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A question of truth: accusations of untruthfulness by populist and non-populist politicians on Facebook during the COVID-19 crisis

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ABSTRACT

Online environments can foster opportunities for political engagement but can also hinder democratic deliberation by promoting hostile and polarizing communication. A prominent concern revolves around the attacks on political actors' truthfulness in public discourse. Such discourse is expressed through anti-elite and antagonistic attacks on perceived (un)truthfulness employed by some politicians toward political opponents in public debates, and it is argued to maintain a close affinity with populist politics. During crises, when people seek guidance from elites, discourses of untruthfulness can lead to further uncertainty by eroding trust in political leadership. Relying on the extensive claims analysis of 7,109 Facebook posts published by political party leaders between March 2020 and February 2021, this study investigates how accusations of untruthfulness unfold in the social media posts of populist and non-populist political leaders in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings show that populist leaders are generally more prone to utilize accusations of untruthfulness in their social media posts than non-populist politicians, but the extent of attacks is context-dependent.



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The digital public sphere serves as a dynamic platform that can foster opportunities for public discourse and political engagement but can also hinder democratic deliberation (Friess & Eilders, 2015). This phenomenon becomes evident as social media platforms often inadvertently promote and amplify hostile and polarizing communication, drawing like-minded individuals together and reinforcing their pre-existing beliefs (Engesser et al., 2017). Within contemporary online environments, a prominent concern revolves

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around the attacks on the truthfulness of political actors involved in public discourse (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Politicians increasingly adopt accusatory, emotionalized, or contemptuous rhetoric, blaming their adversaries for falsehoods and manipulation while constructing their versions of an ostensibly ‘truer’ reality (Kluknavská & Eisele, 2023).

This rhetoric can take the form of accusations of untruthfulness expressed through anti-elite and antagonistic attacks on perceived (un)truthfulness employed by some politicians toward political opponents in public debates. This communication strategy of creating a perception of elite deception (Waisbord, 2018) can wield significant influence, particularly during economic, political, or health crises when anxieties and uncertainties are heightened among the general public and political actors (Van Aelst & Blumler, 2021). Accusations of untruthfulness, inducing a sense that someone is wrong by labeling them as deceitful, may affect democracy by blurring the lines between actual and perceived truthfulness, thus increasing existing uncertainties and societal divides. Despite existing literature offering valuable insights into communicative untruthfulness, our empirical understanding of the factors driving this type of communication remains limited.

This study investigates how accusations of untruthfulness unfold in the social media posts of populist and non-populist political leaders in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our investigation is structured around three key areas: First, we explore whether contextual opportunities arising from the health pandemic influenced the extent of employment of accusations of untruthfulness in political leaders’ social media posts; second, we examine the role of populist actors in facilitating these discourses during a crisis; and third, we consider the impact of specific country contexts.

The issue of questioning the truthfulness of political opponents in public debates gains particular relevance during political or public crises when individuals turn to elites for information and guidance to alleviate fear and uncertainty (Van Aelst & Blumler, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, a profound global public crisis affecting public health, social structures, economies, and individual well-being, highlights how politicians communicate about their opponents during such emergencies. This communication can either bolster or undermine the credibility of the involved actors and their statements, ultimately influencing public willingness to comply with political measures to manage the crisis. Consequently, discursive attacks on truthfulness during times of crisis may not only harm political actors but also, depending on their success, lead to tangible consequences in how the crisis unfolds and how societies recover.

While accusations of untruthfulness, referenced as being part of a broader post-truth political and information environment, are often associated with populism (e.g., Waisbord, 2018), some strategies in communicating untruthfulness, such as the use of the label ‘fake news,’ appear to be employed across the political spectrum (Egelhofer et al., 2021). To gain a deeper understanding of accusations of untruthfulness within the discourse of diverse political actors, particularly during crises, we explore whether and to what extent populist political leaders are more susceptible to such attacks than their non-populist counterparts. We also consider differences in the strategic motives of populist politicians in different countries.

