



## Research Article

Alena Kluknavská\*, Vlastimil Havlík and Jan Hanzelka

# Unleashing the Beast: Exploring Incivility and Intolerance in Facebook Comments Under Populist and Non-populist Politicians' Social Media Posts About Migration

<https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2023-0046>

Received April 5, 2023; accepted June 29, 2023

**Abstract:** Social networking sites allow politicians to reach followers directly and offer citizens platforms to express their opinions. However, online discussions often lack civility, leading to increased polarization. Although existing research has brought important insights into populist effects on political trust, attitudes, or electoral behavior, we know less about how populism's use of divisive rhetoric and identity-based appeals contribute to the confrontational responses of social media users. To address this gap, we investigate the relationship between the use of populist communication in migration-related social media posts by populist and non-populist political actors and the use of uncivil and intolerant rhetoric by social media users. Focusing on the case of the Czech Republic between 2013 and 2020, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of Facebook posts about the contentious issue of migration created by political parties and comments under those posts published by social media users. Our results indicate that while different elements of populist communication bring mixed results to the responses in online discussions, the social media posts created by populist political parties are positively associated with increased online incivility and intolerance. These findings have significant implications for understanding the potential influence of populist messages on social media and its consequences for democratic societies, highlighting their relevance in addressing and mitigating crises beyond the migration crisis, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and other emergencies.

---

**\*Corresponding author: Alena Kluknavská**, Department of Media Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Joštova 218/10, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic, E-mail: [alena.kluknavska@fss.muni.cz](mailto:alena.kluknavska@fss.muni.cz). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3679-3335>

**Vlastimil Havlík and Jan Hanzelka**, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Joštova 218/10, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic, E-mail: [havlik@fss.muni.cz](mailto:havlik@fss.muni.cz) (V. Havlík), [jan.hanzelka@mail.muni.cz](mailto:jan.hanzelka@mail.muni.cz) (J. Hanzelka). <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3650-5783> (V. Havlík). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5506-4568> (J. Hanzelka)

**Keywords:** incivility; intolerance; polarization; populism; populist communication; social media

## 1 Introduction

Social networking sites have become important platforms for political communication in many countries worldwide (Stier et al., 2018). Social media offers political parties an opportunity to engage directly with citizens and the potential for people to express their opinions and engage in rational discussions (Oz et al., 2018; Weber, 2014). However, as online discussions can be fragmented, prone to echo chambers, and impersonal, lacking face-to-face interactions, users with varying perspectives and orientations may engage in debates, which trigger strong identity-based evaluations and result in the emergence of uncivil or discriminatory language (Chan et al., 2019; Frischlich et al., 2019). While incivility refers to violations of considerations for discussion partners, intolerance signals a lack of respect for opinions, beliefs, religions, or cultures (Kenski et al., 2020; Rossini, 2022).

In the context of political communication and online discussions, the topic of migration holds particular significance. The divisive nature of the migration issue, combined with the amplifying impact of the social media environment, has intensified public sentiments and emotions, such as fear, anger, and even hatred, among social media users. The 2015/2016 refugee crisis played a pivotal role in further politicizing and polarizing the migration discourse in many European countries, leading to political contention and public disagreement. In the Czech Republic, concerns and anxieties regarding the potential arrival of migrants from culturally different backgrounds have fueled heated debates, resulting in a wide range of polarized viewpoints and discussions (Navrátil & Kluknavská, 2023).

Against this background, populist communication and the involvement of populist actors may play a significant role in fostering uncivil and intolerant online discussions. Populist messages are based on a highly divisive Manichean view of politics and society, in which the people are pitted against the elites, the “others”, or each other, and which appeal to people’s identities by identifying a threat posed by “corrupt elites” to “pure people” (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2007). Politicians employing populist communication use rhetorical strategies that exploit the fears and concerns of the public regarding minority issues, particularly migration. They tend to use narratives and identity-based appeals to create a division of “us” against “them.” Such discourse can lead to a more confrontational tone in online discussions and, ultimately, the use of uncivil or intolerant language, as social media users may feel their identities are being threatened (Vreese et al., 2018).

However, the role of populist communication and populist actors on incivility and intolerance in online political discussions remains underexplored. This study focuses on this gap by examining whether and how populist communication and the populist character of political parties are associated with uncivil and intolerant rhetoric in social media users' comments. Our main research question is: What is the relationship between the use of populist communication in Facebook posts about migration by populist and non-populist political parties and incivility and intolerance used by social media users in their comments? We answer this question by conducting a quantitative content analysis of migration-related Facebook posts published by political parties in the Czech Republic and comments under those political posts between 2013 and 2020.

This study sheds light on the relationship between populist communication and online incivility and intolerance. Understanding incivility on social media is important as it can negatively impact political attitudes and behavior. In particular, the research shows how online incivility can lead to a decrease in political trust (Van't Riet & Van Stekelenburg, 2022), have detrimental effects on deliberation (Lück & Nardi, 2019), and increase polarization (Lee et al., 2019). Exploring the role of populism, a defining element of contemporary politics, can provide insights into the nature of conflicts in political discussions, particularly during periods of heightened social and political polarization, including various types of crises such as economic crises or health emergencies (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic).

