Abandoned by Elites, United by Crisis: The Rise of a Collective Identity Online

Martina Novotná & Lenka Vochocová

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1

What metanarratives do people use to express their social and economic uncertainties during crises (COVID-19 and the Russian-Ukrainian war) in Facebook discussions?

RQ2

How are elements of populist discourse (e.g. conflict between elites and ordinary people) manifested in these metanarratives?

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL IDENTITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

- Crisis periods stimulate uncertainty, emotions and especially the need for social cohesion – collective social identity (Hogg, 2023)

- Collective social identity effectively reduces uncertainty in crises X atmosphere of conflict between groups (us vs. them), reinforcing populism (Hameleers, 2019; Hogg & Gaffney, 2023; Schmid et al., 2021)

- Social media: an ideal space for collective identification – reinforcing the shared feeling of collective victimhood (Hogg, 2023; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022)
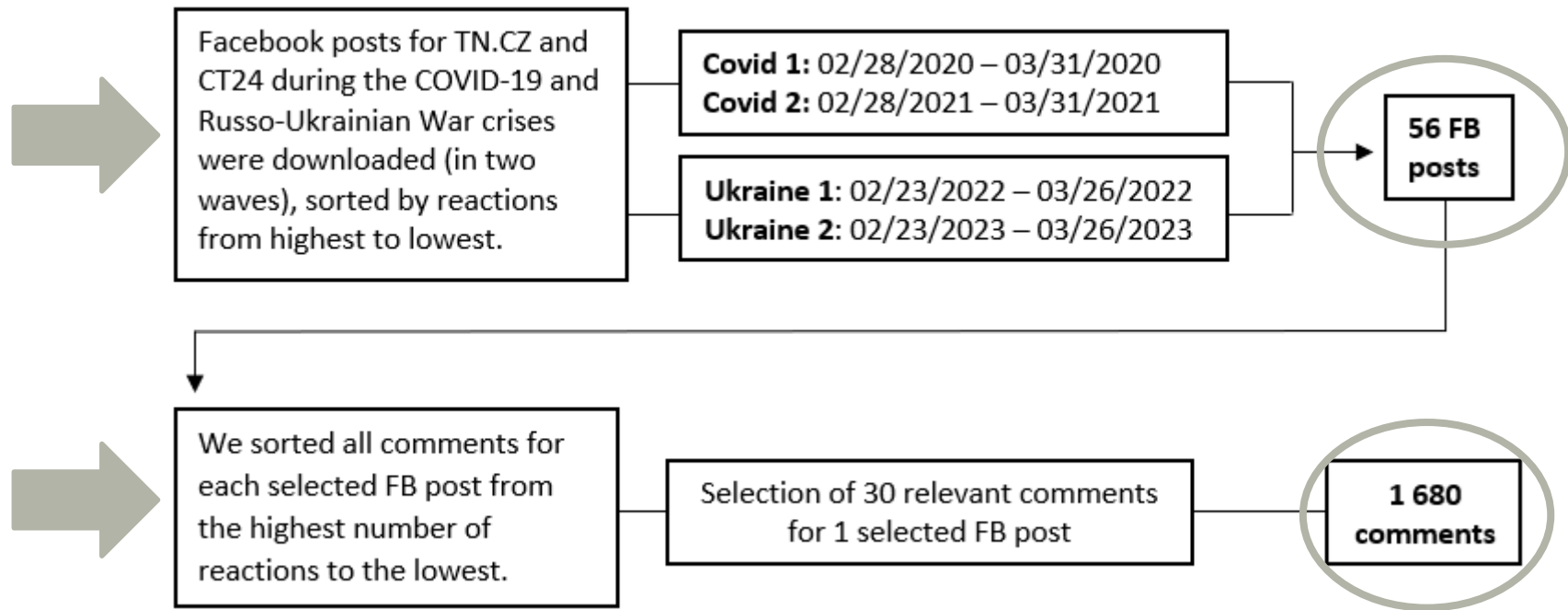
EXPRESSIVITY, ONLINE IDENTITY AND POLARIZATION

- Online expressivity – a discursive way of forming collective online identities – the role of social media performativity (identification, connection, and recognition facilitated by SNS affordances) (Martinsson & Ericson, 2022)

- Performative expressive practices – a cacophony of comments, constant flow of cohesive content, conversational rituals – metalanguage (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021)

- Affective polarization – collective identity formed not around political opinions but rather through aversion to an out-group ("tribal" identity) (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022)