We examine accusations of untruthfulness in four Western and Central and Eastern European countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland. Given the scarcity of empirical knowledge on these cases regarding attacks on truthfulness, we

investigate whether and to what extent the utilization of discourses of untruthfulness among political leaders varies in these countries. This investigation assumes particular relevance as it involves Central and Eastern European countries, some of which have provided fertile ground for populist forces to become stronger (Stanley, 2019). We also aim to address the lack of comparative research that could help us better comprehend the conditions under which accusations of untruthfulness are more likely to be employed by political leaders in some countries compared to others. The four countries make a good case for a comparative study due to their varying experiences with and responses to the pandemic, the overall state of their political systems during our analysis period, and the presence of populist actors in government positions, which create distinct political and discursive opportunities (Koopmans & Statham, 2010) for political actors to disseminate discursive attacks on their opponents' truthfulness.

To empirically assess the relationship between accusations of untruthfulness, crisis opportunities, party affiliation, and country context, we focus on Facebook communication of political party leaders during the first year of the pandemic. Our analysis relies on an extensive claims analysis of 7,109 Facebook posts published by these leaders between March 2020 and February 2021. A claims analysis (e.g., Koopmans & Statham, 2010) presents a form of quantitative content analysis adapted to study attacks on opponents' truthfulness (Kluknavská & Eisele, 2023).

Discursive attacks on opponents' truthfulness: accusations of untruthfulness in public discourse

The recent political discourse has been described as unprecedented regarding the lack of communicative truthfulness (Egelhofer et al., 2022). The profound changes in conditions through which society determines veracities and falsehoods in public communication have been described as the relativization of truth (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017), communicative untruthfulness (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022), post-truth (Waisbord, 2018), or truth contestation (Kluknavská & Eisele, 2023). These perspectives are close to the concepts of misinformation and disinformation, which refer to inaccurate information that is either unintentionally false or intentionally deceitful (Vraga & Bode, 2020). However, while the debate on the accuracy, honesty, and correctness of information is important, as also noted by Hameleers et al. (2022), the *perceived* untruthfulness, as an overarching concept of perceived misinformation and disinformation, should also be taken into account.

The perceived untruthfulness corresponds to the overall perceptions of distrust in the accuracy of the information or the actor voicing that information (Hameleers et al., 2022). In this context, scholars have pointed to the political communication of perceived (un)truthfulness created and shared in public discourse, characterized by a presentation of someone being 'true' or 'false' (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Egelhofer et al., 2022; Hameleers & Minihold, 2022; Kluknavská & Eisele, 2023). These discourses relate to antagonistic politics by attributing blame to established political and public actors, such as mainstream media accused of sharing fake news (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Hameleers, 2020) and also link to the concept of perceived disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2022). Disinformation designates the intentional dissemination of false, untrue, fabricated, or manipulated information created to deceive people (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Tandoc Jr. et al., 2017) and, as such, refers to objectively untrue or false information

intended to cause harm. The perceptions of disinformation, however, identify the information employed regardless of its factuality, aiming to create a *sense* of falsity. These perceptions intend to discredit opponents, politicians, political parties, or opposing voices more generally. When we extrapolate these insights to a communication strategy of political actors, these perceptions can be understood through discursive attacks on the truthfulness of political or public actors involved in the public debate: politicians strategically challenge and contest their opponents through expressions of accusations of untruthfulness.

Unlike the collaborative nature of consensus-driven politics, where responsible questioning of truth, reality, and opposition can enhance democracy and prompt dialogue, the discursively constructed accusations of untruthfulness stem from antagonistic and anti-elite hostility and a disdain for political participants deemed as elites. The attack's inherent antagonism and anti-elite nature also differentiate these accusations from criticism expressing disapproval, disagreement, or a negative opinion of someone or something as part of a democratic dialogue. As noted above, these discursive constructions do not revolve around actual deceptions, where the truth is a fixed point. They are a subject of perceptions of elite deception (Waisbord, 2018) as constructed by political actors. These constructions serve as the strategic manipulations of the connotations associated with 'truth' and 'facts' to influence individuals' perceptions of someone's (un)truthfulness (Hopkin & Rosamond, 2017; Kluknavská & Eisele, 2023). The truthfulness becomes subjective, and actors employing this strategy can capitalize on the binary lens through which politicians scrutinize the honesty of their adversaries, presenting someone feeling 'wrong' as opposed to those who are 'right' (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022).

