



COVID-19 crisis and hate speech

Transnational report

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- Estonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Spain -

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GENERAL CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested not only health systems around the world, but also social cohesion in times of crisis. If in the debut of the pandemic, the Director General of the World Health Organization warned the population on «**infodemia**», and the risks of proliferation of conspiracy theories and false news, in May, the United Nations representative, Secretary General António Guterres, launched a **warning** on the «virus of hatred» that was spreading rapidly throughout the world. Guterres denounced the «tsunamis» of racial hatred, xenophobia and anti-Semitism that was manifesting globally.

The report "COVID-19 crisis and hate speech" presents the main trends and narratives that triggered hate speech in the most significant moments of the health crisis in Estonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Spain.

This collection of national case studies provides an overview of the main events that fuelled hate speech among the population, an indicative list of favourite targets, and the particularities of hate speech in each of the states that participated in this study. In addition, the research teams tried to inventory the most significant actions and narratives carried out at national level to counter the hate speech and conspiracy theories.

Regardless of socio-political context or ethnic and demographic structure, in all five states were identified alarmist conspiracy theories, xenophobic and racist discourses, as well as attempts to correlate the evolution of COVID-19 with stereotypical social representations of ethnic groups.

In all five states included in the study, the strategy of identifying the "scapegoat" went hand in hand with the vigilante discourse promoted by the media, opinion leaders and politicians who criticized various social groups for non-compliance with health regulations or other controlling measures. Usually, the scapegoats were the "others", members of minority groups who, prior the pandemic, were already favourite targets of hate speech and of pejorative cultural stereotypes.

In Estonia, for example, migrants (especially those from Africa or with Muslim origins) and foreign workers have been the favourite targets of hate speech, a discourse consistently fuelled by the Conservative government that has adopted the principle of "Estonians first" as state policy. In Poland, far-right political groups, which are becoming increasingly popular, have promoted conspiracy theories imbued with hate speech targeting citizens of Asian descent or the Jewish community, and even the LGBTQ+ community. In Romania, the favourite targets were Romanian citizens from the Diaspora and the Roma community. A relatively similar situation was identified in Slovakia, where Roma and "irresponsible" Slovaks (citizens who allegedly did not comply to medical regulations and restrictions) were targeted by hate speech. In Spain, the variety of hateful incitement and targets reached the entire ethnic, religious, social, and even political spectrum - xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism being amplified in the context of the medical crisis.

For the promoters of hate speech in the five states, solutions to limit the effects of the disease also included limiting the rights and freedoms of those they perceived as responsible for the spread of the virus. Thus, the dehumanizing discourse against certain categories of people included radical solutions such as expulsion, severe isolation, but also physical violence or the extermination of these categories perceived as not only a threat to public health, but also as a threat to national culture and economy.

The comparative analysis also emphasized how the medical crisis was politically and ideologically instrumentalized in the participating countries. Thus, in each of the five countries, political actors were identified as originators of hate speech and, in some instances, of conspiracy theories, in order to promote or consolidate their own political agendas. In Estonia and Poland, countries where far-right parties and formations are at the forefront of national politics, the main promoters of hate speech have been members of the national parliament or government. Moreover, in Spain, next to populist, far right or far left voices in national politics have joined members of pro-independence parties from Catalonia who tried to promote their political agenda through offensive or shocking messages targeting both the Spanish government, as well its supporters. In Romania and Slovakia, the generators for the hate narratives were mostly representatives of opposition parties or opinion leaders critical against the government.

The hatred that was generated and perpetuated by the medical crisis could not be significantly controlled or discouraged during this challenging period. With the exception of Spain, where the Government and law enforcement agencies have closely monitored the escalation of hate speech and hate crimes, in other states the counter narratives have been initiated by non-governmental organizations or public figures whose voices have not been sufficiently strong during the crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis is far from over and states around the world are still looking for solutions to limit the effects of the pandemic. For the hate virus, on the other hand, the chances of finding an effective “treatment” are extremely low, despite the fact that the favourite targets are known and that the triggering events can be anticipated. Political and institutional actors have a duty to counterbalance these sideslips from the democratic standards, by promoting an inclusive attitude and discourse, but also by law enforcement. It is vital that, at the end of this global challenge, societies acquire not only immunity from the disease, but also the wisdom to recover in the spirit of solidarity and human rights.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The aim of the research was to identify and list the most predominant trends and hate speech narratives that circulated in online media and social media during the COVID-19 crisis in Estonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Spain.

The national case studies were documented from February 2020 until May 2020, in the most critical period of COVID-19 crisis across the world. Along with media monitoring, the documentation process consisted in ongoing monitoring and indexing of public and official pages of politicians, state authorities, influencers and other individuals that reach significant online communities and that potentially could influence their behaviours and perceptions on COVID-19 crisis.

Each national case study provides data on:

- **National context. Triggering events:** Within this section there were included relevant public statements and/or media reports that triggered a negative response and hate speech within various groups/communities
- **Hate speech predominant targets:** The section includes an indicative list of the most targeted groups that were associated with the negative effects of COVID-19. Additionally, it provides detailed descriptions on trending hate narratives that were developed in relation with these groups.
- **Redressing hate speech. Counter narratives:** The section includes relevant examples of initiatives and/or public reactions against hate speech spreading in COVID-19 context.
- **Conclusions and recommendations:** Each case study provides a set of conclusions and recommendations that were inspired both by the research findings and also by the national context.

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ESTONIA – COVID-19 CRISIS AND HATE SPEECH PHENOMENA

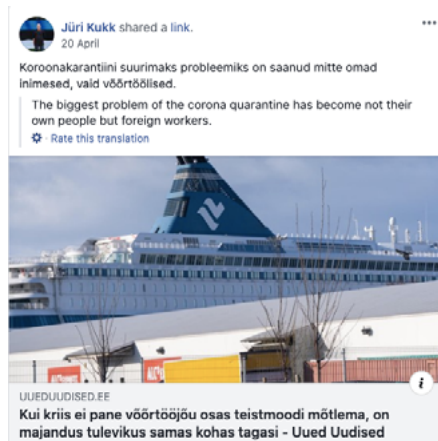
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NATIONAL CONTEXT. TRIGGERING EVENTS.

On March 12th 2020, the Estonian government declared the state of emergency due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and the threat of mass infection in Estonia. The emergency situation was initially envisioned to last until May 1st, but was later extended to May 17th. In general, the Estonian public accepted the situation and different rules imposed by the government. There has been only a modest public debate about the necessity of all the measures that were put in place by the state.

The emergency situation has prompted a surge in the previously common hate narrative against immigrants. One of the specific topics has been expelling foreign workers and “putting Estonians first”, initiated by the Ministry of the Interior. The Ministry of the Interior, headed by the leader of the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE) Mart Helme, drafted a bill allowing the annulment of the long-stay visas of third-country nationals and their expulsion from the country, as soon as they become unemployed during the emergency situation (or after). The legal amendments were approved by the Parliament on 20 April 2020.

The Ministry of the Interior has strongly expressed its aim of protecting Estonians and giving preference to Estonian labour during the crisis. EKRE supporter groups on social media have applauded the approach of “foreigners out”. But it has received more criticism than support in mainstream media, although mainly from the point of view that Estonian farmers need foreign labour.



This topic is not new for EKRE. The party's campaign is built on a strong anti-immigrant sentiment, with racist undertones. In 2013, one of the figureheads of the party, its deputy chairman and current Minister of Finance, Martin Helme, attracted attention by proposing that Estonia's immigration policy should have one rule: **"if you're black, go back"**, and has as recently as in 2019 confirmed **standing by these words**.

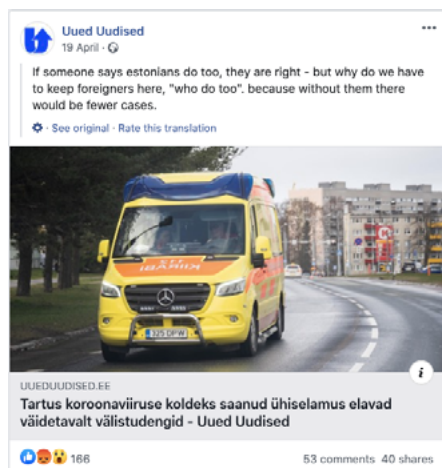


The narrative against foreign workers has somewhat contributed to a hostile discussion, but has not resulted in any illegal hate speech.

Another incident, which has more explicitly generated hateful comments against foreigners, depicts six foreign students of the University of Tartu who live in a dorm who were **tested positive** for the COVID-19 on 17 April 2020. The spread of the virus began due to a birthday gathering in the dorm. The Estonian government put the dorm in a complete lockdown and the incident received a lot of media attention. One news portal published a special **news piece** about the matter that all the involved students were foreigners.

The public commentary next to the news (real names, no anonymized users contributed) mostly carried a xenophobic message that urged the foreign students to be deported without further questions. The similar narrative repeated in the commentary of many portals, in **one case** the

most popular (anonymous) comment with almost 500 positive reactions stated that there will be no tears if these foreign students end up in a mass grave. The same topic also continued on social media where the patterns were similar, a consistent amount of comments concentrated on the fact that these students were of foreign origin and therefore they should be expelled from the country. Some comments were also racist, alluding to skin colour (see for example this [FB thread](#)).



Only very few comments made about the incident could be considered illegal hate speech in the Estonian legal context and most comments could be classified as benign hate, therefore the situation had no legal consequences. All of this contributed to the already existing hate narratives about foreigners that have emerged in recent years. The official reaction by the politicians and officials was neutral, concentrating on the facts of the incident.

In general, it is difficult to outline concrete incidents or statements that have found wide-spread coverage and resulted in illegal hate speech. Although hate speech can be found in social media comments, particularly in far-right supporter groups on Facebook, these comments, which are usually the reaction to incidents happening abroad, do not find their way to mainstream media. The main targets of hate speech on social media are migrants and refugees, particularly Africans and Muslims. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the media platform of EKRE, [Uued Uudised](#), has repeatedly covered news on migrants in other countries violating the rules of the emergency situation (e.g. "[Today's Europe: Migrants spit on the restrictions put in place due to the coronavirus](#)").