METHODOLOGY
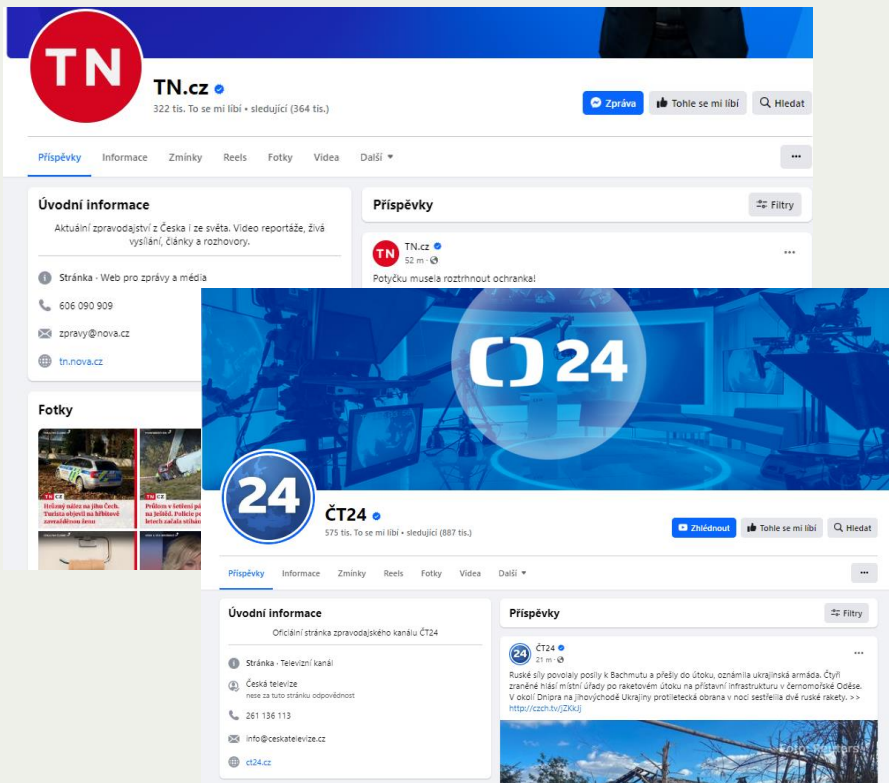
- **Two crisis periods** (COVID-19 and the Russian-Ukrainian war)

- Focus on **public service media** and **mainstream media** / most popular on Facebook in Czechia

- Data downloaded by **Facepager** (Jünger & Keyling, 2019)

- Qualitative content analysis was conducted using **Atlas.ti** software

- **Open and axial coding** (Grounded theory)

FACEBOOK POSTS AND COMMENTS SELECTION PROCESS

Facebook posts for TN.CZ and CT24 during the COVID-19 and Russo-Ukrainian War crises were downloaded (in two waves), sorted by reactions from highest to lowest.

Covid 1: 02/28/2020 – 03/31/2020
Covid 2: 02/28/2021 – 03/31/2021

Ukraine 1: 02/23/2022 – 03/26/2022
Ukraine 2: 02/23/2023 – 03/26/2023

56 FB posts

We sorted all comments for each selected FB post from the highest number of reactions to the lowest.

Selection of 30 relevant comments for 1 selected FB post

1 680 comments

I. The people abandoned by their elites (government)

- The elites pursue their interests
- Politicians prioritize "strangers" (Ukrainians)

Use your brains, people, even if an antidote is invented it will take at least a year to get the vaccine to the ordinary people, the priority is given to elites and older people.
— TN.CZ (1st part, COVID)

(Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. https://democracy.fes.de/topics/polarization-democracy)

II. We have our own problems, we shouldn't interfere in other people's issues

- What about our marginalized (single mothers, retired/homeless people, sick children)?

*We are in debt ourselves, **we have no pensions, no social benefits, and we will support the war that is destroying us**.*— ČT24 (2nd part, Ukraine)

***And who will support pensioners and single mothers**… it's a mockery of ordinary Czechs…*—TN.CZ (1st part, Ukraine)

*Dude, the Czechs are such heroes now, aren't they? **When it comes to a country other than our own, they are helping and sending money**, but they are only collecting bottle caps for Czech children who are seriously ill or disabled.*
— CT24 (1st part, Ukraine)

III. They lie to us, manipulate us and restrict our human rights

- Distrust of official information
- Distrust of the media
- They [politicians] are not solving problems but limiting freedom and establishing totalitarianism (conspiracy narratives)

Yes, freedom of speech and opinion is gone. I don't care anymore, but these young people are heading for a totalitarianism we've never seen before. Ever since COVID t, I have a toothbrush ready and waiting for them to come for me 🙀😛🙀 *but I will just express my opinion, and if someone else has an opinion, I respect it, too.*
— CT24 (1st part, Ukraine)

IV. The government has given up on us, we'll take care of ourselves

- Independence and autonomy of the people as values

We'll take off face masks and put on our helmets 🚯🙇🙇🙇🙇🙇 *At home, we'll have to make a fire and probably use air as* car fuel. We'll take care of the Ukrainians, but who'll take care of us?
— TN.CZ (1st part, Ukraine)

So, let the government boys line up and go thank those who work, those who think and act instead of them😒....
— CT24 (1st part, COVID)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Opinions expressed online can be perceived as dominant views on a given topic.

2. Understanding recurring crisis narratives can aid authorities in preventing citizen uncertainty.

3. Online comments reproducing populist rhetoric can contribute to societal polarization.

4. Defining a common enemy can spread radical views in homogeneous groups.

5. Shared identities are formed through political attitudes, opinions, and values by defining a common enemy.

6. Collective identities emerge on mainstream news sites, not just in radical fringe spaces.

Thank you &
Let's stay in touch!

Martina Novotná
mnovotna@fss.muni.cz

Lenka Vochocová
lenka.vochocova@fsv.cuni.cz

MASARYK UNIVERSITY

SYRI
NÁRODNÍ INSTITUT

CHARLES UNIVERSITY

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Pictures and motives
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