The accusations of untruthfulness can serve as a (de)legitimization tool. Employing attacks on the truthfulness of other political or public actors can question the legitimacy and integrity of those accused. These accusations can, hence, delegitimize opponents and increase the accuser's own legitimacy by manipulating the perception of authenticity. These strategies do not necessarily designate the truth as meaningless, as the essence or understanding of the truth may matter to both communicators and audiences. However, the meanings associated with truthfulness rest upon how these meanings are presented; these presentations can be strategically manipulated to evoke a sense of connection to and resonance with reality (Hopkin & Rosamond, 2017).

To sum up, the accusations of untruthfulness capture how actors evaluate the truthfulness of their opponents; aligning with antagonistic politics and the concept of perception of disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2022), the truth attacks utilize accusations of lying, dishonesty, deception, and deliberate manipulation of facts, knowledge, reality, or purposeful untruth-telling. Elites are, for instance, labeled as lying (Farhall et al., 2019; Hameleers & Minihold, 2022), accused of sharing 'establishment lies' (Waisbord, 2018, p. 25), or being 'fake news' (Egelhofer et al., 2021).

Comprehending how politicians attack the truthfulness of other actors involved in a public debate becomes crucial in understanding the unfolding of communicative untruthfulness on social media. Various contextual factors can influence the dynamics of accusations of untruthfulness. In the following parts, we consider COVID-19, affiliation with a populist party, and the context offered by political and public development in the four countries during the initial year of the pandemic.

Accusations of untruthfulness in times of COVID-19 crisis

Our research period covers the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Facing the outbreak of the COVID-19 disease in early 2020, politicians across the political spectrum tried to deal with what had soon become a severe worldwide health crisis and inform the public about the necessary measures to curb the virus. Most liberal democracies responded by placing strict, nationwide lockdowns, imposing travel bans, restricting free movement, and closing education and economic activities, except for critical infrastructure (e.g., Erhardt et al., 2021). The severity of the crisis increased public anxiety and left people trying to make sense of the situation. In this unprecedented situation, politicians were presented with the challenge of safeguarding effective communication with their adherents during the several waves of the pandemic.

In times of crisis, contestation of opponents' truthfulness may be assumed to fall on the fertile ground due to the increased uncertainty of the situation. We can theoretically assume that the contingency of crises and the political urgency of tackling impending dangers open up a window of opportunity for political opponents who exploit the crisis to push their own agenda. In such framing contests, involved actors establish their interpretation of the crisis regarding causes, consequences, and responsibilities, as well as the lessons learned and the policies that should be implemented to tackle them (e.g., Boin et al., 2009). Attacks on truthfulness may serve to politically damage and erode trust in responsible decision-makers, either based on actual facts and knowledge or based on a morally grounded questioning of opponents' integrity more generally.

However, exceptionally dramatic events present significant challenges for political leaders who must make vital decisions under time pressures (Erhardt et al., 2021). Decision-makers are expected to minimize the negative impact of the crisis on society and manage the perception of the crisis in their public communication (Eisele et al., 2022). To be perceived as effective, leaders have incentives to appear less conflictive and, instead of criticizing the truthfulness of others, might focus on solutions and increasing the morale of the society. This can happen especially during the first acute phase of the crisis when people support leaders' decisions and politicians lower critical voices towards each other, temporarily rallying around the flag (Van Aelst & Blumler, 2021). The empirical literature suggests that even populist and polarizing actors, usually conflictive in their discursive strategies, found it harder to politicize COVID-19 in the initial stages of the pandemic (Bobba & Hubé, 2021). Only after the emergency of the pandemic declined, polarizing leaders went back to exploiting traditional divisive issues (Bitonti et al., 2023).

Overall, we can inquire to what extent COVID-19 presented an opportunity for political actors to challenge the integrity and truthfulness of other political actors by posing the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does the presence of the COVID-19 issue in the post affect accusations of untruthfulness in political leaders' social media posts?

RQ2: To what extent does the first COVID-19 lockdown period affect accusations of untruthfulness in political leaders' social media posts?