Tänane Euroopa: migrandid sülitavad koroonaviirusest tingitud piirangutele

MAAILM, 30.03.2020



Usually, when this type of news articles are shared on social media, they receive comments that include incitement to violence and degrading language that could qualify as illegal hate speech based on any international definition (some of the most striking examples from Facebook groups can be found [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). This kind of hate speech was common before the COVID-19 pandemic, being the usual reaction to any news shared on the topic of migrants not following the social order. There has been no legal consequences, as the Estonian [Penal Code](#) does not allow punishment for this kind of comments, requiring direct danger to life, health or property of a person to qualify as an offence.

HATE SPEECH PREDOMINANT TARGETS



The COVID-19 pandemic has not created new target groups of hate speech in Estonia. Traditional targets, such as migrants and refugees, especially Africans and Muslims, are still the most common target groups. Most prevalent themes include these groups breaking the social norms and not contributing to the society.

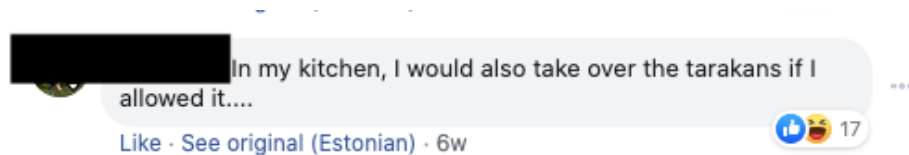
There is no in-depth analysis on the main targets of hate speech in the Estonian online social media. At the same time, the [monitoring exercise on the implementation of the Code of conduct](#) shows that the most commonly reported grounds of hate speech are xenophobia (including anti-migrant hatred) and sexual orientation.

Hate against people who are not ethnically Estonian could be explained by the complex history of the country. After the annexation of Estonia by the Soviet Union, Estonian migration was no longer a naturally developing process. Soviet ethnic and demographic policies moved millions of people around, a policy which affected Estonia in particular. Before the occupation, the composition of the Estonian population was very [homogeneous](#). Germans, Swedes, Jews and Russians made up only a small part of the population. Today, the Russian-speaking minority makes up almost 30 percent of the population. This significant change in population has led to various tensions and segregation. There is deep [friction](#) between the Estonian and the Russian-speaking population in Estonia: there is still division between the two communities in education, labour market, living environment, media consumption etc. This historical and cultural context may at least partly explain the negative attitudes people hold toward immigration which in turn is exploited by politicians to spread hate and fear.

Hate speech can predominantly be found in Facebook comments as responses to the articles of [Uued Uudised](#), the media platform of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE). For example, Uued Uudised published an [article](#) about migrants in France not following the rules to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The [comments](#) on a EKRE supporter group on Facebook suggested that the whole world would benefit if the migrants would get the virus and die (referring to natural selection).



An [article](#) about migrants in Brussels getting in trouble with the police received [comments](#) about exterminating migrants, referring to them as "cockroaches" and "pests".



Similarly, in the [comments](#) on an article about the tough situation of migrants in Italy it was wished that the migrants would get infected with the coronavirus, or go back to their home countries. Furthermore, in the [comments](#) on an article about people ignoring restrictions in Bangladesh, these people were called "dirty Muslims", "worse than animals", and it was expressed that Allah is apparently wishing them to die because of the virus.



One [article](#) on Uued Uudised blamed the spread of the COVID-19 among vulnerable migrant groups on left-wing liberal institutions encouraging migration. The [comments](#) expressed hope that if the sea has not killed the migrants yet, hopefully the coronavirus will.

An article about Hungary expelling citizens of Iran for breaking the rules of quarantine received praising [comments](#) on Facebook, particularly emphasising that black people (using the derogatory term) and Muslims should be deported, shot, or sent to the zoo.



One new specific theme that has arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic is that [foreign workers should be sent back home](#), but also (slightly paradoxically) that black people or refugees should be sent to work on farms. In Estonia, the foreign work force in the agricultural field usually mainly consists of Ukrainian citizens, but several Facebook commentators have suggested that since the farms currently need workers, black people (using the derogatory term) in Estonia should be sent to farms, as they are seen hanging around the city doing nothing, ["coming out like cockroaches"](#) when it is sunny. The common response is that refugees, particularly Africans, [did not come to Europe to work](#) or [do not even understand the concept of work](#).



Most commonly, the proposed actions against these groups include deportation or extermination, or it is expressed that they deserve to get the coronavirus and die.

REDRESSING HATE SPEECH. COUNTER NARRATIVES.

The peculiarity of Estonian social media is the fact that the far-right agenda is strong and overwhelming, only a few people visibly challenge dominant hate narratives. In addition, there are only a handful anti-racist groups or groups where human rights agenda is prevalent. This means that counter narratives are not significant or systemic. Therefore, current research can only pinpoint some trends, but mostly these should not be taken as counter narratives with widespread influence.

Facebook page [Salliv Eesti / Tolerant Estonia](#) could be viewed as the main initiator of counter narratives to challenge the Estonian Government's decisions and their xenophobic rhetoric regarding foreign workers, especially Ukrainians.

Two types of arguments and/or narratives could be identified:

1. Posts and comments that directly criticize or attack the government's policies that were implemented against foreign workers during the emergency situation. These narratives include calling the government xenophobic and also reminding the public that Estonia has desired to be part of the Nordic countries that respect human rights and openness for years.
2. Posts and comments that focus on the fact that Estonians themselves like to study, work and travel abroad. This narrative builds on personal experiences and stories about how Estonians have done seasonal work, for example, in Australia or spent a semester abroad.

In addition, the movement "[Jah vabadusele, ei valedele](#)" (Yes to freedom, no to lies), which regularly organizes protests against the current government, has shared posts on Facebook condemning the government's xenophobic policies during the pandemic. However, their

narrative is strongly focused on anti-government arguments, rather than countering hate speech in general.

Another movement [Kõigi Eesti](#) (*My Estonia too*), which promotes equality and anti-racist values, has shared news articles which disagree with the government's policy on foreign workers, but has not contributed with any independent narrative.

Other people, groups, institutions and pages that have contributed to the discussion have done so sporadically and have not initiated a clear counter narrative.

There have been no noticeable responses to Facebook comments inciting to hatred and violence against migrants for violating the rules of the emergency situation, which can be found mainly as a reaction to articles of [Uued Uudised](#).

There is no way to ascertain if and how these counter narratives have had any impact on the debates surrounding Covid-19 pandemic and different hate agendas.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Covid-19 crisis demonstrated that hate agenda is seeping into policymaking. With the far-right EKRE in the government, xenophobic tendencies have become part of the legislation and official rhetoric. This has also translated into hate on social media, in the Estonian context the most used platform is Facebook. The phenomenon is not new but seems to have grown in scale in the time of crisis.

Recommendations:

- △ Since the hate agenda seems to be much more dominant than the counter narratives, a need for civic and human rights education is more urgent than ever.
- △ In Estonia, the hate speech laws are too soft and the current Penal Code is futile against hate speech for its wording since it requires words to be accompanied by direct danger to one's life or well-being. The Penal Code has to be amended so that the state could also react to instigation of hate and calls to violence.

POLAND – COVID-19 CRISIS AND HATE SPEECH PHENOMENA

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NATIONAL CONTEXT. TRIGGERING EVENTS.

The COVID-19 epidemic in Poland caused a rise in xenophobic, antisemitic and racist incidents. The vast majority of them was met online – on social media (Facebook, Twitter), in YouTube videos and comments to the media materials. From the very beginning of the pandemic, aggressive behaviour was observed – hate speech and discrimination towards people of Asian origin, who were indicated to be transmitting the virus (even if they have lived in Poland for many years and had not travelled to China prior to the epidemic). Later, this negative attitude expanded towards other minorities, such as people from Ukraine working and living in Poland.

The first documented case is from January 11, when journalist Jerzy Targalski said in an interview within the Polish public radio station: “We have yet to see to what extent this pandemic spread outside of China, as so far it is proven that the Chinese are more susceptible than white people. [...] I think it won't spread”.

On January 30, the Chief Sanitary Inspector Jarosław Pinkas, [in a conversation on Radio RMF FM](#) about Coronavirus stated that “in Poland there is no such virus. Therefore, the endangerment is close to zero” and tied that problem exclusively to national origin. Asked by journalist Marcin Zaborski: “So, if I run a temperature of 38 degrees, have cough and feel choking, but I did not visit China, should I not raise an alarm?” he answered: “You should not raise any alarm. Please analyse where you were and if indeed there were any Chinese people in your surroundings. [...] Did you speak to a Chinese woman or some other Chinese citizen, who had been to China within the last two weeks? If you are not aware of any such incidents, you are absolutely safe”.