## 2 Incivility and Intolerance as Reactions in Online Comments

As political communication has moved from traditional offline channels to online platforms, social media has become a critical space for political discourse. Large social networking sites, such as Facebook, offer their users a way to respond to political posts by "liking," sharing, or commenting on the messages (e.g. Eberl et al., 2020). Each of these responses represents different levels of engagement with political posts. While liking the content is the lowest participatory behavior and sharing the content the highest, commenting is the middle-level public response which includes interactions between users and content as well as among users (Kim & Yang, 2017).

Social media platforms have become political arenas that can facilitate pluralistic discussions but also clashes between advocates of different viewpoints. This environment can facilitate the spread of uncivil and intolerant discourse (Chan et al. 2016). Although there are some differences in how scholars approach incivility and

intolerance, disrespect and impoliteness have been commonly used as operationalizations of such discourses (e.g. Gervais, 2019). We follow an approach distinguishing intolerant and uncivil discourses (e.g. Rossini, 2022). Incivility is an expression based on vulgar language, insults, rude, profane, disrespectful, or dismissive tone directed either towards the participants in the discussion or the topic. It includes ridicule, invectives, name-calling, mockery, swearing, personal, ad hominem attacks, slander, and belittling of opponents based on personal characteristics, ideas, or arguments (Coe et al., 2014; Kenski et al., 2020; Stryker et al., 2016). Intolerance includes hate speech and actions undermining democratic principles, such as prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and racist, hateful, or violent speech. The line between uncivil and intolerant discourse is set at the crossing of the pluralistic democratic discourse (Rossini, 2022).

### 3 Populism and Populist Communication

Populism has emerged as a prominent feature in contemporary politics, with some scholars describing it as the defining characteristic of our time (Mudde, 2007). In this article, we combine the ideational (Mudde, 2007) and communication perspectives (Engesser et al., 2017), the two approaches which are not mutually exclusive and represent different aspects of populism (Kefford et al., 2022).

Populism, as a thin-centered ideology, considers society as divided between two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the “pure” people and the “corrupt” elites, and asserts that politics should reflect the general will of the people (Mudde, 2007; Stanley, 2008). Populism argues that the “good” people have been betrayed by the “bad” elites who are abusing their positions of power. It also demands that the sovereignty of the people must be restored. Populism identifies the most significant conflict as between political representation and the electorate, exceeding the intensity of the usual conflict between government and opposition (Mudde, 2007). As populism offers few specific perspectives on political or socio-economic issues, it often attaches itself to some “host” ideology, for instance, nativism, which supplements the ideational core of populism (Mudde, 2007).

When populist ideology is communicated in public, its main ideological elements are characterized by a particular content and style, which appeal to the grievances of people by advocating for the people, attacking the elite, and ostracizing “the Others” with the use of negative and emotional tones (Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2019). Populist communication is often associated with the style of communication used by populist politicians, but it can also be used by political actors across the political

spectrum. For instance, established political parties have adopted some populist communication features as a response to the challenge posed by rising populist challengers. This adaptive strategy has led some scholars to describe a populist zeitgeist characterizing contemporary party politics (Rooduijn et al., 2014).

## 4 The Role of Populist Communication in Fostering Incivility and Intolerance

Populist narratives, built on simplified worldviews, intense emotions, negativity, and the construction of a deep moral conflict, have proven effective on social media platforms like Facebook (Ernst et al., 2019). Previous studies have shown the influence of populist communication on forming political attitudes (Bos et al., 2013) and its potential to exacerbate conflicts among social media users (Coe et al., 2014; Rains et al., 2017). We expect that the main elements of populist communication are positively associated with social media users' use of uncivil and intolerant language, particularly in the context of the migration issue.

The uncivil and intolerant responses can be linked to users' social identities. The process of identity formation is grounded in assumptions of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), according to which individuals tend to categorize themselves and others into various social groups based on group similarities and differences. Politicians use populist frames to emphasize social identities by creating a sense of belonging among their supporters and self-identification with a positively evaluated group of good people (in-group) and also a sense of a threat by demonizing political elites or out-groups as a way of creating a common enemy for their followers to rally against (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2018). The construction of two opposing identities through populist appeals can also trigger rude, uncivilized, or hateful speech (Rains et al., 2017).

When political actors discredit or blame the elite in their communication and accuse them of being detached from the people (Ernst et al., 2019), it can potentially spark uncivil or intolerant responses from people, especially when discussing highly divisive issues such as migration. Discrediting involves defining oneself against elites by highlighting their negative qualities, such as lying, incompetence, or laziness. Assigning the blame links the elite to the negative state of society, such as economic or social decline, and identifies a clear culprit, such as specific politicians or international organizations (Engesser et al., 2017). By framing the migration issue as a result of elite failures or highlighting the negative consequences for society

associated with elite decision-making (Bos et al., 2020), political actors can fuel insecurities, anxieties, or anger among in-group members, contributing to intergroup conflicts. We can thus expect that the presence of anti-elitism in a political post discussing migration will be associated with higher use of incivility (H1a) and intolerance (H1b) in users' comments.