Accusations of untruthfulness by populist and non-populist actors

A post-truth political and information environment is argued to show a strong alignment with populism (Bennett & Livingstone, 2018; Kluknavská & Eisele, 2023; Waisbord, 2018). The attacks on opponents' truthfulness, argued to thrive in a post-truth era, are theoretically close to populist anti-elite attacks. Populism, as a thin-centered ideology, builds upon a strong 'us'-'them' dichotomy and separates society into two antagonistic groups, 'the good people' and 'the bad elite,' demanding the sovereignty of the people to be restored (Mudde, 2007). Similar to populism, post-truth is rooted in the view of society contrasting elite lies and popular truths, which rely on the ordinariness of the people sharing a common sense and innate wisdom (Waisbord, 2018). The populist ideology might thus align well with attacks on truthfulness, which separate society into 'truthful' people and 'lying' elites (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022). As such, the populists do not make the general idea of the truth meaningless, as they must emphasize people's wisdom and the populists' own role in it. However, populist actors try to control the narrative of who is perceived as truthful while emphasizing the people and the elites standing in stark contrast as antagonists (Mede & Schäfer, 2020).

Empirical research indicates that populist actors are more likely to engage in conflicts and adopt anti-elite elements in their communication than non-populist politicians, despite the employment of this communication by politicians across the whole political spectrum (De Bruycker & Rooduijn, 2021; Ernst et al., 2017; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). Similarly, references to misinformation and disinformation as indicators of politicians engaging in a debate about the factuality of information have also been identified to a greater extent in the discourse of populist politicians than their mainstream counterparts (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022).

Crisis situations are argued to be a breeding ground for populist politicians, sometimes even considered a precondition for their mobilization (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). However, given the nature and stages of COVID-19, it is less clear to what extent the pandemic opened opportunities for populists to attack their opponents discursively. At least in the initial phases, the pandemic, similar to other natural catastrophes, has been harder to politicize given the lack of usual enemies such as elites or migrants and thus less likely to become an arena of political contestation where populists can build upon the traditional divide between 'us' and 'them' (Bobbà & Hubé, 2021). Nevertheless, with the initial shock waning, decreasing compliance with the government measures, and prolonged lockdowns dividing public opinion on the most effective way to handle the crisis, the subsequent stages of COVID-19 offered populists a way to not only exploit the situation but also actively contribute to the divides, thus actively perform and disseminate the sense of the crisis (Moffitt, 2015). Empirical research shows that in some countries, populist actors increased the use of attack-oriented messages, particularly towards government actors, after the first wave of the pandemic (Bitonti et al., 2023). Such a strategy could effectively offer populists a way to exploit real or constructed failures of elites in a public debate.

Building upon these insights, we can assume that populist actors, emphasizing conflicts and divides under crisis conditions, will be more inclined to accuse lying and dishonest elites in their messages.

H1: Accusations of untruthfulness are more likely to appear in social media posts of populists in comparison to non-populists.

Accusations of untruthfulness in Austria, Czechia, Germany, and Poland: the role of country context

While the two Western and two Eastern European countries faced the same crisis condition and all reacted quickly by imposing lockdowns in March 2020, the political and public reactions to the pandemic were influenced by varying domestic contexts and took distinct shapes. We theoretically assume that employment of accusations of untruthfulness depends on specific political or discursive opportunities (e.g., De Bruycker & Rooduijn, 2021; Koopmans & Statham, 2010), which facilitate or hinder the creation and dissemination of accusations of untruthfulness in political messages in four countries.

Austria has rapidly responded to the disease outbreak with strict measures and a focus on public health, resulting in a flat infection curve and a complete economic lockdown (Kittel et al., 2021). The general compliance was high, and the government, represented by Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (Austrian People's Party), has often been portrayed as a successful crisis manager at the beginning of the pandemic. Yet, the crisis has widened economic inequalities and deepened societal cleavages, decreasing public support for government measures and polarizing public perception (Kittel et al., 2021). The initial vaccination campaign was also criticized for lagging behind other European countries. Furthermore, the Austrian political landscape was affected by significant corruption scandals, resulting in Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's resignation in 2021 (Kittel et al., 2021). These circumstances created space for the increased presence of accusations of untruthfulness in public debate.