In February and successive months, social media in Poland carried many homophobic commentaries and conspiracy theories pertaining to the Coronavirus pandemic. Here are some examples of posts posted on Twitter:

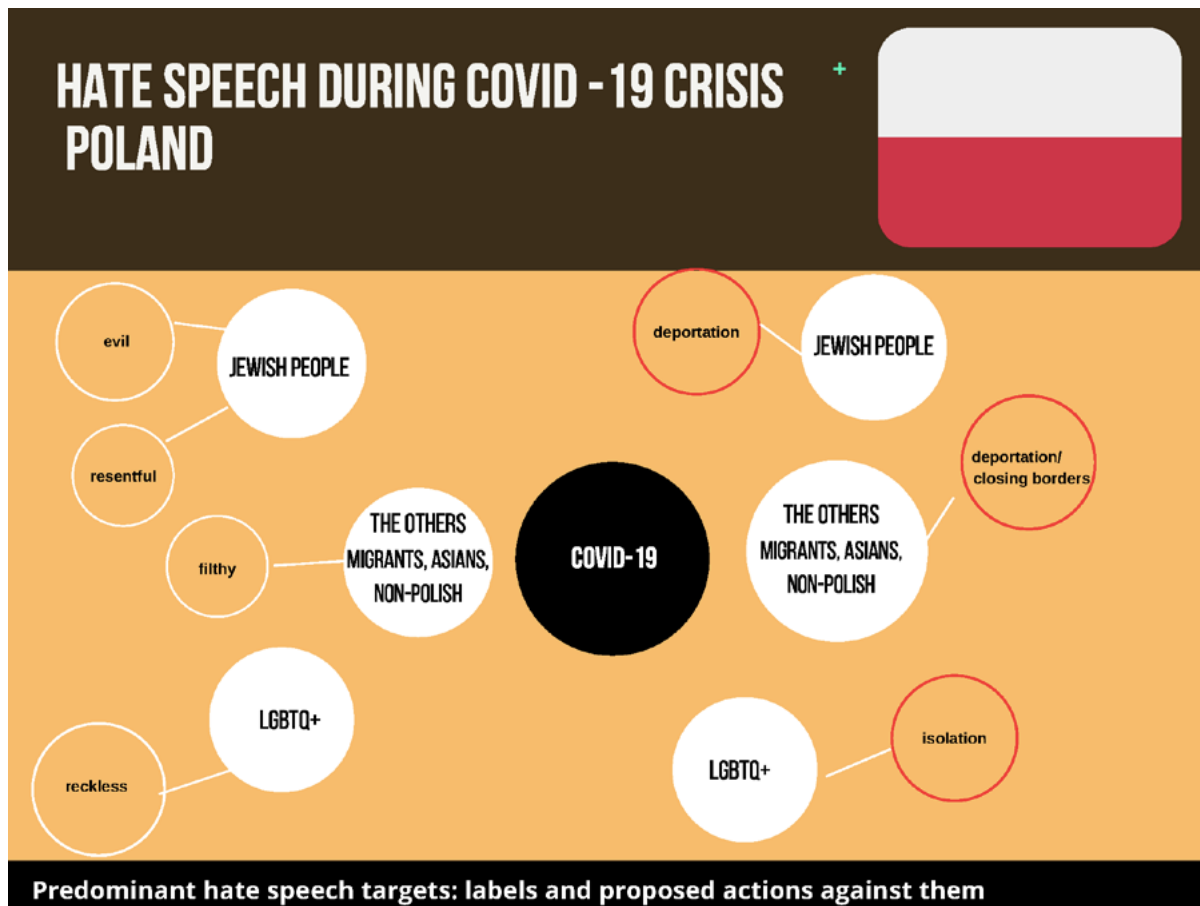
- "F...ck you in the ass you faggots, that virus is your fault",
- "Faggots mean diseases, who knows if Coronavirus is not another of your inventions!!!",
- "Today I read that those most vulnerable to be infected by Coronavirus are faggots and lesbians".

Also, a rapid rise in conspiracy theories was observed, shared also by many well-known public figures. Some of them decided to visit a far-right YouTube channel known for frequent xenophobic and homophobic content, wRealu24: Grzegorz Braun and Janusz Korwin-Mikke (both members of the Parliament, on behalf of Confederation, a far-right political group), ex-catholic priest Jacek Międlar, singers Edyta Górniak and Ivan Komarenko.

They all expressed similar theories: that the pandemic itself is fake and used by politicians to gain control over citizens; that the pandemic is only a way to get people vaccinated against their will and, therefore, having chips placed in their bodies; that the Coronavirus is a biological weapon. The last-mentioned argument is also a common part of antisemitic theories – MP Grzegorz Braun said that it is possible that the virus was created in laboratory and released to begin a war – by Israel or China. The mentioned public people also emphasized the alleged plan of Bill Gates and/or the World Health Organization to depopulate the Earth using either the virus itself or a vaccine against it. A very popular politician and MP, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, **said on a television talk show**: "Jews are now a power because they have experienced pogroms. As the result of pogroms, the strongest, the most able Jews survived – this is a warning to anti-Semites. [...] And there even exist such theories that rabbis intentionally provoke pogroms, especially in order for Jews to survive such pogroms and then there is a natural selection among Jews". Deputy Grzegorz Braun **made threats** to Polish Minister of Health, speaking in Polish Parliament about publicly hanging him. Popular commentator Stanisław Krajski has also **made speculations** about freemasonry in Church which is responsible for the crisis – his theory says that limiting the number of people in churches, measure which was introduced to lower the possibility of spreading infection, is a purposeful act of destroying the Catholic Church.

All of the above-mentioned people have a significant impact on the public debate in Poland. Grzegorz Braun is a politician who is currently an MP and has been highly visible during presidential campaign in 2015. In the 2019 European Parliament elections he received over 33.000 votes and in national elections for Parliament, over 31.000 people voted for him. He is a member of the coalition of far-right parties Konfederacja (Confederation) along with Janusz Korwin-Mikke. Konfederacja received 6,81% of votes in Parliament elections in 2019 and introduced 11 MPs to the Parliament. Stanisław Krajski was a commentator on leading Polish catholic radio station, Radio Maryja. The radio itself is known for frequent hate speech, homophobic and antisemitic content. Krajski is now a popular commentator in far-right media, often presenting antisemitic and conspiracy theories.

HATE SPEECH PREDOMINANT TARGETS



Retrospectively, the xenophobic incidents are concentrated on people or groups of people considered to be the "others" - non-Polish, Asian, members of the LGBT community, Jews etc. The coronavirus crisis has very similar patterns to previous outbursts of hate – against immigrants in 2015 and against members of the LGBT community during the election campaign in 2019. Additionally, within each of these tormented episodes strong antisemitic attitudes were met.

A very concerning trend is the popularity of conspiracy theories and hate speech among celebrities and public figures, as they provoke massive communities on the Internet to believe such theories and contribute to the spread of dangerous fake news. These actions are particularly dangerous as they pose a threat for public health and human life and well-being.

When analysing the hate speech that was triggered by the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to stress that the aggressions towards the groups were quite common prior to this medical crisis.

The Jewish community was targeted by antisemitic propaganda, hate speech and conspiracy theories, and these are recurring narratives in far-right discourse in Poland. Jews were described

as a group of people that conspire to gain domination and power over the whole world using the COVID-19 virus as a biological weapon or by mandatory vaccines containing chips controlling people's minds etc. Frequently used is the derogatory term *parchy* – very insulting, antisemitic slur. Some examples of such hate speech can be found under the video posted on Twitter, in which the Ambassador of Israel in Poland informed about the possibility of Israeli citizens to return to Israel (similar to other countries helping their citizens to come home since the beginning of the pandemic): - "See you never again", - "Let this be the end of your parasitic existence in Poland", - "And it could all be solved by itself. Sometimes even a virus brings measurable advantages", - "Corona(virus) did some good", - "Let them leave at last and stop constantly spitting at our country – one way ticket", - "May it be as quick as possible, get the hell out of Poland", - "God speed, you f.cking kikes".

Corona-related hate affected also the refugees/the immigrants (or people perceived as part of this group), even though they may have lived in Poland for a consistent period of time. They were usually described as dirty, reckless about the hygiene and health and, therefore, posing a threat to the safety of Polish people.

As novelty, during this crisis the hate narratives against Asians have reached a high level of intensity. People of Asian descent were portrayed by the hate perpetrators as carrying the disease ("the Chinese are more susceptible than white people"), along with people of other nationalities or origins (Ukrainians, people from Middle East).

Other hateful comments on the Internet claimed that the LGBT community is most affected by coronavirus and, therefore, they should stay isolated from the rest of society (as an example: "that virus is your fault", "Faggots mean diseases, who knows if Coronavirus is not another of your inventions", "Faggots and their faggotry – as a consequence – the AIDS disease. Eating rats, cats, dogs, bats etc. – as a consequence CORONAVIRUS. [...] In other words, histology of pathology", "we demand penalization of homosexuality and arrest of all sexual perverts from LGBT in Poland! Deviants constitute a great epidemiological danger"). They were usually referred to with the homophobic slur *faggots*.

The most common actions against "the others" proposed by the hate preparators consisted in deportation of people belonging to Jewish community or people from Middle East and Ukraine. As for immigrants and refugees, also portrayed as a threat to Polish community, closing the borders was the most common immediate action to limit the effects of COVID-19. These radical solutions proposed by the far-right politicians and their supporters came hand in hand with other ideological proclamations: Poland with Poles, one religion (catholic) and strong leaders.

REDRESSING HATE SPEECH. COUNTER NARRATIVES.

There are few examples of effective promotion of counternarratives specifically countering coronavirus-related hate speech.

The report **"Virus of Hate"** produced by the "NEVER AGAIN" Association is an important example of this. It contains numerous descriptions of hate speech (online and in traditional media – including public television and radio) as well as physical assaults, acts of discrimination in the context of the coronavirus, and it was extensively covered by Polish and foreign media. Such initiatives are efficient because they show the scale of the problem, as well as prevailing "trends" and can help to create new tools that would combat the hate speech.

Also, during the crisis the Polish medical authorities actively promoted verified and scientific information to counter the massive amount of conspiracy theories (e.g. through special adverts on YouTube). Conspiracy theories¹ should be treated as dangerous as hate speech because they pose a significant threat to human health and life. The only way to fight them was by referring to science, even though these measures did not directly address the issue of hate speech.

Proactive actions were met within social media platforms as well. In interviews published in the Polish media, Facebook director of the public policy team for Poland Jakub Turowski declared that the social platform will help counter conspiracy theories and fake news. According to him, the Polish Facebook division works with 60 different organizations in order to verify information and fight fake news. They have trained the administrators of Facebook groups on identifying fake information and reporting them. Additionally, users can receive verified information from the World Health Organization or the Ministry of Health directly on Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp. However, the credibility of the Facebook position was questionable because one of the interviews outlining the policy against fake news was given to wPolsce.pl, a portal associated with wPolityce.pl – a medium known for hateful, homophobic, xenophobic content.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 crisis has reactivated hate narratives against traditional target groups – immigrants, Jews, LGBT community, people seen as "others". The aggression against people of Asian origin has been the novelty of the monitored period. The hateful conduct has often been triggered by hate speech promoted by public figures – politicians, celebrities, journalists, priests. The same people play a great role in spreading conspiracy theories.