People-centrism in populist communication emphasizes politicians' closeness to the people, stresses people's virtues, praises their achievements, and portrays them as a homogeneous group, through which it creates a strong sense of collective identity based on shared values, interests, or beliefs (Ernst et al., 2019). Politicians can use people-centric frames to create a sense of unity and common purpose among their supporters, often by painting themselves as the authentic representatives and the defenders of an in-group against external or internal threats (Hameleers et al., 2018). The use of people-centric frames can have a contrasting connection to uncivil and intolerant responses in users' comments. On the one hand, it can exploit existing social divisions and contribute to the emergence of uncivil or intolerant discourse. This can be particularly true in the context of migration, given how political actors utilize this issue to reinforce a shared identity based on exclusionary criteria, such as ethnicity, nationality, or cultural and religious background. On the other hand, it can foster a sense of solidarity and belonging, potentially reducing uncivil or intolerant responses. We, therefore, ask to what extent does the presence of people-centrism in a political post discussing migration affect the chances of social media users using uncivil (RQ1a) and intolerant (RQ1b) language in their comments?

Populist communication puts forward exclusionary discourses toward "the Others." In the context of the migration issue, it often frames migrants as an out-group favored by the elites and portrays them as a threat to the identity, interests, culture, or values of the people (Bos et al., 2020; Engesser et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). This framing can contribute to the polarization of the public debates, creating divisions between those who perceive migrants as a threat and those who support more inclusive and welcoming approaches. When people perceive that the presence of another group is threatening their own group, they may feel a sense of insecurity and react negatively, even with uncivil or hostile verbal responses. As such discourses may exacerbate the sense of "us" versus "them" dynamics, we expect that the presence of ostracization in a political post can increase the likelihood of uncivil (H2a) and intolerant (H2b) responses in users' comments.

The stylistic populist elements can also lead to uncivil or intolerant responses. Negativity, frequently associated with a populist communication style, depicts failures, negative events, or developments in society or politics (Ernst et al., 2019; Heiss et al., 2019). Negativity, linked to populism through its tendency to paint society in black and white, could, in the context of migration, contribute to the polarization of

opinions and fuel animosities between people. As such, negativity can lead to higher use of pejorative, even hostile expressions when engaging in online discussions. We, therefore, ask to what extent the negative tonality of a political post affects the chances of social media users' using uncivil (RQ2a) and intolerant (RQ2b) language in their comments.

The presence of emotional appeals in the political post refers to the tendencies of actors to share positive or negative emotions or reveal feelings (Bos et al., 2013; Ernst et al., 2019). The expressive language used in the messages about migration, including positive emotions, such as happiness, hope, or pride, and negative emotions, such as anger, fear, sadness, or anxiety, can amplify emotions in the audience. When people feel emotional, they tend to rely less on logic and reasoning, potentially leading to a breakdown of politeness and respect towards discussion opponents. We ask to what extent emotionality in a political post affects the chances of social media users' using uncivil (RQ3a) and intolerant (RQ3b) language in their comments.

## 5 Uncivil and Intolerant Responses to Populist Actors' Social Media Messages

Populist actors exploit direct access to the people's grievances by circumventing gatekeepers (Kriesi, 2014). They create a strong connection with their followers by reinforcing the sense of belonging, making them feel more approachable and more socially present (Ernst et al., 2019; Jacobs & Spierings, 2016; Kruikemeier et al., 2013). Social media also allows populists to connect with like-minded people (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016) and use personalized, dramatic, emotionalized, or harsh rhetoric attacking elites and out-groups (Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2019).

Social identity can play an important role in social media users' reactions to political posts of populist actors, especially when addressed in relation to a highly contested issue of migration. As populist actors are particularly likely to employ populist rhetoric (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020), often centered around minority issues, they regularly promote a particular vision of what it means to be a member of "the people." This can intensify the responses of social media users who strongly identify with populist messages about migration, making them more prone to engaging in uncivil or intolerant behavior when encountering opinions that are perceived as conflicting with their own. We, therefore, expect that social media users will be more uncivil (H3a) and intolerant (H3b) in the discussions under political posts of populist actors than non-populist actors.

