circulated in many news portals’ posts in social media. In the show, Thaçi herself emphasizes her role as a mother and as a daughter within the family structure. She speaks of the distress caused both to her own mother and to her teenage son on learning how she was being harassed. This is, of course, a very legitimate reaction and concern, but it is interesting to note how the discourse around Albking remains tangled in the dialectic between the “slut” and the “mother” – either women are attacked as the former, or protected as the latter. A very common reaction in TV shows was also the surprise and disgust that “a married man”, “a father of children,” could have been part of the group. In a show in Kallxo.com dedicated to the most recent arrests related to Albking, one of the guests in a burst of anger even goes on to say that “it would be very interesting to post the numbers of their wives in Albking and see what they would do then.”<sup>31</sup> It is as if the solution to the “degeneration” of women is the consolidation of their role in the nuclear family. But it is never questioned how this notion of “degeneration” is itself tied to the moralizing force of nuclear family values; how protecting women as wives or daughters perpetuates the ideology that women only have value as such. The split itself – the mechanism of shame and violence it triggers, the heavy burden it places on women’s shoulders – must be placed under scrutiny, and not just what happens when one falls on the wrong side of it.

This disciplinary and punitive function of the group, as symptomatic of the moralizing forces of wider societal heteronormative expectations, failed to come to the spotlight in the news coverage and the television shows that followed the prosecution of Albking. It is precisely in this failure that Manne’s insistence on understanding misogyny as structural and not reducible to the psychology of individual agents becomes particularly relevant. The most common descriptions of the members of Albking by journalists and TV show guests revolved around the idea of some form of psychological deficiency. “Mentally ill,” “perverted,” “sick,” “sexual maniacs,” “frustrated,” “psychopaths,” were the usual characterizations. Furthermore, in Kallxo Pernime, one of the guests, after describing the group members as “sick,” goes on to speak about their “low level of education,” and expresses surprise that “one of the arrested even has a university degree, and yet this did

<sup>30</sup> Kiks Kosova, “Sulmohet nëna e 3 fëmijëve, burrat e Albking nuk ndalen [Mother of 3 children attacked, Albking men will not stop], May 7, 2024.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdoKmQECU5w&ab\\_channel=KlanKosova](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdoKmQECU5w&ab_channel=KlanKosova). Accessed on May 20, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Kallxo Pernime, “Pse u mbyll ‘Albking’? [Why was ‘Albking’ closed?], May 31, 2024.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0uYGPSG21o&t=3839s&ab\\_channel=Kallxo.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0uYGPSG21o&t=3839s&ab_channel=Kallxo.com). Accessed June 1, 2024.



not stop him”.<sup>32</sup> This type of discourse relies on two main trails of stigmatization: pathology and class. In both, we may notice the molding of Albkings members into deviant others – either the neurodivergent other or the uneducated, lower class other. Of course, every discourse that constructs a deviant other by that very same token postulates a normal majority. The underlying assumption that one could draw here is that these deviant others could be “civilized” into normalcy. This normative line of thinking ultimately fails to address the continuum of patriarchal violence from offline to online, suggesting that online violence could be avoided if only citizens were properly informed of the rules of online conduct; if they had proper education; if individual pathologies were addressed or weird personalities corrected.

To be sure, the construction of deviant others in order to explain online misogynist violence is not reserved to Kosovo media but is something that often surfaces in the discourse around the manosphere more broadly. Sugiura, for example, has spotlighted criticisms of major news outlets such as the BBC, CNN and *The New York Times* for their portrayal of incels as “something distinct and ominous from wider society”.<sup>33</sup> She warns against falling into extreme/non-extreme and deviant/every-day dichotomies when speaking about incels and other sub-communities of the manosphere:

*The extreme/non-extreme distinction is deceptive, since it obscures systems of oppression and ‘everyday’ misogyny – particularly online, where such boundaries can be harder to differentiate – that have become socially sanctioned and normalised. Moreover, this arbitrary division absolves the ‘non-misogynistic’ majority as it is allowed to express reprimand for and rejection of ‘extreme’ misogyny, whilst presenting itself as morally irreprehensible.*<sup>34</sup>

There is a risk, therefore, in the attribution of violence to deviant and secluded groups, problematic personalities or individual pathologies, without taking into account how pervasive misogyny is even in the wider society, which we might consider to be the “normal majority”, making it this much harder to identify the roots of online misogynist violence in patriarchal systems of socialization.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Sugiura, *The Incel Rebellion*, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

The case of Albking's made the rounds in the public discourse of recent months, causing much shock and disgust for the violence it enacted against women and girls through sexual harassment, blackmail, and violation of personal data. However, this public response was caught up in the sensationalism caused by the pornographic nature of the group, pushing forth a narrative which tied the violence to sexual gain. Although the gain of sexual pleasure is undoubtedly integral to the logic of the group, this paper has attempted to also dig out the politically reactionary nature of the violence of Albking's, which remains largely ignored by public discourse. By doing so, we tried to complicate both the notion of "sex" and that of "politics", showing how they are entangled with one another.

As such, the case illustrates the ambiguities and the difficulties that arise in the grey areas between "online" and "offline" in digital society. The need to deconstruct the online/offline dichotomy arises both in order to acknowledge the gravity of the harm that is facilitated through digital technologies, which is often hidden behind the anonymity that online spaces provide or cast aside as "just words" and not "real" violence; as well as to draw attention to the danger of scapegoating forms of networked online misogyny as deviant and perverse cases, isolated in their mediums, thus absolving wider society from any responsibility it may have in reinforcing such manifestations of violence.

The case of Albking's illustrates both of these dangers. On the one hand, it serves as a telltale of the shortcomings in both legal structures and institutional responses in Kosovo when it comes to combating technology-facilitated violence in general, and online gender-based violence in particular. Moreover, it highlights the influence yielded by technology conglomerates and the corresponding powerlessness on the part of governments and national regulatory bodies vis-a-vis these entities in safeguarding citizens from online abuses. On the other hand, the case speaks of the shortcomings of the normative discourse propagated in public discussions in the media, which sought to portray Albking's members as socially deviant, psychologically disturbed, perverse and misinformed. This psychological interpretation ultimately fails to address the structural misogyny embedded in the dominant patriarchal social order prevalent in Kosovo, which is increasingly leveraging virtual platforms to exert authority and control over women's bodies, identities, sexuality and reputation.

As we tried to interrogate the ways in which the discourse around Albking's – both within the group and in the media coverage of the case – tied women to gendered roles and expectations, new questions arose. We identified how this discourse produced a symmetrical split in the representation of women, who were either being attacked as morally corrupt and deceiving "whores" or protected as "mothers" and "daughters" through the vindicating



grace of the nuclear family structure. More study is needed to chisel out the exact mechanisms through which this totalizing binary, and the breakdown thereof, triggers male violence, and how the specificity of the digital medium facilitates this trigger.

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