¹ According to the research carried out in April 2020 by the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, as many as 45 percent of Poles believe in conspiracy theories alleging that 'some foreign forces or countries intentionally spread the coronavirus' and only 42 percent recognize its natural origin confirmed by scientific knowledge.

This medical crisis has confronted the society with two interlinked challenges: hate speech and fake news. Hate speech and hate crimes could be redressed if existing legal provisions would be enforced by state authorities, with clear penalties for hate perpetrators. On the other hand, fake news and conspiracy theories could be combated only with the consistent contributions of medical professionals that should build their arguments only with scientific research and fact-based opinions.

ROMANIA – COVID-19 CRISIS AND HATE SPEECH PHENOMENA

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NATIONAL CONTEXT. TRIGGERING EVENTS.

Starting with late February until the end of May, the coronavirus crisis has challenged the Romanian society, as Romanians have been exposed to various restrictions, occasionally confusing messages from state officials and alarming news reports from mainstream media and within social media. In this tormented context, uncivility and hate speech have increased significantly against traditional but also against new “scapegoats”, that have been portrayed and perceived as potential threats for public health and security.

On 16th of March 2020, Romania officially entered a state of emergency, but the indications of an increase in hate speech became visible weeks before. The daily media reports from Italy and Spain that were describing COVID-19 aggravating medical crisis have been rapidly linked to Romanian workers and residents that were affected too and decided to return to Romania. As Italy, Spain and the UK have the largest Romanian communities abroad, but also because the Romanian authorities do not have clear records on Romanians living abroad, speculative narratives have developed naturally. The returning Romanians, that are assimilated to the Romanian diaspora, have been subject to hate speech messages that were portraying them as contamination vectors, but also as unworthy beneficiaries of the Romanian medical and social security system. Also, this hate narrative has developed political connotations within politicians and influencers who are critical against the current Government and president Klaus Iohannis.

On March 11, Victor Ciutacu, anchorperson and host within România TV (one of the most popular national all-news channels) [posted on his personal blog a hateful message](#) against the returning Romanians in which he was expressing his revolt and dissociation: “I don’t hate you. You are too small for that. But I resent you! From my liver, from my heel, with all my power. And I’ll keep on, be it the epidemic at its peak or just beginning. To show solidarity with those of you who have made money and gained power with your help. You are accomplices.” In his message, Ciutacu

was criticizing Romanian diaspora for its political orientation but also for taking advantage of Romanian tax payers.

On March 12, Cătălin Rădulescu (member of SDP – Social Democratic Party and member of the Parliament) posted an **extensive and virulent message** on Facebook against the Romanians returning from quarantined zones. In his message, Rădulescu was blaming the Romanian diaspora for being virus “carriers” and “murderers” as they were a threat for Romanian residents. Rădulescu did not miss the opportunity to sanction the diaspora for voting the current governmental party and the president of Romania, which, in his opinion, were to blame for the crisis. Due to his hateful conduct, Rădulescu has been proposed for **one-year suspension from SPD** on the very same day by the local leadership of the Social Democratic Party.

A few days later, other public hate messages were promoted by Mirel Palada, head of an important sociological institute and former counsellor within the Romanian Government in 2015. In two consecutive Facebook posts, Palada **ranted against the Romanian diaspora** blaming them not only for potentially spreading the coronavirus, but also for their so-called political endorsement of the current Government: “A large number of people from the diaspora returned to the country. Hundreds of thousands. Maybe even a million. We still don't know exactly how many. We're still counting. After giving a [offensive word] to the country and its inhabitants, whom they consider to be stubborn and primitive elders, now the love for the country has suddenly stricken them, when the situation began to get critical” (March 18, 2020). His message was equally subject to critics and promotion in online media. On 29th of March, Mirel Palada posted **another hateful message** against the Romanian diaspora as he was predicting very bleak outcomes on Romanians' returning to country: “In two months, at the end of May, when we will have about ten thousand dead people and hundreds of thousands of sick people (...) Then we will see how public opinion changes from one extreme to another. Then we will see the negative emotions addressed to the diaspora who brought the virus to the country.

They cursed the country. They also criticized the health system and the Romanian state. And now, back home, the doctors are no longer corrupt, they are good. Hospitals in Romania are no longer pathetic, they are the place where they strive to save their lives. Abroad is no longer heaven on earth, it is the place from which they flee. Romania is no longer that shitty country, it is the place of refuge, where unfortunately they brought ruin.”

These hate narratives have soon transitioned from the medical and political dimensions into an ethnic one, as most Romanians returning home were perceived as members of Roma community, which is widely and stereotypically depicted as being uneducated and unwilling to adhere to social norms and containment measures. Thus, illegal hate speech has increased significantly due to some incidents in several segregated Roma communities across the country, incidents that were covered by national media and went viral on social media.

On April 7th, Nicolae Bacalbaşa, MP on behalf of Social Democratic Party [posted on his Facebook page](#) a hateful and demeaning message against Roma community: "Well, just to get clear. The Chinese took the virus from their bats, we will take it from our crows! #stayhome". The racist post is no longer available on Bacalbaşa's page, but his hateful conduct went under the scrutiny of the National Council Against Discrimination that eventually [sanctioned](#) him with an administrative fine of around 1,400 euros on 20th of May 2020.

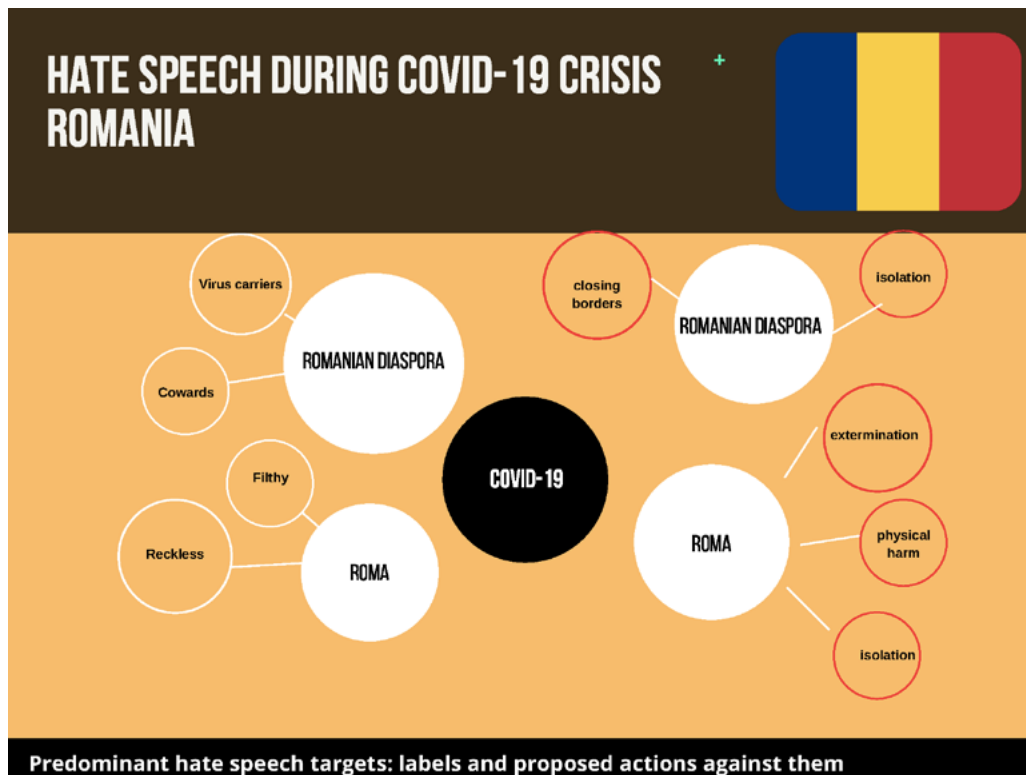
On April 10th, Vladimir Tismăneanu, a high profile Romanian academic and intellectual, posted a racist meme that consisted of a group of crows (a very common degrading association to Roma community) with the text: "Tăndărei Airport. All flights are suspended". This racist meme became viral soon after the Romanian authorities decided, on April 4th, to install a total lockdown on Tăndărei, a town in south-east Romania that is affected by poverty and has a consistent Roma community. [Tismăneanu's racist sideslip](#) has been subject to many critics in mainstream media and within CSOs. Soon after the incident he removed the meme and formulated public apologies. Moreover, three weeks later Tismăneanu was [sanctioned](#) by The National Council Against Discrimination with an administrative fine for promoting racist messages.

By mid-April, other violent incidents that took place in several Roma communities were covered by national media and have contributed to illegal hate speech escalation. Most of the identified hate messages promoted by regular users were using degrading expressions and were calling for severe containment measures against Roma communities (including use of extreme military and police force). During the documentation process about these incidents, 80 Facebook comments have been reported for promoting illegal hate speech (especially calls for violent actions and extermination). All reported content was removed for violating Facebook Community Standards.

Apart from the Romanian diaspora and Roma community members, other hate speech targets, but with a lower incidence and tone intensity, were the elderly and the Christian Orthodox practitioners. The vast majority of hateful content consisted in pejorative and demeaning expressions that were addressed as rhetorical sanctioning of those who were perceived as contamination agents due to their lifestyle or for not complying to containment measures. These hate narratives targeting elderly (labelled as "dodderers") or Orthodox practitioners (labelled as "relics kissers") have contributed to uncivil online behaviour and perpetrated endemic stereotypes within the Romanian society.

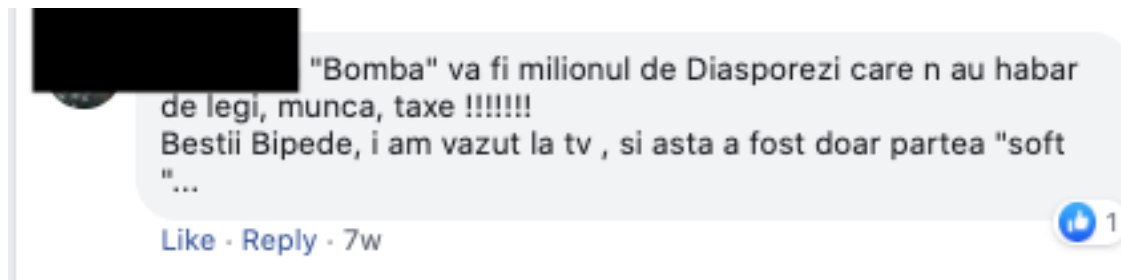
Although the state of emergency has been suspended, the medical crisis is ongoing in Romania and this hate agenda might meet further developments. From the above listed hate speech targets, special focus and caution should be taken on the Romanian diaspora, due to the political and ideological connotations that could be reframed in the forthcoming electoral context.