## 6 Methodology

After the fall of communism, the Czech party system was quickly established as one of the most stable party systems in Central and Eastern Europe, with a relatively low level of volatility (Powell & Tucker, 2014). Party competition was structured around the dominant left-right conflict of political parties resembling traditional party families, including the radical left party Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), the Christian-democratic party Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU-ČSL) and the conservative party Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the TOP 09 party (Havlík, 2015). The Czech Republic has also experienced the unprecedented rise of populist political parties (for electoral results, see Supplementary Material A), including technocratic (centrist) populist Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO 2011) and the populist radical right Freedom and Direct Democracy (formerly Tomio Okamura’s Dawn of Direct Democracy). The Czech party system, combining a set of traditional political parties and populist actors, thus provides an excellent opportunity to examine the relationship between populist communication and political discussion.

Focusing on the topic of immigration is suitable for such inquiry. In Central and Eastern European countries, the issue of immigration did not historically play a significant role in shaping party politics or public political attitudes until the outbreak of the European migration crisis in 2015. The refugee crisis considerably politicized the topic, presenting it as a polarizing problem rather than an opportunity despite low levels of asylum applications and immigrants overall (Navrátil & Kluknavská, 2023).

The data for our study consists of a corpus of Facebook posts from the political parties in the Czech Republic between 2013 and 2020. Our sample includes political parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies at least once during our time frame. Our final sample contains 798 migration-related posts and corresponding 6263 comments. We drew this sample from all Facebook posts ( $n = 60,528$ ) of political parties during the time frame (2013–2020). We sampled it based on keywords related to migration and refugee crisis: refugee, migrant, migration, immigration, or asylum. We included all the migration posts created by political parties (except for the SPD party, where we randomly sampled 300 posts to keep the data among parties comparable), in which migration issue was a dominant topic. More information on the political parties and the data is included in Table 1. We describe the whole sampling process in Supplementary Material B.

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of political parties’ Facebook posts and comments to identify the populist message elements (e.g. Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020) and the presence of incivility and intolerance in the comments (e.g. Rossini,



**Table 1:** Political parties included in the Analysis.

Political party	Populist	Government 2013–2017	Government 2017–2021	Posts included	Migration- related posts	Total num- ber of posts	Comments (migration- related posts)	Comments included
Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO 2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes	74	104	6381	7087	725
Dawn of direct democracy (Dawn) <sup>a</sup>	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Freedom and Direct De- mocracy (SPD) <sup>a</sup>	Yes	N/A	No	113	3369	8887	56,475	1131
Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD)	No	Yes	Yes	49	79	4659	3372	400
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM)	No	No	No	156	278	7329	2901	993
Civic Democratic Party (ODS)	No	No	No	187	283	8508	4866	1385
Mayors and Independents (STAN)	No	No	No	7	21	4302	91	23
Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU-ČSL)	No	Yes	No	112	170	6726	2691	646
TOP 09	No	No	No	84	130	7685	5923	800
Czech Pirate Party (Piráti)	No	N/A	No	16	56	6051	5664	160

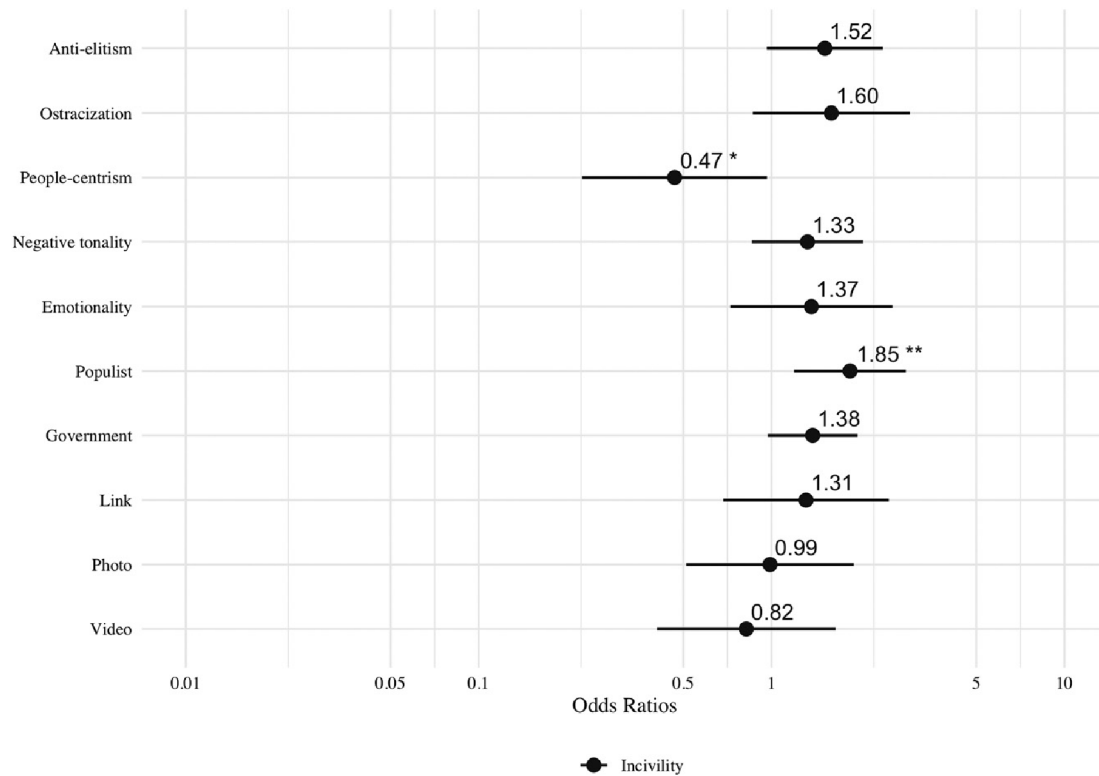
<sup>a</sup>As the party Dawn does not have a FB page and the party SPD has primarily communicated through the FB of its leader Tomio Okamura, we have substituted the data for both parties by drawing on the Tomio Okamura’s FB page.

