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Hate speech in Albanian political communication.

Case study: electoral campaign in Albania, April 25, 2021

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Introduction

In the Cambridge Dictionary, hate speech is defined as *"public speech that expresses hatred or encourages violence against a person or group based on something such as race, religion, politics, sex or sexual orientation"*. *Hate speech "is usually thought to involve communicating hostility or contempt for an individual or group because of a characteristic group such as race, color, national origin, gender, disability, religion, political influence or sexual orientation"*. In fact, this paper, contrary to the above definition, will address the language of hatred in Albanian political communication, the way in which the leaders of political parties in Albania express themselves against each other, as a way to hit and discredit the political opponent but also for to defend themselves when their interests and the interests of the political group they represent are affected or violated, especially in the election campaign. Knowing that political communication to some extent determines the political identity of everyone who becomes part of politics, then we will need to analyze the position and protection that each political actor makes and how much hate speech is the dominant factor in this communicative situation.

Laying out the problem

On April 25, 2021, Albania held Parliamentary elections. The language of political hatred remains one of the most prominent forms of the spread of hatred in Albania, especially during the election period. During the campaign, the Diversity Reporting Network 2.0 identified several hate speech incidents, coming from several key political figures in the country. The incidents included the use of hate speech, insulting, derogatory and sexist language, etc., which various political and public figures used against each other. (For example: The incident of the Prime Minister of the country, Edi Rama with the candidate for MP of the Democratic Party, Grida Duma, who drew the attention of the media and the public for the use of excessive hateful language against each other. Both figures in question are known for the use of hate speech elements in political contexts and beyond).

On the other hand, reactions with the same insulting and hateful language have also come from representatives of other political parties in the country, where Grida Duma is mentioned again, who in a post on her FB page distributes videos with insulting and hateful calls to the Prime Minister. Also, Nora Malaj MP of the SMI in parliament reacted, using hate speech against him. A similar reaction with hate speech came from MP Mesila Doda, who used harsh insulting, denigrating and hateful tones centered on Mr. Edi Rama as an individual, but also as Prime

Minister. On the other hand, there was no lack of use of hate speech by various representatives of civil society, drawing their attention to the lack of response to the incidents in question. Reactions, but without hateful content regarding this incident, also came from civil society organizations, which demanded a ban on the use of hate speech (mainly against women) in politics, directed at political entities, political figures, media, etc.

Thus, immediately after, the reaction of the Head of the European Union Delegation in Tirana, Luigi Soreca was followed by the recommendations of the Commissioner for Protection against Discrimination and the Central Election Commission, who stressed "preventing hate speech during the election campaign", as by political parties and their supporters, as well as by media outlets which "should refuse to cover election campaigns that use or support hate speech". Based on these findings we quote Waldron who argues that "... *hate speech seeks to create a rival public good as*" *wolves call each other through the peace of a good society*". (Waldron 2012: 94).

Methodology

This paper is a qualitative analysis mainly on political communication, facts and data but also by researchers and key theories related to hate speech used in political communication in Albania before, during and after the election campaign. Also, during the work we have tried to put the conclusions of the theorists in the field in front of the Albanian context of political communication. The data used in support of the hypothesis and research questions were also taken from the analysis of the discourse of concrete cases that political actors used during the election campaign. Through the method of discourse analysis, we have tried to analyze and deconstruct the approach that this form of expression is articulated and the impact it has on the political opponent and consequently (especially during the election campaign period) on the supporting electorate of each party.

Referring to the time frame considered in this paper, the study covers the period before and during the electoral campaign of the Parliamentary elections of April 25, 2021 in Albania.

Hypotheses and research questions

The paper aims to examine the hate speech that has dominated the communication of political actors in Albania. This harsh language towards the parties is the essence of the hypothesis raised which is "*The use of hate speech has dominated the election campaign of April 25 in Albania, influencing political debates and even personal insults to political opponents*". The research questions in function of the hypothesis are:

- How did hate speech affect the polarization of political communication during the election campaign?
- What is the relationship between political actors and the hate speech used by them?