HATE SPEECH PREDOMINANT TARGETS



The coronavirus crisis developments have triggered the diffusion of hate narratives and conspiracy theories that would antagonize various groups within the Romanian society. Due to conflicting or incoherent official messages, as well as to mainstream media excessive coverage on people or groups that did not comply to the state of emergency restrictions, the perceived insecurity and uncivility on social media and on other online platforms have increased exponentially. This health emergency crisis has reactivated old fears, stereotypes and misconceptions about certain groups, but has revealed new narratives against new scapegoats that traditionally have not been subject to hate speech and discriminatory attitudes. Moreover, this tormented context had a catalytic effect on various conflicting political, cultural and social views that were pre-existent within the Romanian society and finally have met the proper environment to expand and, in some particular cases, to escalate.

Right from the start of the medical crisis, in late February, the extensive reports on the severity of COVID-19 within other European countries have raised concerns and critics on the possibility that a significant number of Romanian working or living abroad would choose to return in their home country. In this context, the Romanian diaspora was perceived as a distinct social group that would unjustly benefit from the support of the Romanian government. This dissociation was implied even by new denominations such as "diasporezi" or "diasporeni" which were mainly pejorative in direct association with negative labels or actions.



Translation: "The real "bomb" will be the one million diasporezi that have no respect for law, labor, taxes! Bipedal beasts, I've seen them on TV, and that's only the soft part..."

The most common labels that were attached the Romanian diaspora mentioned them as "cowards", "virus carriers" or simply "infected".

It is worth noting that the Diaspora issue had a solid political connotation as most of the critical and hateful messages against the repatriated Romanians were also identifying them as the core electorate of the current governmental party (The National Liberal Party - NLP) and of the Romanian president, Klaus Iohannis, political actors that are mostly criticized by the opposition parties and other national conservative organizations for promoting an anti-Romanian agenda for the benefit of other European countries.



Translation: "Don't blame it on COVID, but on NPL and Iohannis – they crammed the country with infected diasporezi!"

Thus, the most hateful comments against Romanians living in diaspora suggested that they should not benefit from any governmental support as they did not contribute to the national healthcare system and, even worse, they have acted against Romania's interest in the recent years.



Translation: "For three dimes that you didn't work for, that you stole or you earned from prostitution, you destroyed a country. First by expressing a vote to which you were not entitled to and now you started to kill innocent Romanians with the plague you brought from the filth you used to live in. This is how you show your responsibility. What good did you bring for the Romanians that live here? Shame on you, diasporezi. Once this plague will vanish, wait and see what we have prepared for you"

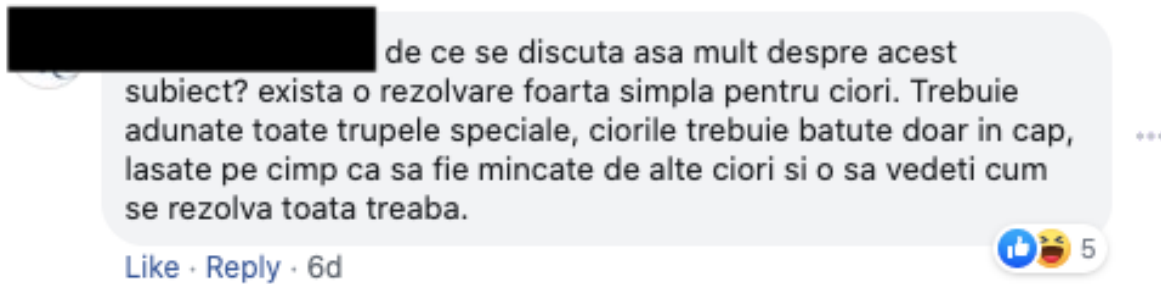
Along with the political connotations the hateful messages soon developed a new ethnic dimension, as the returning Romanians were perceived as members of Roma communities that historically have been criticized for damaging Romania's perceptions within the other European member states. Thus, a new label became more visible within the hateful messages, as an expression of discontent and dissociation against the diaspora, but also within self-acclaimed diaspora members. The "bombers", which suggested undesirable characteristics such as lack of education and social compliance, were also portrayed as a peril for the social and medical security of the communities. As the narratives became more ethnic, the hate discourse became more violent against the "crows" (pejorative label for Roma community) and the "bombers" that potentially endangered Government's safety measures across Romania. For this category of "savages" and "filthy" citizens, the most common proposed actions referred to forced containment and brutal force if they would not comply to the state of emergency restrictions.



Translation: "Where is Adolf Hitler, I miss him so much ever since the bombers came back home. A guy like Hitler would've been great in Tandarei, as he would've had a solution for everyone in there"

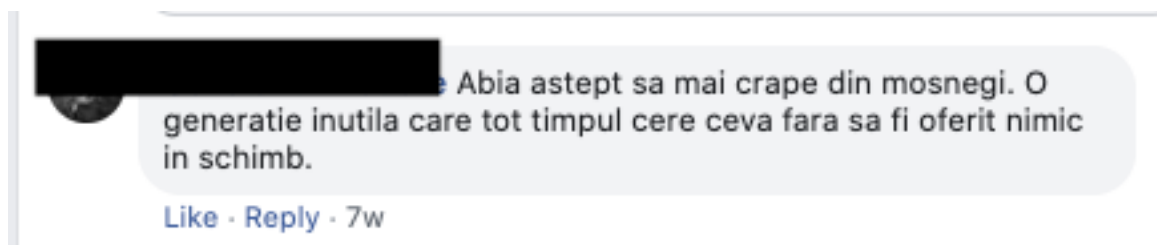
ROMANIA

Due to some violent incidents that have been extensively reported by national media in Roma communities during the state of emergency, the negative tone of voice has increased dramatically to illegal hate speech. For the “gypsies” and the “crows” (both pejorative denominations of Roma) most of the hate perpetrators suggested extremely violent and radical actions that varied from complete isolation to arson or use of lethal ammunition, as means to control coronavirus dispersal but also as ethnic cleansing.



Translate: “Why all these talks? There's a very simple solution for crows. Gather all special [military] corps, the crows must be beaten only by hitting their heads, let them in an open field to be eaten by other crows and you will see the problem solved”

Apart from the dissociating narratives that were developed against Romanian diaspora or Roma community, during the state of emergency it was observed a high incidence of vigilante narratives that were targeting elderly people or orthodox practitioners in a hateful and demeaning manner.



Translation: “I can't wait to see some dodderers dead. [They are/represent] a useless generation that is always demanding and never returning back [to others/society]”

Both categories have been exposed in various media reports for not complying to the state regulations and have been portrayed as a threat to public safety during this medical emergency.

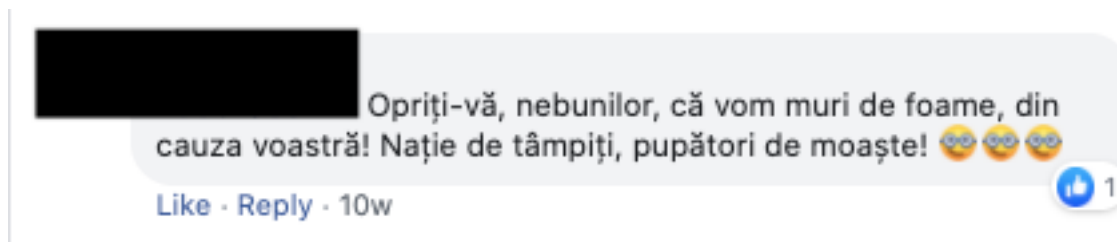


Translation: "Kick the dodder in the face and send him home. If he refuses, send him to the lime pit"

Along with the pejorative denominations for elderly ("dodder" or "crone") and for Christian Orthodox practitioners ("relics kissers" or "relics worshipers") the most common labels referred to their perceived "ignorance" and "recklessness".



Translation: "You're delusional!!! You and your priest you're going to jail!!! You bring death on Erath, relics kissers!!! Stay home, the virus has no God, it hits and kills"



Translation: "Stop this madness or we will starve to death because of you! Stupid nation, relics kissers!"

Although the hateful and uncivil messages have been less violent or harmful, these narratives did contribute to a generic scapegoat profiling and did charge a hostile ambiance during the crisis.

Regardless of the targets of hateful messages or their intensity, it is worth mentioning that the entire spectrum of narratives was governed by the dichotomy us – them, where "us" was perceived as compliant, disciplined, challenged by severe restrictions and sometimes discriminated by the state, as opposed to "them" who were perceived as a threat both to "us" as for themselves.

REDRESSING HATE SPEECH. COUNTER NARRATIVES

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, very few counter narratives to redress various hate narratives in Romanian social and online media were identified. Although the Romanians working or living abroad were subject to many hateful narratives, the counter narratives

developed by individuals or formal groups did not succeed to change the discourse. The most common counter messages that addressed the trending narratives against the Romanian diaspora evoked mostly the consistent contributions of the diaspora for the Romanian economic and social system. On March 13, a group of 30 civic groups and NGOs issued an [open letter](#) to Romanian president Klaus Iohannis asking for urgent measures to repatriate Romanians that were facing difficulties in other countries affected by COVID-19. In their statement, the authors did mention that “in the mainstream media in Romania, as well as on social networks, radicalized voices of hatred towards Romanians in the Diaspora have sharpened lately, with messages about how they would “make us sick” or they would “affect the resources” if they came back to Romania. Although the Romanian authorities did organize special repatriation missions for the Romanian members of Diaspora, there were no official statements addressing the hate narratives that were targeting the Diaspora.