The Czech government, led by the populist party ANO and Social Democrats, imposed a nationwide lockdown and flattened the curve of the outbreak of the disease (Navrátil & Kluknavská, 2020). However, the lockdown was lifted in May 2020, and the government hesitated to impose a new one before the Regional election in October 2020 despite the autumn surge of cases. The public willingness to comply with measures declined, and the government's handling of the pandemic, marked by vaccination delays and inconsistent communication, raised public and political criticism about its competency in managing the crisis. The country had eventually recorded the most new cases per million inhabitants globally by mid-October 2020 and the highest per capita death rate globally in March 2021 (PAQ Research, 2021). These circumstances, particularly the highly divided public and the clash between governing populists and anti-populist opposition, offered space for attacks on truthfulness.

The swift institutional reaction in Germany included measures comparable to those in the Czech Republic and Poland, albeit somewhat stricter than those in Austria (Engler et al., 2021). The lockdowns and actions received compliance and favorable public perception, as most of the population adhered to the regulations and placed trust in the government led by Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union). The vaccination campaign was fast and efficient, with the government incentivizing citizens to get vaccinated and tested. Public and political discussions primarily revolved around democratic principles, particularly balancing civil liberties and pandemic-related constraints (Volk, 2021). This presented political actors with relatively closed opportunities to accuse each other of lies and dishonesty.

The Polish government, led by the populist Law and Justice (PiS) party, initially responded to the pandemic with minimal measures to curb the spread of the virus, imposing a national lockdown only at the end of March 2020 and already relaxing the measures with the upcoming presidential elections in May/June 2020. Before the pandemic, Polish politics had faced significant internal and external criticism for its growing restrictions on democratic freedoms. In light of the crisis, the Polish government has been accused of implementing an illiberal constitution under the guise of responding to the emergency (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2020). The public's opinion of the lockdowns and measures was characterized by polarization, as some endorsed the government's actions while others vehemently opposed them, deeming them either excessive or ineffective. The political tensions, upcoming presidential elections, and polarized public created a favorable context for political actors to engage in attacks on truthfulness.

Thus, all four cases, while subject to the same crisis condition, dealt differently with the challenges of the pandemic and offered different contextual opportunities, which could potentially induce different extents of accusations of untruthfulness. To explore the influence of these country contexts, we pose the following question:

RQ3: To what extent do accusations of untruthfulness in political leaders' social media posts differ across countries?

We further acknowledge possible differences in the strategic motives of populist politicians in these countries. Generally, based on the evidence of populists' use of conflictive and anti-elite communication elements (e.g., Engler et al., 2021; Ernst et al., 2017), we expect accusations of untruthfulness to be employed more by populist actors. As studies suggest that different regional contexts may lead to different variants of populist ideologies and strategies emphasizing different issues in Western and Central-Eastern Europe (e.g., Pirro, 2014), we need to learn more about the differences in how politicians in these two regions make use of such strategies.

One notable difference within our sample of countries is a differing political context regarding the presence of populist actors in the government. While populist parties did not participate in governments during our period of analysis in Austria and Germany, in Czechia and Poland, populist politicians did hold executive positions. Government actors generally tend to exhibit a lower level of conflict in their communication strategies (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008; Nai, 2020); this condition might thus be essential for employing accusations of untruthfulness in political messages. We therefore pose the following question:

RQ4: To what extent do populist leaders use accusations of untruthfulness in different countries compared to non-populist leaders?

Methodology

Our analysis builds on a unique dataset of Facebook posts published by party leaders during the first year of the pandemic (March 2020 –February 2021) in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland. This section details the data collection and analysis conducted to test and answer the above-formulated hypothesis and research questions.

Data collection

As a first step in the data collection, we identified the relevant Facebook pages of party leaders. In some cases, these pages did not exist or were inactive; in such instances, we resorted to the party's page. We consulted with country experts and coauthors to verify that the Facebook page was the right one.

In the second step, we downloaded all posts for our period of analysis via Crowd-Tangle (CrowdTangle Team, 2021). Given the high numbers, especially for Poland and the Czech Republic, we drew a random sample instead of coding all posts to keep coding manageable. Based on studies using a similar methodology (e.g., Eisele et al., 2022; Kluknavská et al., 2021), a systematic sample of 25% of posts stratified per each politician was deemed to result in an adequate number of posts. The final sample included in the analysis consisted of $n = 7,109$ Facebook posts. Table 1 presents an overview of the number of political posts in the four countries. Please consult Appendix (Supplementary Material A) for more detailed information on the Facebook accounts of each politician.