2022). The final coding was done by one coder (Krippendorff's Alpha in intra-coder reliability above 0.7 for all variables; the full results can be found in Supplementary Material C). Our dependent variables are the presence of incivility and the presence of intolerance in the comments under a FB political post, respectively. We base the measurement of our dependent variables based on the conceptualization of incivility and intolerance presented above. Incivility is operationalized as vulgar language, insults, personal attacks, pejorative language, and attacks on the opinions or arguments of other people or discussants. Intolerance is operationalized as the denial of individual rights, racist remarks, attacking political positions of other actors or discussants, social or economic discrimination, gender, and sexual discrimination, religious discrimination, other stereotyping, violent threats, or hate speech. For each Facebook post, we coded a maximum of 10 comments. We dummy-coded the presence of incivility/intolerance under the migration-related post when at least one of the comments contained uncivil/intolerant language.

To assess our hypotheses and research questions about elements of populist communication, we created dummy variables for their presence in political posts. We operationalize these elements based on the conceptualization of populist communication: we include content elements of anti-elitism, people-centrism, ostracization, and stylistic elements of negative tonality of the post and emotionality present in the political post. To assess the connection of party type to which a political party belongs with incivility and intolerance in the comments, we classified Czech political parties based on the PopuList project's framework (Rooduijn et al., 2019). Following similar research (e.g. Eberl et al., 2020), we also include the type of the post, i.e. if the post was only a text (status) or whether it also included a link, photo, or video (these types of posts may or may not also include the text). This way, we can control for the potential influence of the presence of visuals in the message. Lastly, we include the affiliation with the government as a control variable. For testing the formulated hypotheses and understanding the research questions, we relied on binary logistic regression, running two separate models for each dependent variable.

## 7 Results

We tested hypotheses and research questions regarding different elements of populist communication and the populist character of the political parties for both incivility and intolerance models. As shown in Figure 1 (full regression models shown in Supplementary Material D), the use of anti-elitism ( $b = 0.420$ ) and ostracization ( $b = 0.471$ ) in migration-related messages increased the odds of social media users utilizing uncivil language, but these results were not statistically significant. The presence of people-centrism, however, showed a significant positive connection to