As for the Roma community that was also targeted by violent hate narratives during the crisis, the counter narratives have been promoted mostly by organizations and institutions that promote human rights. On the 8th of April, the International Roma Day, a NGO platform promoted a [solidarity message](#) with Roma communities across Romania in COVID-19 context. The call for solidarity was expressed especially because of the increasing blaming and shaming narratives that were targeting Roma communities as a medical hazard and as scapegoats. Within the statement, ten NGOs were asking Romanian authorities and journalists to be accountable and responsible when dealing with Roma communities that are the most vulnerable within Romanian society. [Another open letter](#) supported by a network of Roma NGOs and human rights NGOs stated on the 12th of May that the Roma community has been the pandemic’s scapegoat and was asking for institutional support in combating racism and hate speech that have tormented mainstream media and social media, and have contributed to violent policing during the lockdown.

Consistent counter narratives that were addressing anti-Roma hate discourse were promoted after Vladimir Tismaneanu, a respected Romanian academic, had posted a racist meme on his Facebook account. His behaviour was subject of many critics in [mainstream media](#), by Roma activists, but also it has been [publicly sanctioned](#) by institutions such as the Ellie Wiesel Institute.

On the 25th of April, in an [extensive interview](#) dedicated to hate escalation during the COVID-19 crisis, Asztalos Csaba, chairman of the National Council for Combating Discrimination (the national equity body) was stating that “hate is spreading far more quickly and intensively than the coronavirus”. Mr. Asztalos’s concerns were supported by the numerous hate incidents that were the subject of petitions received by his institution during the crisis. On the 20th of May 2020, the National Council for Combating Discrimination issued a significant number of administrative fines for discrimination and racism, most of the sanctioned deeds targeting the Roma community.

Although no notable counter narratives were developed during the COVID-19 crisis, it is worth mentioning that institutional and intellectual racism were subject to significant debates nationally. Within the Romanian society there are persistent hateful narratives that were reinforced during the crisis and were almost impossible to dismantle. Eventually, the up-down development of counter narratives and of counter actions that sanctioned public officials and popular figures might be useful for a larger and necessary debate in Romania on inequity and racism, which have deepened during this medical crisis.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 crisis has triggered and reinforced traditional hate narratives against national groups such as Roma, which was portrayed as a scapegoat by conservative politicians or by mainstream media.

The health crisis has contributed to political and ideological radicalization in online media and on social media, where Romanians living and working abroad were subject to hateful and uncivil narratives. These narratives were promoted by opposition politicians or influencers that are critical to the current Government and might be reactivated within the forthcoming electoral campaigns and instrumentalized in political contexts.

The National Council for Combating Discrimination has diligently sanctioned racist sideslips that were promoted by public figures. Yet, these sideslips were not sanctioned or tempered by other state officials that were expected to promote cohesive and inclusive messages as part of the crisis management.

Given the national and international context that is affected both by the COVID-19 crisis and by anti-racist movements, Romanian authorities, state officials and politicians must address sensitive and potentially unpopular topics such as racism, discrimination, inequity and hate speech or hate crimes as part of their political agenda.

SLOVAKIA – COVID-19 CRISIS AND HATE SPEECH PHENOMENA

Authors: Andrea Cox, Martin Susol

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NATIONAL CONTEXT. TRIGGERING EVENTS.

The pandemic crisis uncovered social prejudices and stereotypes deeply rooted in the society, and it confirmed once again low levels of tolerance towards vulnerable minority groups in Slovakia. The most visible actors who formed the media and societal discourse were politicians who became the main catalysers of these past fears, prejudices, and stereotypes. The main event that completely changed the mood and discourse and marked the entry of the global pandemic into the Slovak society were the parliamentary election in Slovakia on the last weekend of February. The two main candidates, the former prime minister Peter Pellegrini and the current prime minister Igor Matovič, created the main dividing lines in the discourses and narratives in the Slovak society, as both used the COVID-19 crisis as an electoral theme.

Despite the fact that the Slovak society reacted promptly to the global pandemic by enforcing and complying to strict containment measures, the politicians built their rhetoric on prejudices and stereotypes. In general, there were two main stereotypes (narratives) that generated hate speech and violent messages via the online environment:

- a) irresponsible Slovaks,
- b) nonhygienic Roma.

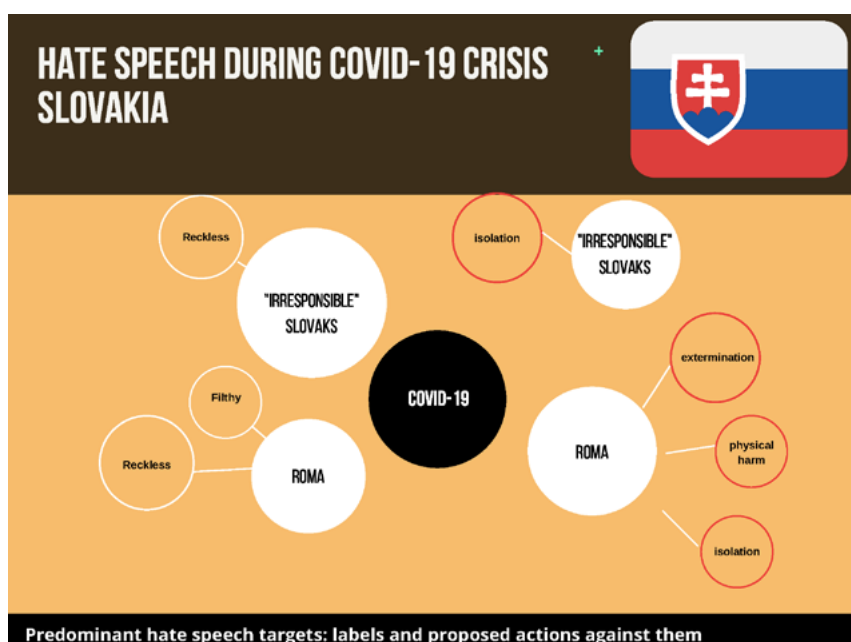
The narrative represented by the term “irresponsible Slovaks” was created immediately after the first individuals were infected with the virus COVID 19. It was the former prime minister Peter Pellegrini who verbally attacked those people and named them “those who played golf in the Italy”. The aim was to create the image of a public enemy that was spreading the virus in Slovakia because of its perceived greediness and ambition to have a luxury lifestyle despite the health risks. The second cornerstone that formed the narrative of the “enemy” was represented by so-called commuters who live and reside in the territory of our country, but travel daily or weekly to work in neighbouring countries or more distant abroad. Hate speech, promoted as legitimate anger, also targeted people who ignored the new rules, did not comply with the quarantine, did not wear protective masks or concealed their travel history (travel being one of the cornerstones

of the anamnesis which decided if a person was to be tested for coronavirus or not). A common motive for hate speech was the fear of the virus spreading to uninfected areas of the country. This fear has been exacerbated by ongoing information on the development of the pandemic in other countries, notably Italy and Spain, with an emphasis on the daily increase in infected patients and victims of the virus.

The second narrative was spreading immediately after the firsts COVID - 19 cases in the Roma settlements. This narrative was promoted by various actors, including extremists and alternative media, as opposed to the "irresponsible Slovaks" narrative that was mostly promoted by the mainstream politicians.

The Roma were described as parasites, rats, various species of insects and animals. Many comments included calls for violence, shootings, evictions, taking away their children by the state or levelling of settlements. Anger was sparked when quarantined Roma settlements received help from private companies and volunteers in form of providing basic grocery and toiletry deliveries. Various hoaxes and misinformation were distributed about the high social benefits the inhabitants of these settlements allegedly received, their dislike to work and tendency to steal, spread through social networks. The use of collective guilt has begun to appear again in many contributions, which may have severe consequences for the coexistence of the inhabitants of these settlements with the majority society. Most of the hateful comments appeared on Facebook.

HATE SPEECH PREDOMINANT TARGETS



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During the pandemic there were various stereotypes and prejudices emerging in the Slovak society. They were all mainly associated with two groups of individuals that were portrayed as threats to public safety and health and potential catalysts of the disease.

People's attention in Slovakia, and thus the target of hate speech, has shifted to those who, due to their way of life, face an increased risk of being infected with the virus. Most of the hate speech on Covid-19 currently targets socially excluded communities, and the Roma ethnic group.

The largest increase in hate speech was recorded against the Roma minority, as media outlets covered the spread of the disease in Roma settlements and the quarantine imposed in some settlements. The hate speech posts and comments were mainly connected to the free testing of the inhabitants of Roma settlements and the provision of free food and hygienical goods by private companies and non-profit organizations, as well as to the overall perceived lifestyle of members of Roma settlements.

Co by chceli ked sa im.nepaci nech nejedia
vsetko maju zadarmo a este si budu vyberat? Zeru prasacie hlavy
chvosty a zrazu by chceli co pecene holuby ? Ved nech si ich idu
nachytat haved jedna

Translation: "What would they want? If they do not like it, they should not eat. They get all for free and yet they want to have a choice? They eat pigs' heads, tails and suddenly they would like baked pigeons. They are welcome to go and get them. They are just vermin."

Nič by som im nedal zavrel by som ich tam a
hodil bombu a hned by bola štátna kasa naplnená. Potkany
pojebane majú všetko zadarmo zas nám čo dá štát.

Translation: "I would not give them anything. I would close them in, throw a bomb there and immediately we would have full state accounts (treasury). Fucking rats, they have it all for free. And what will the state give to us?"

Čierne hovno 🐛 bude vždy len čierne hovno

Translation: "Black shit will remain black shit."

STRIEĽAŤ PRI UTEKU !!!!!

Translation: "Shoot them when they run!!!!!"

Robert Fico, the chairman of the strongest opposition party, SMER-SD, took advantage of this situation, advocating against free testing in poor Roma settlements. At several press conferences he named the current Prime Minister, Igor Matovič, a Prime Minister of the Roma or of the Gypsy.