Hate speech in identity building

According to Steven Heyman and Jeremy Waldron - *there are some analyzes that require a justification for the legal limitation of hate speech to a description of how hate speech violates human dignity, these analyzes look beyond the first-order harms and disadvantages suffered by immediate hate speech objectives and consider the possibility of hate speech underpinning complex social structures, large-scale operations which reduce the social status of members of target groups.* (Waldron 2012: 12).

In the stories of Heyman and Waldron we find credible knowledge of the nature of identity-based social hierarchies and the damage done to subjugated people under the actions of such hierarchies. to think that hate speech is responsible for creating or maintaining identity-based social hierarchies. *"Waldron claims that there is a good kind of public involvement that our society sponsors and to which it is committed. Hate speech undermines this public good, or makes the task of maintaining it much more difficult than it would otherwise be. Hate speech creates an environmental threat to social peace, a "kind of slow-acting poison that piles up here and there, literally, so it eventually becomes harder and less natural for even good-hearted members. of society to play their part. in the preservation of this public good".* (Waldron 2012: 4)

The language we use and the discourse we apply in relations with others (in this case, politicians and their opponents or the media), tends not only to convey information, but also to provide social benefits. In other words, discourse is an instrument that, among other things, helps us to ensure social good, by doing different things and by showing ourselves, the values we carry, that is, our identities. These social representations which can be defined as *"collective frameworks of perceptions"* serve as a bridge between the system of society and the cognitive system of individuals. In other words, social representations and common ideas (ideology), affect the recognition of action / interaction and are built as a subject of change and maintain interdependence. (Wodak, 2008: 25).

Hate speech as a means of propaganda

"Too often propaganda is described as a manipulation aimed at changing ideas or opinions to make individuals 'believe' an idea or fact, and ultimately to get them to adhere to a doctrine - all matters It tries to persuade, to bring you a decision, to create a strong adherence to a truth... The purpose of modern propaganda is no longer to modify ideas, but to provoke actions. a doctrine, but to make the individual irrationally caught up in a process. It is no longer to transform an opinion, but to arouse an active and mythical belief". (Ellul, Jacques 1973: 25). Typical for this is the case of the statement of the President of the Republic, Mr. Ilir Meta in front of the media, on 21.04.2021 when he expressed himself calling for bloodshed: *"Grab the forks, sharpen the axes"!*

But now President Ilir Meta, who after the start of parliamentary investigations into his role, before, during and after the April 25 elections, has "*softened*". His attitudes have been more moderate. He justified the rebellions, when he spoke of revolution, the kidnapping of scythes and forks, or when he declared war on ambassadors. According to Meta, he made these reactions because there was no Opposition, and not because he liked the protagonism. "*Before April 25, there were zero chances in Parliament. I defended democracy and the Constitution. My protagonism has been in defense of the Constitution and I am obliged to respect the Constitution. That is why I refused the interviews after April 25. My protagonism was not demanded of me, but I was in defense of the Constitution. "the institutions were abandoned by the opposition and the majority was trying to capture every institution"*", he said./CNA.al

"The intent of using hate speech and personal attacks is clear. This language aims to divert attention from important issues in Albania such as unemployment, corruption, the departure of young people, etc. in debates related to banal accusations. We are talking about a denigrating and intimidating campaign. And there is a strategy behind it, it is not a coincidence"- said for VOA Agron Shehaj, DP candidate for MP in Tirana Region. Which means that this language serves the propaganda that each political party spreads in the legitimacy of its approach to the electorate.

Hate speech as power

Political correctness is a term used to describe language, policies or measures aimed at avoiding insult or disadvantage to members of particular groups in society. In public, political but also media discourse, the term is generally used as a pejorative with an implication that these policies are excessive or unjustified (the case of political groupings). Since the late 1980s, the term has been used to describe a preference for inclusive language and deviation from the norm of language or behavior, which can be seen as exclusion, marginalization, or insult to groups of disadvantaged or discriminated people, particularly groups of determined by ethnicity, gender, gender or sexual orientation. Seen in this way we can say that this has to do with the language of hatred within the framework of pluralist democracy, populism and political calculations in the face of the opposition and the electorate.

Hate speech generally refers mainly to the cultures of small countries and with fragile democratic culture. In the concrete case in the political communication in Albania, the language of hatred is quite pronounced between the political parties whenever there are big issues and debates that meet discussion but more and more this is noticed during election campaigns, where there is indisputably clashes between parties in confrontations with the public.