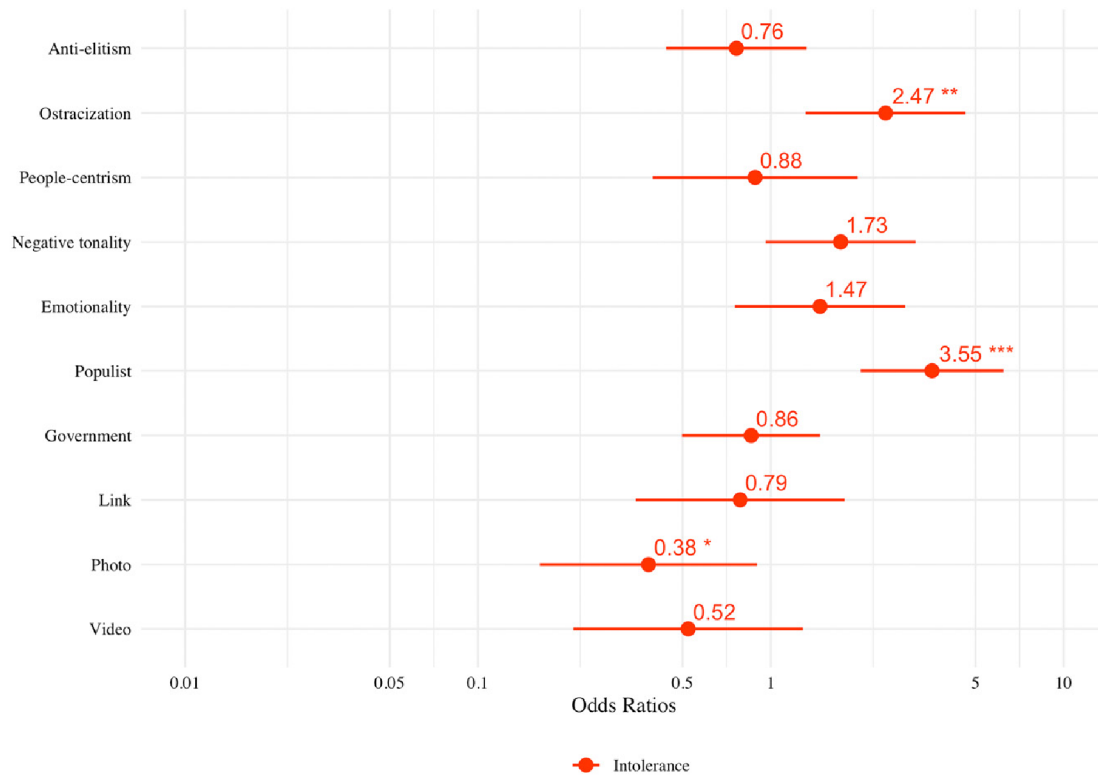


**Figure 1:** Coefficient plot for incivility as a dependent variable.

incivility, meaning that users were less likely to be uncivil when politicians brought up the people and a sense of unity and common purpose among their supporters ( $b = -0.762$ ). The stylistic elements of populist communication, negative tonality ( $b = 0.283$ ) and emotionality ( $b = 0.314$ ), were also positively connected to uncivil comments; however, the results were insignificant.

Interestingly, social media users were more likely to be uncivil under the posts of populist political parties ( $b = 0.617$ ) than non-populist parties. The party's affiliation with the government also increased the chances that the users were uncivil ( $b = 0.324$ ), but the results were insignificant. While the use of a link in the post ( $b = 0.271$ ) increased the likelihood of users being uncivil, the inclusion of a photo ( $b = -0.012$ ) or video ( $b = -0.198$ ) in the post in comparison to the status (only text in the post) decreased it; all these post types were insignificant.

For the intolerance model (Figure 2), social media users were less likely to use intolerance in their comments when political parties used anti-elite ( $b = -0.271$ ) and people-centric ( $b = -0.124$ ) elements in their messages. However, these results were not statistically significant. Yet, one of the elements of populist communication significantly increased the odds of social media users incorporating intolerance in their comments. When politicians ostracized out-groups in their messages ( $b = 0.902$ ), the likelihood of users utilizing intolerant language in their comments increased. The



**Figure 2:** Coefficient plot for intolerance as a dependent variable.

stylistic elements of populist communication, negative tonality ( $b = 0.549$ ) and emotionality ( $b = 0.387$ ), increased the odds of the presence of intolerant language, yet, the results were insignificant.

The social media users commenting on the political posts of populist actors ( $b = 1.268$ ) compared to non-populist actors were likelier to use intolerant language in their comments. Unlike in the case of incivility, users were less likely to use intolerant language when commenting on the posts of government actors ( $b = -0.155$ ), though the results were not statistically significant. When users commented on the posts that contained only text (status), they were more likely to be using intolerant rhetoric, in comparison to those posts including the link ( $b = -0.241$ ), photo ( $b = -0.962$ ), or video ( $b = -0.649$ ).

## 8 Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between populist communication and online incivility and intolerance in political discussions on social media. Focusing on migration, a highly politicized and contested issue across European countries, we

analyzed whether and how populist communication spread by populist and non-populist parties in the Czech Republic between 2013 and 2020 is associated with social media users' uncivil and intolerant language.

Our findings reveal interesting insights regarding the relationship between *populist communication* and incivility and intolerance. Specifically, when discussing the migration issue, we found that the presence of people-centrism in political posts decreased the likelihood of users utilizing incivility in their comments. When populist and non-populist politicians emphasized their closeness to the people and praised the people's achievements when discussing the migration issue, the chances of users responding with uncivil language decreased. This finding indicates the de-escalating potential of appeals to shared identity and a sense of belonging in political discussions. However, the study also reveals that the use of ostracization targeting out-groups in political posts about migration increases the chances of intolerant language being used by social media users. This finding suggests that targeting the "Others" with hostility and contrasting them with the people, and creating a perception of unjust favoritism by elites (Bos et al., 2020; Engesser et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) can be regarded as an important elite cue and political strategy in heightening users' hostile verbal responses in the context of contentious political issues.

Importantly, the results demonstrate that the *populist character* of political parties plays a significant role in shaping the relationship between migration-related social media messages and the language used by their followers. Social media users were found to be more likely to use intolerant and uncivil language under the migration posts of populist actors compared to non-populist actors. This connection was present even in cases where the posts created by populist actors may not explicitly contain populist communication elements such as ostracization or anti-elitism. It suggests a potential broader influence of the narratives employed by populist actors and the identification and alignment of social media users with the populist ideology. Populist actors often pursue a strong connection with their followers, reinforcing a sense of shared belonging. This connection can generate a heightened emotional response among people concerning perceptions about immigrants (Wirz et al., 2018), making them more prone to engaging in uncivil or intolerant behavior, even in the absence of explicit populist rhetoric in the posts.

