Contemporary humans are continuously and deeply immersed in the reality of online communication. News websites and social media provide information about politics, society and everyday life. They also convey a number of negative phenomena. When engaging with such online media, people are repeatedly exposed to hateful comments about immigrant groups, and ethnic and religious minorities. The existing analyses of ethnophaulisms and hate speech have not addressed the emotional core of such utterances, taking for granted that they are motivated by hate; nor they examined the actual mechanisms through which incidental uses of derogatory language grows into such a large-scale societal problem. This project tries to fill this gap in our understanding of this problem.

In this project, we would like to analyze the role of the emotional processes in transmitting derogatory comments within the online reality. However, we focus not on the emotion of hate, but rather on the emotion of contempt. Contempt is a very basic emotion evoked by encounters with those perceived as inferior and not fully human. We propose that when people repeatedly encounter examples of contempt speech directed against ethnic minorities and immigrants, they develop contemptuous stereotypes of the outgroups, that ultimately lead to dehumanization of the outgroups and greater distancing intentions. Additionally, by repeatedly encountering examples of contempt speech people's sensitivity to such utterances decreases, they no longer perceive them as harmful and offensive – in a similar vein as when people encounter frequently examples of aggression in violent movies and brutal video games. This is why contempt speech may spread through the society, and transform into a sort of epidemy.

We aim to verify the proposed claims in a series of studies, including experiments during which we will study how people's thoughts and behaviors change after being repeatedly exposed to examples of contempt speech. We will try to understand how stereotypes of ethnic minorities and immigrants change after such exposure and also whether the exposure makes people more likely to use contempt speech in their everyday communication. We will also examine effects of exposure to contempt speech, observed at the brain level – we will use EEG to monitor the change in brain reactions to derogatory content and to the faces of the ethnic minorities. We predict decreased brain responses to derogatory speech as well as a decreased activation patterns associated with perception of the humanity of minority faces, after exposure to contempt speech.

The outcome of the project will be an epidemic model of contempt speech. This model will allow us to describe and understand the rapid spread of the contempt speech within the online reality. This basic model may be of great use in an applied settings, in the case organizations aimed at reducing the scale of hate speech and other dangerous phenomena related to the Internet use.