"He is a prime minister of Roma, Prime Minister of Gypsies, he does not care for anybody else. He would take a camping stove and make breakfast for them," he added that "Roma are a vast part of [the Prime Minister's] party". - Robert Fico, during a press conference on 30 April 2020

Robert Fico also generated an atmosphere of hatred with false claims that framed the governmental help to Roma settlements in juxtaposition to the government ignoring the problems and situation of the elderly living in facilities/homes for the elderly, where, in some cases, the coronavirus was confirmed.

Additionally, as in some Roma settlements quarantine operations were enforced, neo-fascist political party ĽSNS speculated the situation. The party persisted with their regular offensive statements and labelled the Roma population as those who are "parasites" and "scroungers". Public posts about inadequate state aid and excessive protection of these settlements from the risk of infection and the spread of the pandemic began to crawl through social networks, especially on the FB profiles of individual representatives of this party. Under the posts of party representatives, there was a consistent amount of hateful contributions attacking the inhabitants of Roma settlements. Most of the hate messages consisted in dehumanizing allegations and calls for shooting or injury of Roma individuals or communities. There have even been cases where NGOs have had to delete their posts on FB about helping these settlements, given that the comments under these posts were full of hate speech.

"A settlement in Krompachy is quarantined. A lot of soldiers and policemen present. Despite this our responsible co-citizens found their ways how to escape and even today they managed (perhaps as a protest) to set the forest on fire... Wait until tens or perhaps hundreds of settlements will have to be put under quarantine. We in the Eastern part of Slovakia will fully enjoy a problem fuelled with billions [of euros] by all the governments. Also, here in the East people mostly voted for Matovic, so it can be only assumed that all ends well in the end, can it not?" - Milan Mazurek, ĽSNS, official Facebook profile

This crisis was not only used and misused by various political actors, far-right movements, but also by various conspiracy news websites and alternative media. In these groups, two recurrent scenarios emerged (which are still active in the alternative media). The first one criticizes the lack of support and solidarity of the European Union and the second one is speculating on the origin of the pandemic.

The Eurosceptic narratives promoted by alternative media were mostly built on misinformation and fake arguments suggesting the failure of the European Union as it has supposedly not managed to support its member countries. The spread of misleading and biased news has given the Slovak society the impression that the European Union has failed to help the affected countries and that most of the aid has come from Russia and China. Unfortunately, these attempts to influence the society have been successful, and according to the latest survey on Covid-19, the majority of Slovaks agree with these claims. According to the public opinion poll conducted by the agency Focus (2020) in the last weekend of March 2020, only 22% of Slovaks believed that the EU is helping Slovakia in the fight against COVID – 19, 25% of Slovaks believed that Russia is helping them, and more than 67% of Slovaks believed that China is helping them in the fight against this global pandemic.

The second, most visible scenario that emerged during the quarantine was speculating on the origin of the virus. It was based on the hypothesis that the virus was spread on the command of world elites to control and influence the global environment for their purposes. The virus was supposedly created in order to decimate the European (or world) population or as a pretext for vaccinating all of humanity, either to increase the profits of pharmaceutical companies or to insert electronic chips in the world population that would make it easier to manipulate and control it. In his public statements, the chairman of the extremist party ĽSNS, Marián Kotleba, started to use the phrase “Project Covid” as means to enforce the conspiracy dimension of the crisis. Several conspiracy theories got intertwined, combining old narratives of Jewish organizations that are secretly plotting to manipulate people with theories on vaccination actually being used to plant electronic chips in human bodies so that their movements would be tracked and controlled through 5G networks. Hate speech under these conspiracy posts was directed specifically against Jews, liberals, and politicians (both domestic and international). These conspiracy theories have been promoted by a certain part of the representatives of the so-called alternative scene close to esotericism, but also sporadically by known figures of show business, arts or culture (apart from conspiracy sites and representatives of the extreme right). Even though these cases were isolated, their impact on the population of Slovakia should not be neglected, bearing in mind that the people carrying these messages were public figures.

The second most targeted group of people considered to be a threat were the working “migrants”, the people living near the borders of Slovakia, or those who are working in Slovakia, but living in Hungary, Austria or the Czech Republic. These groups have been accused by politicians to be greedy insensible and irresponsible towards the Slovak public. Prime minister Igor Matovič publicly used derogatory terms such as “peddlers” against those he portrayed as irresponsible and as agents for the spread of the virus.

The last group, but never the less a strongly accused group of being a threat to public health, were the pensioners and old people, the most vulnerable group to the infection. They have been

accused of exposing themselves to the virus because they did not comply with certain laws and norms published by the government.

During the documentation process of hateful incidents, 101 Facebook comments have been reported for promoting illegal hate speech (especially incitement to hatred). 88% of the reported content was removed for violating Facebook Community Standards.

REDRESSING HATE SPEECH. COUNTER NARRATIVES

The emergence of a pandemic and the spread of hate speech or conspiracy theories also stimulated the emergence of counter narratives addressing the situation. These counter narratives aimed to inform, explain and put the information on COVID-19 and on the measures accompanying the pandemic into the right context.

These counter narratives appeared on all levels of public administration, from the national government, all the way through city councils. Several private companies, NGOs, civic associations and various activists or volunteers were also involved. Mostly civil society organizations took initiative in order to redress the prejudices and the stereotypes that contributed to various hate narratives. These initiatives were reactive and not proactive.

The main official channel for counter narratives was a website created by the Government of the Slovak Republic <https://korona.gov.sk>². Civil society organizations used a web portal to inform the general public on COVID-19 developments and to promote their activity and efforts to curb the effects of the pandemic.³ Even various municipalities and health insurance companies provided official information about the disease for the Slovak public in order to fight and to debunk myths.⁴

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Slovak society and its politicians reacted immediately after the first COVID-19 cases appeared. In the eyes of the prime minister, Slovaks were the most responsible nation on Earth, taking strict measures

² Individual ministries also used their websites to shed light on facts and myths, for example the [Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development](#) of the Slovak Republic.

³ More at the web link: <https://mimovladky.sk/2020/04/myty-o-koronaviruse-co-nam-o-viruse-povedali-ale-nie-je-to-pravda/>

⁴ More at the web link (regions): Zilina region web page https://www.zilinskazupa.sk/files/odbory/zahranicne-vztahy/2020/who_myth_buster_15stran_rhn.pdf, Trenčín region web page: https://www.tsk.sk/koronavirus-dolezite-informacie.html?page_id=705040, Bratislava region web page <https://bratislavskykraj.sk/myty-a-fakty/> as well as individual towns and cities such as Poprad - <https://www.facebook.com/poprad.eu/posts/3055182801192511/>. Health insurance companies and health care providers: <https://www.dovera.sk/aktuality/4003-koronavirus-zakladom-je-informovanost-a-dodrziavanie-hygieny> or <https://www.procare.sk/koronavirus/>

to combat the pandemic. However, this positive self-image also paved the way for the construction of a negative image towards the most vulnerable groups in the society.

The following recommendations can be applied both online and offline by the main actors that have the power to change narratives and influence behaviour:

- a) state/legal actors should not decline their responsibility to combat hate speech and hate crimes associated with COVID-19 and count only on online platforms and civic initiatives to take the lead.
- b) do not use racist/hate terminology to link the COVID-19 to any ethnicity, nationality, or specific location.
- c) reframe the hate speech with positive emotions and facts.

SPAIN – COVID-19 CRISIS AND HATE SPEECH PHENOMENA

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Movimiento Contra la Intolerancia

NATIONAL CONTEXT. TRIGGERING EVENTS.

The emergence of the pandemic has had a double impact on the hate speech phenomenon. The concept itself has suffered various mutations, especially in the tormented Spanish political context. New targets appeared such as the elderly and the health professionals.



Translation: "Police department warns that sending anonymous messages or bullying sanitation or supermarket staff is a hate crime"

Moreover, the fight against hate speech has been politicized and misused by Government officials as one of the strategies to limit public criticism of containment measures, but also to censor or minimize political opposition. Thus, fuelled by the most critical moments of the medical crisis, Spain has also been the scene of ideological and conceptual debates that have tested the fine boundaries between free speech, hate speech and legitimate criticism in the public sphere.

Apart from the political and ideological struggle, xenophobic, anti-Roma and anti-Semitic messages went viral on various social media or communication platforms.

Xenophobic narratives have been developed mostly against people with oriental background who were associated with the origin of the virus, but also against immigrants who were accused of benefiting too much of the Spanish health and social resources. The Roma community has been portrayed as the virus propagator, while the Jewish community was falsely associated with conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the virus.

In February 2020, a councillor of the extreme right-wing party VOX tweeted an **offensive message** against the Chinese community: "As if we are the ones who eat bat soup", "Chinese tourists are transmitters of the disease". Although Vidal is a less-known politician, because of his position (councillor within the capital of Spain for the opposition party), his message had a great impact and has been subject to many critics.



In March 2020, a civil servant from Sevilla municipality **asked for military action against** the Roma community living in a poor neighbourhood of the city and suggested that the spread of COVID-19 is related to this community.



The state official has rectified his statement on the very same day as a consequence of a **potential criminal investigation** against him on grounds of hate crime.

POLÍTICA

La Guardia Civil traslada al juzgado un posible delito de odio del alcalde de Santoña por vincular Covid-19 y gitanos

⌕ Una asociación denunció a Sergio Abascal ante el instituto armado por decir en la radio que cinco de los seis muertos por el virus pertenecían al "colectivo gitano"

⌕ [Una veintena de familias de Santoña afectadas están en confinamiento forzoso](#)

Translation: "Civil Guard report to the Prosecutor Office - a possible hate crime of the Santoña's mayor for linking Covid-19 with gypsies."

Additionally, new groups and entire administrative regions have become targets of hate speech. Aggressive nationalistic messages that pointed at cities, regions or countries as the origin of the sanitary problem were found online, as were messages that stigmatized entire professions that were in the front line (health workers, food workers and other groups). Ideologically-motivated hate speech⁵ was observed in relation with elderly people, as well as within nationalist and pro-independence entities who considered that "Spain" was to blame for the medical crisis (Hispanophobia-based messages)

During the COVID-19 crisis the pro-independence propaganda⁶ did use the medical crisis as a pretext to boost their political and ideological agenda.