One limitation of our study is its exclusive focus on the migration issue as the primary context for investigating the relationship between populism and online incivility and intolerance. As we recognize that the relationship between populist communication and online discussions can extend beyond the migration topic,

future research should consider incorporating a more diverse range of public and policy issues or political contexts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the connection between populist communication and online incivility and intolerance. Further, our study has still been relatively small in scope. Future research could analyze a larger sample of social media platforms, which are used for different purposes in relation to sharing and commenting. Such inquiry has the potential to shed light on how different social networking platforms influence the use of incivility and intolerance. In addition, future studies could engage in comparison across different countries and look into dynamics over time and political contexts.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, our findings have important implications for our understanding of the role of populist communication in shaping public democratic engagement and its quality in the public sphere. The uncivil and intolerant responses can have significant implications for the overall quality of democracy. Unlike incivility, which can, under some circumstances, spark a discussion among people and be beneficial for constructive exchanges (Rossini, 2022), intolerance can lower the quality of the discussion as a whole (Prochazka et al., 2018). This is particularly relevant in the context of health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where constructive exchanges and informed debates are crucial for effective decision-making and public health measures. The results also suggest that populists successfully exploit social media platforms to connect with like-minded individuals who are more likely to identify with messages emphasizing a strong sense of belonging and exclusion of certain groups from society (Engesser et al., 2017). These findings highlight the potential for populist communication to exacerbate divisions and promote hostility but also underscore the importance of political parties adopting more inclusive and respectful communication that prioritizes dialogue. Additionally, the study's focus on the Czech Republic provides insights into the role of populist communication in online political discussions and specifically in the context of disrespectful discussions, in a relatively understudied context, contributing to the literature on the dynamics of populist politics in Central and Eastern Europe.

**Research funding:** The work of Alena Kluknavská and Vlastimil Havlík on this article was supported by the NPO “Systemic Risk Institute” number LX22NPO5101, funded by European Union – Next Generation EU (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, NPO: EXCELES). The work of Jan Hanzelka on this article was supported by the Specific University Research Grant (MUNI/A/1279/2022).

**Competing interest:** The authors report no conflict of interest.

## References

- Bos, L., Schemer, C., Corbu, N., Hameleers, M., Andreadis, I., Schulz, A., Schmuck, D., Reinemann, C., & Fawzi, N. (2020). The effects of populism as a social identity frame on persuasion and mobilisation: Evidence from a 15-country experiment. *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(1), 3–24.
- Bos, L., Van Der Brug, W., & De Vreese, C. H. (2013). An experimental test of the impact of style and rhetoric on the perception of right-wing populist and mainstream party leaders. *Acta Politica*, 48, 192–208.
- Chan, C. H., Chow, C. S. L., & Fu, K. W. (2019). Echoslamming: How incivility interacts with cyberbalkanization on the social media in Hong Kong. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 29(4), 307–327.
- Chan, J., Ghose, A., & Seamans, R. (2016). The internet and racial hate crime. *MIS Quarterly*, 40(2), 381–404.
- Coe, K., Kenski, K., & Rains, S. A. (2014). Online and uncivil? Patterns and determinants of incivility in newspaper Website comments. *Journal of Communication*, 64(4), 658–679.
- De Vreese, C. H., Esser, F., Aalberg, T., Reinemann, C., & Stanyer, J. (2018). Populism as an expression of political communication content and style: A new perspective. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4), 423–438.
- Eberl, J. M., Tolochko, P., Jost, P., Heidenreich, T., & Boomgaarden, H. G. (2020). What's in a post? How sentiment and issue salience affect users' emotional reactions on Facebook. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 17(1), 48–65.
- Engesser, S., Fawzi, N., & Larsson, A. O. (2017). Populist online communication: Introduction to the special issue. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(9), 1279–1292.
- Ernst, N., Blassnig, S., Engesser, S., Büchel, F., & Esser, F. (2019). Populists prefer social media over talk shows: An analysis of populist messages and stylistic elements across six countries. *Social Media+Society*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118823358>
- Frischlich, L., Boberg, S., & Quandt, T. (2019). Comment sections as targets of dark participation? Journalists' evaluation and moderation of deviant user comments. *Journalism Studies*, 20(14), 2014–2033.
- Gervais, B. T. (2019). Rousing the Partisan combatant: Elite incivility, anger, and Antideliberative attitudes. *Political Psychology*, 40(3), 637–655.
- Hameleers, M., Bos, L., Fawzi, N., Reinemann, C., Andreadis, I., Corbu, N., Schemer, C., Schulz, A., Shaefer, T., Aalberg, T., Axelsson, S., Berganza, R., Cremonesi, C., Dahlberg, S., de Vreese, C. H., Hess, A., Kartsounidou, E., Kasprovicz, D., Matthes, J., ... Weiss-Yaniv, N. (2018). Start spreading the news: A comparative experiment on the effects of populist communication on political engagement in sixteen European countries. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4), 517–538.
- Havlík, V. (2015). Stable or not? Patterns of party system dynamics and the rise of the new political parties in the Czech Republic. *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, 15(1), 180–202.
- Heiss, R., Schmuck, D., & Matthes, J. (2019). What drives interaction in political actors' Facebook posts? Profile and content predictors of user engagement and political actors' reactions. *Information, Communication & Society*, 22(10), 1497–1513.
- Jacobs, K., & Spierings, N. (2016). *Social media, parties, and political inequalities*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jagers, J., & Walgrave, S. (2007). Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(3), 319–345.
- Kefford, G., Moffitt, B., & Werner, A. (2022). Populist attitudes: Bringing together ideational and communicative approaches. *Political Studies*, 70(4), 1006–1027.
- Kenski, K., Coe, K., & Rains, S. A. (2020). Perceptions of uncivil discourse online: An examination of types and predictors. *Communication Research*, 47(6), 795–814.