Dependent variable: accusation of untruthfulness

To map the dynamics in accusations of the untruthfulness of other actors, we first conducted a claims analysis of Facebook posts. Claims analysis as such originates in social movement studies and describes articulating an opinion or statement that bears on someone else's interests (Lindekilde, 2013). It describes the conscious and strategic articulation of political opinions through some form of action, including social media communication. While a claim can generally be understood as an evaluation of other actors in public discourse, whether positive or negative, our dependent variable (DV) is based on those claims in which politicians accuse others of untruthfulness. This aligns with our conceptualization of accusations of untruthfulness as strategic attacks on the truthfulness of other political and public actors.

Claims, in general, build on the following core variables: (1) the *actor* raising the claim, in our case, the Facebook account on which the post is published; (2) the *position*: the evaluation of another actor as in positive, neutral/ambivalent, or negative assessment of other actors (our DV is based on negative evaluation, with a focus on accusations of untruthfulness); (3) the *evaluated actor*; (4) the particular *topic* in the context of which the claim is made; and (5) the *justification* for the evaluation, also often designated as a frame (see Kluknavská & Eisele, 2023).

Based on this coding scheme, we could precisely pinpoint the presence of accusations of untruthfulness, i.e., those claims in which a claimant accuses other actors of being untruthful. While we did not distinguish between different forms of these accusations

Table 1. Overview of coded posts and claims.

Country	No of posts coded	No (and %) of posts containing accusation of untruthfulness	Average No of claims with accusation of untruthfulness coded in posts
Austria	927	36 (3.88%)	0.0442
Czech Republic	2,549	126 (4.94%)	0.0847
Germany	904	27 (2.99%)	0.0365
Poland	2,729	133 (4.87%)	0.0715
Total	7,109	322 (4.53%)	0.0682

in further analysis, we illustrate what forms these accusations can take; these can include accusations of lying, dishonesty, information manipulation, untruth-telling, deceiving, distorting facts and reality; accusations of intentionally misleading the people, society, or their audience; accusations of being or sharing disinformation or fake news; accusations of being politically or ideologically biased; accusations of sharing propaganda or creating information for propagandistic purposes; accusations of sharing conspiracies, rumors, hoaxes. All these forms are based on allegations through which the politician engages in anti-elite negative evaluation of someone else's truthfulness.

The identification of claims was part of a manual quantitative claims analysis of leaders' Facebook posts. Four intensively trained independent coders coded the material using a detailed coding scheme: two coders coded the Czech sample, one coder coded the Polish sample, and one (the same) coder coded the Austrian and German samples. We conducted several rounds of intensive training and inter-coder, intra-coder, and inter-country reliability tests, which yielded satisfactory results (reliability results are available in Appendix as Supplementary material B).

Summing up, our dependent variable is the accusation of untruthfulness in a politician's Facebook post, essentially measured as the presence of at least one claim containing such accusation in a post. Table 1 includes the number of social media posts in the sample that contained at least one accusation of untruthfulness.

Independent variable: populist vs. non-populist leaders

To understand the influence of populism on truth contestation (H1), we classified the parties with which leaders are affiliated according to the well-established PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2019). Populist was coded as 1 when the party was labeled as such according to their definition of populism. Populism, in this sense, refers to a set of ideas that consider society as ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' standing against 'the corrupt elite,' and that consider politics as an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004).

Independent variables: pandemic context and countries

To understand the connection between the COVID-19 pandemic and accusations of untruthfulness (RQ1), we included if the post mentioned COVID-19 as the main topic (see earlier description on evaluation of truthfulness in the manual content analysis) and coded it as a dummy variable. The COVID-19 issue encompasses government measures (e.g., lockdowns, isolations, and quarantines, anti-epidemic measures, personal protective equipment, testing, social distancing, border closure), government responses and criticism (e.g., open letters, petitions), or epidemiology (e.g., the spread of the disease, virus mutations, cases, infections, deaths, pandemic predictions, information about the disease of individuals or politicians).