Thus, if we refer to the political figures in Albania, the most typical case is again that of the President of the Republic, Mr. Ilir Meta, who, coming out of the frameworks that have marked his public position at the head of the state, as well as justifying his harsh language with exactly the power that the position of the President of the Republic gives him, during the electoral

campaign of 2021, is characterized by a language of hatred filled with anger that positioned him openly against the majority and its leader, Prime Minister Edi Rama. His language not only insulted and cursed the Prime Minister but went so far as to call for strong declarations of war, for the people to rise up as best they could and fight against the government (ostensibly against the discontent and the difficult economic situation created in the country), as if the country was actually in a state of war. Of course, this, said by someone else, would not be news, but coming out of the mouth of the leader of the Albanian state was certainly a very strong statement of hatred to incite violence, so much so that it caused strong debates in the media and in groups of various interest.

For the scholars of communication in general and of political communication in particular, this approach of Mr. Meta was interpreted in different ways, but still most of them saw this behavior of his as a kind of self-defense against that wrongly constructed image, which was heavily charged with corruption and crime by abusing political and public functions. (Recall that only two days ago the US State Department (DASH) had announced Mr. Sali Berisha, a person "*Non grata*" along with his family). Did President Mr. Meta himself feel threatened by this decision of DASH?

Hate speech as revenge

President Meta appeared out of control, irritated and unrestrained even after the condemnation of his threatening statements by Ambassador Yuri Kim. In an unethical language for the head of state, Meta has stated that he is ashamed of Ambassador Yuri Kim to protect Edi Rama and that he invites him to a live confrontation and that he also should not interfere in the internal affairs of Albania. Meta even says that the martyrs will vote on April 25.

"Now live as soon as Ambassador Yuri Kim wrote to me not to mention forks. I tell the American Ambassador live not to defend Edi Rama anymore. Since he sent me a live sms I tell the American Ambassador not to support Edi Rama anymore. Since I am transparent I am also telling you a fact that the American Ambassador asked me as President, the day before the KED meeting, to accept Adrian Dvorani, who asked this not on behalf of America, but on behalf of Edi Rama. Yuri Kim's statement is a disgrace and I invite the Ambassador to come live in the studio now with Edi Rama to face the Albanians", said Meta from the television studio of the Berisha family. (Interview of Mr. Ilir Meta in the show "Free Zone" by journalist Arian Cani, on TV Klan.)

In the context of the argument we continue the analysis of the discourse with a focus on this dialogue. Yuri Kim addresses a message to the President quoting: *"It is unacceptable to threaten with forks, these statements deserve punishment"*! On the other hand, Meta does not stop with counter-reactions and reactions: *"Russia also has missiles, not only the USA! If the vote is affected here, there will be hatred"*. In response, the US Ambassador, Yuri Kim, strongly condemned Ilir Meta's statements, calling for sharpening of forks and axes. Kim writes that these

are reprehensible statements and that he will be held accountable. Immediate was the reaction of Ilir Meta who said that Yuri Kim should not interfere in the internal affairs of Albania and even said that he was threatened by the ambassador!!!

Conclusions

The electoral campaign of April 25, 2021 in Albania was characterized by a harsh offensive language filled with hatred and insults, and this language even dominated throughout the campaign, influencing the decisions of the electorate. Throughout this period we have seen a tense situation filled with harsh, insulting and discriminatory rhetoric among political actors, sparing neither the insults affecting family and relatives nor the insulting sexist calls against female MPs. All this confirmed our hypothesis that "The use of hate speech has dominated the April 25 election campaign in Albania, influencing political debates and even personal insults against political opponents".

It feels appropriate to point out that, although the media and journalists did not retain the authorship of hateful language content, they conveyed what politicians were saying by reporting these incidents in violation of the Code of Ethics. This requires that reporting and coverage of these incidents by journalists and media professionals should be done responsibly, accompanied by the necessary explanations and critical reflections on the context, in order to contribute to reducing hate speech, not to spreading and increasing it.

Hate speech is still seen as a "*taboo*" to turn into a culture of political communication in Albania. As long as the parties are fighting for power, any attempt at communicative language is difficult to orient towards a constructive approach, although calls from external and internal "*advisors*" are not lacking.

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