- Kim, C., & Yang, S. U. (2017). Like, comment, and share on Facebook: How each behavior differs from the other. *Public Relations Review*, 43(2), 441–449.
- Kriesi, H. (2014). The populist challenge. *West European Politics*, 37(2), 361–378.
- Kruikemeier, S., Van Noort, G., Vliegenthart, R., & De Vreese, C. H. (2013). Getting closer: The effects of personalized and interactive online political communication. *European Journal of Communication*, 28(1), 53–66.
- Lee, F. L., Liang, H., & Tang, G. K. (2019). Online incivility, cyberbalkanization, and the dynamics of opinion polarization during and after a mass protest event. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 4940–4959.
- Lück, J., & Nardi, C. (2019). Incivility in user comments on online news articles: Investigating the role of opinion dissonance for the effects of incivility on attitudes, emotions and the willingness to participate. *SCM Studies in Communication and Media*, 8(3), 311–337.
- Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford University Press.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Navrátil, J., & Kluknavská, A. (2023). A tale of two campaigns: Understanding the role of short-term political context in Czech and Slovak counter/mobilizing on migration. *Social Movement Studies*, 22, 1–19.
- Oz, M., Zheng, P., & Chen, G. M. (2018). Twitter versus Facebook: Comparing incivility, impoliteness, and deliberative attributes. *New Media & Society*, 20(9), 3400–3419.
- Powell, E. N., & Tucker, J. A. (2014). Revisiting electoral volatility in post-communist countries: New data, new results and new approaches. *British Journal of Political Science*, 44(1), 123–147.
- Prochazka, F., Weber, P., & Schweiger, W. (2018). Effects of civility and reasoning in user comments on perceived journalistic quality. *Journalism Studies*, 19(1), 62–78.
- Rains, S. A., Kenski, K., Coe, K., & Harwood, J. (2017). Incivility and political identity on the Internet: Intergroup factors as predictors of incivility in discussions of news online. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 22(4), 163–178.
- Rooduijn, M., De Lange, S. L., & Van Der Brug, W. (2014). A populist zeitgeist? Programmatic contagion by populist parties in Western Europe. *Party Politics*, 20(4), 563–575.
- Rooduijn, M., Van Kessel, S., Froio, C., Pirro, A., De Lange, S., Halikiopoulou, D., Lewis, P., Mudde, C., & Taggart, P. (2019). *The PopuList: An overview of populist, far right, far left and eurosceptic parties in Europe*. [www.popu-list.org](http://www.popu-list.org)
- Rossini, P. (2022). Beyond incivility: Understanding Patterns of uncivil and intolerant discourse in online political talk. *Communication Research*, 49(3), 399–425.
- Schmuck, D., & Hameleers, M. (2020). Closer to the people: A comparative content analysis of populist communication on social networking sites in pre-and post-election periods. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(10), 1531–1548.
- Stanley, B. (2008). The thin ideology of populism. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13(1), 95–110.
- Stier, S., Bleier, A., Lietz, H., & Strohmaier, M. (2018). Election campaigning on social media: Politicians, audiences, and the mediation of political communication on Facebook and Twitter. *Political Communication*, 35(1), 50–74.
- Stryker, R., Conway, B. A., & Danielson, J. T. (2016). What is political incivility? *Communication Monographs*, 83(4), 535–556.
- Tajfel, H. (1978). Social categorization, social identity and social comparison. In H. Tajfel (Ed), *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 61–76). Academic Press.



- Van't Riet, J., & Van Stekelenburg, A. (2022). The effects of political incivility on political trust and political participation: A meta-analysis of experimental research. *Human Communication Research*, 48(2), 203–229.
- Weber, P. (2014). Discussions in the comments section: Factors influencing participation and interactivity in online newspapers' reader comments. *New Media & Society*, 16(6), 941–957.
- Wirz, D. S., Wettstein, M., Schulz, A., Müller, P., Schemer, C., Ernst, N., Esser, F., & Wirth, W. (2018). The effects of right-wing populist communication on emotions and cognitions toward immigrants. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4), 496–516.

---

**Supplementary Material:** This article contains supplementary material (<https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2023-0046>).