

EU ELECTIONS

Barcelona university invents tool for measuring hate speech

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BARCELONA - A team of academics in Catalonia have come up with a monitoring tool for xenophobic speech, something they say could be used at EU level too.

Ricard Zapata-Barrero, professor of political and social sciences at Barcelona's Universitat de Pompeu Fabre, and his colleague Gema Rubio Carbonero thought up the tool as a way for political parties to assess their own speeches and for civil society to scrutinise politicians.

"Xenophobia is a construct," says Zapata.

He explains that political parties seek to divert public attention from the economic crisis by raising emotions and negative attitudes towards issues such as immigrants and the European Union.

Populist discourse in politics affects both at the societal level, by legitimising racist behaviour, and at the institutional level by legitimising structural racism.

Zapata likens the monitoring tool to a discriminatory "speed radar" that can offer proof of when language has passed the limit of what is tolerated in society.

The study used Catalonia as a test case. The researchers analysed six political parties, their electoral programmes, interviews and plenary sessions in the parliament from 2007 to 2012.

The three main findings were that most of the language used by political parties in Catalonia does not show xenophobic tendencies and that where there were incidences of it, they were linked to right-wing ideology.

It also showed that parties are more likely to use discriminatory speech when in opposition rather than in government.

With populist and anti-immigrant parties set to make strong gains in the May European elections, Zapata thinks the monitoring tool could be used in the European Parliament.

"I think it would be very good if we would have the chance to collect all the speeches on immigration that there are in the European Parliament and make the political parties feel watched and analysed."

He warned of the dangers of populist speech becoming a regular feature in political discourse.

"Often it is political parties that shape how public opinion perceives immigration. What is worrying is not so much that there are political

parties that are clearly xenophobic . . . [but] that the mainstream political parties are absorbing this tendency."

Zapata notes that instead of countering the language of extremism, mainstream parties often adopt or are indifferent to it; in his opinion a "bad strategy".

He gave the example of France where it became evident in 2002 that the anti-immigrant National Front was a strong political force. Mainstream parties, especially on the right, began to adopt the same language.

"This contagious effect is worrying and should be quickly limited," he says.

Just as society should not tolerate political speeches that are discriminatory to gay people or the role of women then it should not tolerate anti-immigrant speeches, he continues.

He hopes that his speech monitor can also help establish some ethics around the political discourse on immigration.

"There is a clear correlation between xenophobic discourse and anti-European Union speeches. This is therefore also a European problem," Zapata concludes.

Classifying speeches

The monitoring instrument has three different elements for identifying potentially problematic speeches.

If all three indicators come into play the speech is classified as anti-immigrant.

The first factor to be analysed is target audience. A speech referring explicitly and only to citizens and excluding immigrants trips the first indicator.

A speech framing the relationship between citizens and immigrants in terms of conflict and tension, with citizens being the 'positive' and immigrants being the 'negative', trips the second indicator.

The third factor concerns linguistic parameters. If generalisations, exaggerations, negative metaphors and/or dehumanising wording is used against a particular part of the population, this indicator kicks in.

"We classify a speech as xenophobic when these three elements are all present," says Zapata.

The team behind the report are looking into continuing their monitoring in Catalonia. Meanwhile Zapata would like to apply the method to the new European Parliament, which will begin its work in autumn.

The study can soon be found on the Interdisciplinary Research Group on Immigration (GRITIM) [website](#).