In addition, we identified the first lockdown period in each country (RQ2) and included it as a dummy variable. The beginning of the first lockdown was marked by the introduction of nationwide measures to curb a widening outbreak of COVID-19, encompassing quarantines, isolations, curfews, stay-at-home orders, border closures, and similar societal restrictions. In Poland, this happened on 13 March 2020; in the

Czech Republic and Austria, the first lockdowns were introduced on 16 March 2020; and a day later, on 17 March 2020, similar nationwide measures were undertaken in Germany. The end of the first lockdown period is harder to specify as most countries slowly eased the restrictions over several weeks. We set the end date of the first lockdown on 30 April 2020, which coincides with the relaxation of key policies in all four countries.

Regarding the differences between the four countries (RQ3, RQ4), we created a variable that divided the respective politicians according to their country affiliation.

Control variables

We included the post type as a control variable, i.e., if the post was a link, photo, video, or only text. The post can be composed of only a text (simple status) or can include (in addition to a text) or be composed of only a link, photo, or video. This way, we can control for the potential influence of the presence of visual elements in the message. In addition, accounting for the involvement of the specific party in government, we dummy-coded the politician's affiliation with the government.

Analysis strategy

To test the formulated hypotheses and answer the research questions, we relied on binary logistic regression, taking the presence (yes or no) of evaluations of truthfulness in the post as our dependent variable. For the analysis, we relied on the `dplyr` package (Wickham et al., 2023) and `glm` function in R for the regression analysis. For visualization of results, we relied on `sjPlot` (Lüdtke, 2022) and `Stargazer` (Hlavac, 2022) packages in R. Descriptive statistics for all included variables can be found in Supplementary material C.

Results

We start by overviewing differences in accusations of untruthfulness across countries. In total, 322 out of 7,109 posts contained accusations of untruthfulness (4.53%), which indicates that such accusations are not very prominent overall. The highest share of accusations of untruthfulness was in Czechia ($n = 126$; 4.94%) and Poland ($n = 133$; 4.87%), followed by Austria ($n = 36$; 3.88%) and Germany ($n = 27$; 2.99%). Tables 2 and 3 provide an overview of the utilization of accusations of untruthfulness across party leaders in each country.

The descriptive results suggest that leaders across the political spectrum utilized accusations of untruthfulness to a varying extent. However, it appears that leaders of populist and populist radical right parties predominantly engaged in these discourses in all four countries. Interestingly, party leaders in Austria, specifically those from the (non-populist) Austrian People's Party and The Greens – The Green Alternative, did not engage in accusations of untruthfulness at all, despite their communication making up a significant portion of the total communication in the country sample.

We ran a baseline model to analyze the effects of contextual factors, not including interaction terms between countries and the type of actors. Our model supports the descriptive account of the results. As shown in Figure 1, the posts created by populist political parties (H1) show a significant positive effect (the full model is shown in

Table 2. Number of total posts and posts containing accusations of untruthfulness in Austria and Germany.

Austria			Germany		
Leader	Accusations of untruthfulness	Total	Leader	Accusations of untruthfulness	Total
Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP)	0% (0)	15.4% (143)	Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (CDU)	18.5% (5)	24.8% (224)
Pamela Rendi-Wagner (SPÖ)	2.8% (1)	21.7% (201)	Markus Söder (CSU)	3.7% (1)	24.6% (222)
Norbert Hofer (FPÖ)	86.1% (31)	31.8% (295)	Saskia Eskens (SPD)	0% (0)	2.8% (25)
Beate Meinl-Reisinger (Neos)	11.1% (4)	16.2% (150)	Christian Lindner (FDP)	3.7% (1)	12.8% (116)
Werner Kogler (GRÜNE)	0% (0)	14.9% (138)	Katja Kipping (Die Linke)	14.8% (4)	8.7% (79)
			Bernd Riexinger (Die Linke)	11.1% (3)	13.2% (119)
			Tino Chrupalla (AfD)	48.1% (13)	10.5% (95)
			Annalena Baerbock (Grüne)	0% (0)	2.7% (24)
Total	100% (36)	100% (927)	Total	100% (27)	100% (904)

Note: Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer did not have a FB page. We drew on the page of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany. We do not include those leaders who were inactive (zero initial posts).

Supplementary material D). This finding supports our hypothesis about the differences between populists and non-populists. It indicates that affiliation with a populist party increases the likelihood of a politician utilizing accusations of untruthfulness ($b = 0.642$, $p < 0.001$, odds ratio = 1.899).

