

CASE STUDY: Gendered Hate Speech During the 2024 Presidential Elections in North Macedonia

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The 2024 presidential elections in North Macedonia saw increased political engagement across social media platforms, with heated discourse often directed towards female candidates. This case study examines the prevalence and nature of gendered hate speech online, focusing solely on the 2024 presidential elections.

Utilizing data from the [EOOH online hate speech platform](#), a total of 1,634 (n=1634) messages in Macedonian language were analyzed, collected between March 01 and June 20, covering both the pre-election and post-election periods. 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 these candidates on Facebook and Twitter.

Key Findings

An overwhelming portion of the number of messages containing hate speech were directed against the presidential candidate supported by the political party VMRO-DPMNE, Gordana Siljanovska Davkova. Interestingly, the candidate of the political party Levica, Biljana Vankovska, was not subjected to the same degree of attacks as Siljanovska-Davkova. Few messages targeting Vankovska contained gendered or ageist insults, and the toxic messages directed at her were generally less severe. This difference could be attributed to Vankovska not advancing to the second round of elections and her lack of affiliation with either of the two main political parties, VMRO-DPMNE or SDSM. Without the same level of public visibility or partisan association, Vankovska likely did not attract the same volume of politically charged hate speech.

Approximately 2% of the analyzed messages contained disinformation, while 1% included threats. Although low in number, these messages were particularly concerning as they had the potential to influence public perception through falsehoods or intimidate individuals involved in the political process.

The Prevalence of “Grandma Goga”

One of the most frequently used slurs against Gordana Siljanovska Davkova was “Grandma Goga,”¹ which appeared in numerous comments. This term was not just an insult to her age but also served as a vehicle for ridiculing her political involvement, often comparing her to male politicians, such as U.S. President Joe Biden, in a derogatory manner. For example, one message stated:

“Најјакото е што вмровци се исмеваат со Бајден дека е стар, а се восхитуваат на сенилната и горда гога, изгубена во време и простор. ВМРО е дијагноза! Секта!”

This comment ridiculed both her age and her political affiliation, highlighting the intersection of sexism, ageism, and political disdain. By framing Siljanovska Davkova as an out-of-touch elderly woman, such slurs harmfully shift the discourse from her policies and qualifications to personal attributes irrelevant to her capabilities as a leader. Other comments followed suit:

„Гордана гога е баба, не ја бива за претседател.“

„Готова е гога греота зашто ја мачат баби се за дома не за да одат по ТВ студија...“

„Каков грев е баба гога, Господ на помош нека ни е.“

Commenters frequently referred to her as “senile,” using her age and appearance as points of ridicule, while also mocking her political affiliations. One commenter wrote, “*The VMRO took Grandma Goga to a meeting at the EPP like a young bride,*” suggesting that her participation was merely ceremonial and dismissing her political agency.

Why Ridicule Harms Discourse

Using slurs like “Grandma Goga” reduces political discourse to petty and harmful commentary. Instead of engaging in meaningful debate about the candidates’ policies or platforms, these messages reinforce negative stereotypes about women in politics—particularly older women. Ageist and sexist insults like these devalue a candidate’s contributions based solely on gender and age, undermining the inclusivity of political processes. Such rhetoric stifles constructive dialogue and perpetuates a culture where female candidates are judged by personal characteristics rather than their ideas and qualifications.

The analysis revealed that toxic messages were more prevalent on Facebook, where 55% of the extremely toxic messages (with a toxicity score greater than 0.8) were found. Twitter, while also home to harmful content, appeared to have fewer highly toxic messages, possibly due to the platform’s stricter moderation policies.

1. The term “Grandma Goga” suggests that the person is evil, frightening, or hostile. It’s a twist on “Baba Roga,” a mythical character from Slavic folklore, typically portrayed as a frightening old woman who scares or kidnaps children.

A significant portion of the hate speech against Siljanovska Davkova was tied to her support from VMRO-DPMNE, adding a political layer to the sexist rhetoric. Many comments combined political insults with gendered slurs, creating a dual attack on both her political allegiance and her gender. For instance, she was frequently accused of being a “traitor” and mocked for her affiliation with VMRO-DPMNE, which some commenters associated with incompetence or corruption. This pattern of politically charged sexist discourse was one of the most common in the analysis, with many comments including both political and sexist toxic elements.

Key Remarks and Conclusions

The findings illustrate a troubling pattern of gendered hate speech in political discourse, particularly aimed at older female candidates like Gordana Siljanovska Davkova. The frequent use of terms like “Grandma Goga” serves to trivialize her role in the political landscape, shifting the focus away from her political platform and reducing her candidacy to a subject of mockery based on her age and gender. This is not only harmful to her personally but also detrimental to the overall quality of political debate.

Biljana Vankovska, in contrast, was spared much of the gendered hate speech likely due to her early exit from the race and her lack of affiliation with the dominant political parties, which suggests that party politics, in combination with sexism, plays a key role in the volume and intensity of online hate speech.

This case study demonstrates the importance of monitoring and addressing gendered hate speech, particularly during politically charged periods like elections. The harmful combination of sexism, ageism, and political insults seen in this study underscores the need for stronger moderation practices on social media platforms and more robust efforts to promote respectful political discourse.

Moving forward, policymakers, social media companies, and civil society must work together to ensure that online spaces allow for meaningful political engagement without the corrosive effects of hate speech.

Methodology

The data collection process relied on the EOOH online hate speech platform, which monitored interactions primarily on Facebook and Twitter. A total of 1,634 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.**

The analysis of toxicity in online messages was conducted using Textgain's advanced language processing tools, which measure the intensity of negative sentiment in text. Textgain assigns a toxicity score to each message, ranging from 0 to 1, with a higher score indicating a more severe level of toxicity. Messages with scores above 0.8 were classified as extremely toxic. Messages were further analyzed for specific toxic keywords and phrases commonly used in the context of hate speech against female candidates. The platform also monitored the frequency and combinations of different toxic categories.

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.