On the 15th of March, Clara Ponsati, a former member of the Catalonia government and current member of the European Parliament publicly evoked "From Madrid to Heaven", an advertising slogan that was used to promote tourism in Madrid years ago.

⁵ To efficiently tackle actual hate speech, it is important to frame it into the definition and legal provisions such articles 22.4 and 510 of the penal code. Both cover "ideology" as an aggravating circumstance and as a category to protect against hate speech. Although the Council of Europe definition does not mention it explicitly, it must be interpreted as such, since the definition includes a Numerus Apertus clause, this is how our Courts take it and, of course, it would fall into the category of other forms of intolerance.

⁶ In pro-independence propaganda the stigmatization of the "Spanish" is promoted using ancestral prejudices linked to the idea of Spanish-ness. In the current political context related to the independence dispute the prejudice is that Spain is by nature prone to fascism so Catalans can be free only if they become independent.

- DIRECTO** PSOE y Podemos se contradicen en la derogación de la reforma laboral pactada con EH Bildu
- DIRECTO** La mascarilla es también obligatoria para todos los viajeros en autobús, tren, avión y barco

La exconsellera Clara Ponsatí se mofa de las muertes por coronavirus en la capital: "De Madrid al cielo"

10 MINUTOS 15.03.2020 - 16:26H



- Así te contamos en directo la última hora sobre el coronavirus.
- Mapa del coronavirus en España: contagiados y fallecidos.

Her hispanophobic message was launched in a tense moment, in which the death rate was beginning to be very high in Madrid. She used the slogan to allude to the deaths of people in Madrid, making a mockery out of their pain. Her message was an implicit reference to the perceived incapacity and mismanagement attributed to the Spanish administration, a common prejudice among hispanophobes.

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SOCIEDAD CIENCIA EDUCACIÓN MEDIO AMBIENTE SANIDAD SORTEOS SUCEOS TIEMPO TRAFICO Y TRANSPORTES VER MÁS

DIRECTO Últimas noticias de la desescalada y la evolución de la pandemia

LA POLEMICA

Canadell: "España es paro y muerte; Catalunya, vida y futuro"

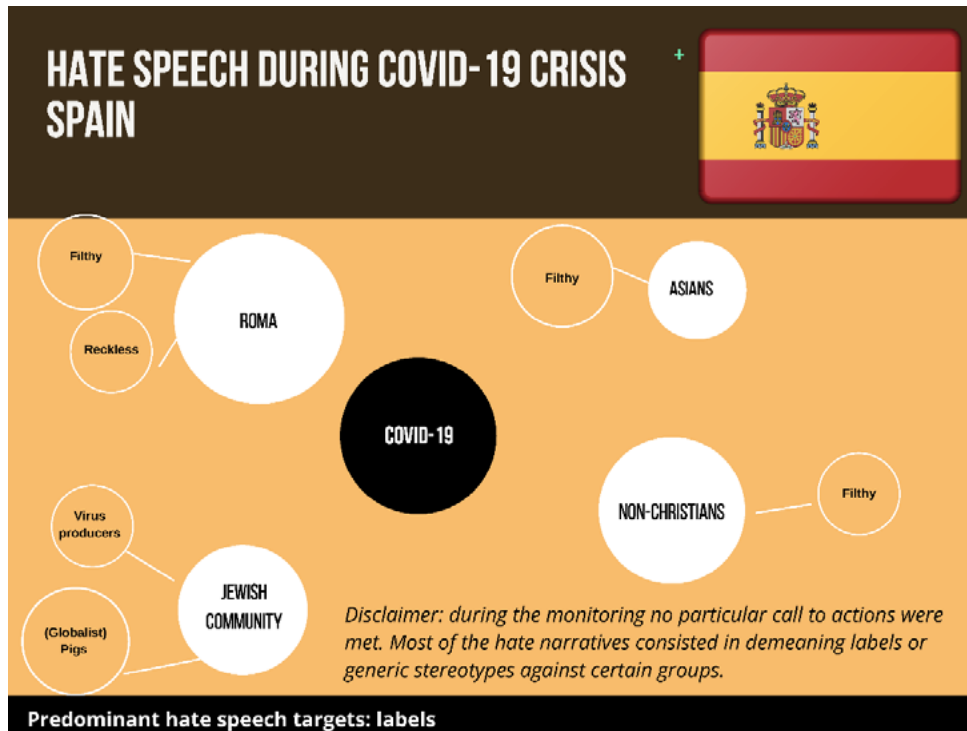
El presidente de la Cámara de Comercio de Barcelona asegura que con la independencia no habría habido tantas muertes por lo que recibe diferentes críticas

Joan Canadell @jcanadell

Españoles fijaros en la diferencia de un cierre 2 semanas antes. Hacer caso a @QuimTorraPla hubiera supuesto parecernos a Grecia, una centena parte de contagios y muerte. Catalunya independiente hubiera salvado miles de vidas...España es paro y muerte, catalunya vida y futuro

During the same period, Joan Canadell, the President of the Chamber of Commerce of Catalonia, tweeted a very controversial message: "Spain is death and unemployment, Catalonia is future and life". Canadell considered that in an independent Catalan region the impact of the coronavirus would have been less severe, transforming Spain into the scapegoat for the problems of Catalonia.

HATE SPEECH PREDOMINANT TARGETS



Online hate speech⁷ has historically targeted migrants, Roma people, religious minorities and LGTB persons. It is based on prejudices to link all these categories to crime, the collapse of social services, preferential aid over Spaniards, and in the case of Muslims to link them to terrorism. As hate speech is mostly present in social media, during the medical crisis the trends did not change significantly.

This section includes some samples of hate messages found on social networks that might be considered as archetypes of how the pandemic has influenced hate speech targeting traditional groups.

An example is the tweet that brings together various forms of hate (homophobia, xenophobia and political intolerance) in the context of Catholic fundamentalism.

⁷ However, the occurrence of hate speech within mainstream media is relatively low: the update of the Penal Code in 2015, judicial action, and probably good level of social consensus against it has meant that hate speech does not cross the barrier of mainstream media, and has been diverted to social networks and websites created ad hoc for its dissemination.



Translation: "I won't vacuum myself. Coronavirus is a divine punishment brought by Jesus to kill reds, fagots and peruans. I won't be part of this destruction of Catholicism's salvation. Hail to God, hail to Jesus, hail to Virgin María and hail to Spain"

Similar to the above-mentioned status, another message attributes to God the will to exterminate Chinese people



Translation: "It seems pathetic to me that "Hormiguero" (a very popular TV Program) would hire a Chinese Girl, under the circumstance that we are living. Get out of there, Chinese virus (in reference to the girl)



Translation: "Coronavirus is a divine punishment against the Chinese population because they are savages and kill living beings like dogs, cats, elephants and bats. God doesn't want the Chinese to be alive because of the pain that they are doing to this world"

Roma People

Traditionally, hate speech based on Romaphobia has basically focused on the following prejudices: criminal behaviour and tendencies, inability to comply with the rules, being socially misfit because of their ethnic origin, being fully dependant to social benefits. In Spain, the use of word "gypsy" is still disputed for its negative connotation, as some Roma self-identify as gypsies. Yet, there are other racist expressions such as "*calorro*", and very often the word "gypsy" is used as an insult, meaning dirty or lazy.

During the pandemic, various media outlets used ethnic references when covering negative news on communities or individuals that did not comply to confinement rules.



Translation: "Dozens of gypsies avoid the state of alarm and organized a party in the Park"

Antisemitism

During the COVID-19 crisis the frequency of anti-Semitic messages decreased on social media, along with the focus on Middle East conflicts that previously would trigger massive anti-Semitic narratives.

Even so, the Jewish community has been associated with the occurrence of coronavirus in complex conspiracy theories. These conspiracy theories suggest that the pandemic was not an accident and that all events are controlled by the Jewish elite.



Translation #1 - The traitor has arrived and the virus has appeared. Social communism serves the new world order and the Jews. This was planned and it was not accidental. Criminal scoundrels.

Translation #2 - Attention Spain, the Jewish globalists and freemasons have found a new account for the virus. Climate change. The fault is ours. The rain of a lifetime has returned since they have stopped spraying the sky. Globalist Pigs



Translation and context: "We should stop this or in less than "400 years" we won't have victims of Holocaust." This discrediting message is related to the news of a Holocaust survivor's death due to COVID-19.

REDRESSING HATE SPEECH. COUNTER NARRATIVES

Retrospectively, one of the most distressing aspects of the pandemic has been the escalation of the legitimate confrontation between democratic parties. The incitement to hatred based on ideology has increased significantly, notwithstanding the fact that these manifestations are subject to the criminal code and are considered to be aggravating circumstances. As a result of this ideological hate speech, episodes of low-intensity political violence have occurred.

According to various entities that tried to reduce the general hostility, the political confrontation during the COVID-19 crisis has reached similar levels of intensity as during the Spanish civil war (1936 – 1939). Movimiento Contra la Intolerancia and other organizations have reacted against that narrative, trying to promote an alternative discourse, based on the democratic principles in order to avoid dramatic events.

Eventually, the ageist narratives that targeted the elderly did contribute to a general debate within society. Various complaints made by NGOs against discriminatory texts and regulations that were detrimental to the elderly population have had an impact on the media and therefore contributed to counteracting these hate narratives.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is worth mentioning that, during the pandemic, the parliament has modified the National Childhood Protection Law in a way that will also reflect on the provisions of articles 22.4 and 510 of the National Criminal Law and that will provide more protection for two new social groups. Thus, the legislative update will allow the prosecution of criminal acts such as incitement to hatred on grounds of age (ageism), and aporophobia – motivated hatred against people in situations of extreme poverty.

After consistent advocacy actions conducted by various NGOs, including MCI, the recommendation has been enforced and could be pointed out as a positive consequence of the crisis.

With the arrival of the de-escalation phase of the pandemic and the end of the state of alarm, discursive aggressiveness seems to have decreased. It is extremely important that the Ministry of the Interior includes in its annual report on hate speech and hate crimes all the incidents that were identified during this health crisis.