CASE STUDY: “Vermin,” “Parasites,” “Satan”: How Toxic Speech Became a Normal Part of Public Discourse

Institute of Communication Studies

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The toxic discourse in North Macedonia’s online political landscape continues to thrive, fueled by sharp polarization and the anonymity of social media. Between September 29 and December 22, 2024, the EOOH platform monitored a total of 238 posts (n=238), capturing insights into the language of hate directed at political figures and groups. This analysis focuses on the patterns of political hate speech, key examples, and its implications for democratic discourse.

The research, conducted by the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) in cooperation with Textgain, aimed to assess the levels of harmful and toxic speech directed at political figures on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok.

Key Findings

1. **Platforms and Toxicity**
    - **Facebook:** Dominated the dataset but exhibited varied toxicity levels. Toxic language frequently appeared in comment sections of posts by political candidates.
    - **TikTok:** Despite contributing only 1% of the total posts, it exhibited the highest proportion of toxic messages.

2. **Toxic Language Examples**
    - Personal Attacks on Candidates:

      Under a Facebook post by President Gordana Siljanovska Davkova commemorating the Day of Macedonian Revolution on October 23, 2024, comments included:

- *"Fikus Pendarovski"* (a term belittling former President Stevo Pendarovski as a decorative figure without influence).
- *"Marioneta"* (puppet), implying lack of agency in decision-making for the sitting president Gordana Siljanovska Davkova

Similarly, under a Facebook post by Kanal 5 TV on October 26, 2024, several toxic comments emerged:

- *"Macedonian evil"*, a derogatory reference targeting VMRO-DPMNE.
- *"Listen Micko you govedo"* (Listen Micko, you cattle), directed at her and her party leadership.

- **Dehumanizing Rhetoric:**

  Terms like *магаре* (donkey), *гомно* (dung), and *паразити* (parasites) appeared across platforms, often aimed at political groups or their leaders. Another example is the phrase сатана (satan) used to dehumanize the former ruling political party, SDSM ("You are the satan").

- **Violence and War References:**

  Comments using terms such as *убиство* (murder), and *закана* (threat) were more common on TikTok than other platforms, indicating a higher degree of hostility among users of the platform. Although, the representative sample for TikTok was drastically lower than the other platforms (with 1% of the overall detected posts).

3. **Patterns and Themes**

- **Normalized Political Hostility:** Phrases like *зајко* (Zajko, a diminutive used to ridicule former PM Zoran Zaev), *бандит* (bandits), *окупатори* (occupators), *магаре* (donkey), and *напад* (attack) repeatedly surfaced in posts, showing how hostility is entrenched in political discourse.

Methodology

The data collection process relied on the EOOH online hate speech platform in collaboration with Textgain, which monitored interactions primarily on Facebook and Twitter. A total of 238 messages were selected for analysis. These messages were gathered from comment sections rather than from official posts made by political parties or candidates themselves, ensuring a focus on public discourse. The platform used automated tools, in conjunction with human oversight, to extract relevant messages that included toxic elements. These elements were identified based on predefined categories such as profanity, ridicule, contempt, racism, sexism, politics, religion, threats, and untruths.

Posts were collected from Facebook (97%), X (3%), and TikTok (1%) and analyzed for toxicity scores and thematic content. All posts were written in Macedonian, with an average toxicity score of 0.08. While no posts exceeded a toxicity score of 0.8, keywords and recurring themes highlighted systemic hostility in online conversations.

The analysis incorporated both automated linguistic tools and human oversight to identify vulgarity, threats, and politically charged hate speech. Specific examples were examined to provide contextual depth.

Discussion

The examples above highlight the troubling normalization of hate speech in Macedonian political dialogue. The frequent use of terms like *Fikus Pendarovski* or *VmroGnidi* exemplifies how toxic language undermines meaningful debate by focusing on personal attacks rather than policy.

Similarly, the use of violent and dehumanizing language such as *убиство* (murder) and *паразити* (parasites) and *сатана* (satan) - not only vilifies opponents but also risks inciting hostility in real-world interactions. These trends erode the quality of public discourse, replacing constructive dialogue with hostility and polarization.

TikTok, despite being a smaller platform in this context, emerged as a notable hotspot for high-toxicity messages. Its algorithmic content amplification may exacerbate the spread of inflammatory posts, further polarizing users.

Conclusion

This case study underscores the pervasive nature of political hate speech in North Macedonia. The use of targeted insults like *Fikus Pendarovski* and *VmroGnidi* reveals how public figures are routinely dehumanized online, undermining their credibility and discouraging civic engagement.

Toxic Categories Analyzed

The following toxic elements were examined in the context of the messages directed at presidential candidates:

- **Profanity:** The use of vulgar language aimed at demeaning the candidates.
- **Ridicule:** Comments intended to mock the candidates, often based on their gender or age.
- **Contempt:** Expression of disdain or disrespect, often tied to political or personal characteristics.
- **Racism:** Although less common, certain messages contained ethnic slurs or references.

- **Sexism:** Gendered insults or comments aimed at undermining the candidates due to their gender.
- **Politics:** Politically charged insults, often linked to the affiliations of VMRO-DPMNE or SDSM.
- **Religion:** References to religion in a derogatory or demeaning context.
- **Threats:** Messages containing direct or implied violence.
- **Untruths:** Disinformation or false claims about the candidates.

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