The COVID-19 pandemic does not significantly affect accusations of untruthfulness in politicians' social media posts. However, the COVID-19 issue (RQ1; $b = 0.319$, $p = 0.056$, odds ratio = 1.375) slightly increases the chances of accusations of untruthfulness, while the first pandemic lockdown (RQ2; $b = -0.11$, $p = 0.946$, odds ratio = 0.989) decreased the odds of attacks in the social media posts in our sample.

Looking at the differences between the four countries under study (RQ3), overall, Czech ($b = 0.321$, $p = 0.147$, odds ratio = 1.379) and Polish ($b = 0.338$, $p = 0.129$, odds ratio = 1.403) political leaders were all more likely to employ accusations of untruthfulness in their social media messages in comparison to German political leaders. The country differences were not statistically significant.

The first control variable, affiliation with the government ($b = -1.594$, $p < 0.001$, odds ratio = 0.203), decreased the chances that a politician will employ accusations of untruthfulness in their message. Looking at the second control variable, the type of the post, we see that accusations of untruthfulness were more likely to occur in those posts which contained only a text (i.e., status) in comparison to those posts in which a link ($b = -1.084$, $p < 0.001$, odds ratio = 0.338), photo ($b = -0.749$, $p < 0.01$, odds ratio = 0.473), or video ($b = -0.821$, $p < 0.001$, odds ratio = 0.440) were shared.

As shown in Figure 2, the addition of interaction terms interacting countries and type of actors (RQ4) increased the effect of populist affiliation ($b = 0.981$, $p < 0.05$, odds ratio = 2.667). It also changed the direction for Austrian politicians ($b = -0.858$, $p = 0.149$, odds ratio = 0.424), though the results were insignificant (see also Appendix Supplementary material E for marginal effects plot). The interaction of countries and populism,

Table 3. Number of total posts and posts containing accusations of untruthfulness in Czechia and Poland.

Czechia			Poland		
Leader	Accusations of untruthfulness	Total	Leader	Accusations of untruthfulness	Total
Andrej Babiš (ANO)	2.4% (3)	16.8% (427)	Jarosław Kaczyński (PiS)	4.5% (6)	8.2% (225)
Tomio Okamura (SPD)	41.3% (52)	23.6% (601)	Zbigniew Ziobro (SP)	3.0% (4)	4.1% (111)
Jan Hamáček (ČSSD)	1.6% (2)	2.9% (75)	Borys Budka (PO)	5.3% (7)	8.5% (232)
Vojtěch Filip (KSČM)	8.7% (11)	3.7% (95)	Adam Szłapka (.N)	5.3% (7)	3% (82)
Peter Fiala (ODS)	15.9% (20)	11.9% (303)	Barbara Nowacka (iPL)	1.5% (2)	1.1% (30)
Vít Rakušan (STAN)	1.6% (2)	5.9% (150)	Małgorzata Tracz (PZ)	9.0% (12)	8.9% (243)
Marian Jurečka (KDU-ČSL)	8.7% (11)	16.2% (413)	Wojciech Kubalewski (PZ)	0% (0)	0.8% (23)
Markéta Pekarová Adamová (TOP 09)	13.5% (17)	8.1% (207)	Bartosz Grucela (Razem)	3.0% (4)	1.8% (50)
Ivan Bartoš (Piráti)	6.3% (8)	10.9% (278)	Paulina Matysiak (Razem)	7.5% (10)	4.4% (121)
			Maciej Szlinder (Razem)	0% (0)	0.3% (9)
			Joanna Wicha (Razem)	2.3% (3)	2.2% (59)
			Adrian Zandberg (Razem)	7.5% (10)	4.6% (125)
			Włodzimierz Czarzasty (NL)	7.5% (10)	5.1% (140)
			Robert Biedroń (NL)	6.0% (8)	11.4% (311)
			Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz (PSL)	7.5% (10)	4.7% (128)
			Elżbieta Bińczycka (UED)	0.8% (1)	0.8% (22)
			Robert Winnicki (Konfederacja)	19.5% (26)	5.5% (150)
			Grzegorz Braun (Konfederacja)	3.0% (4)	14.2% (387)
			Jarosław Gowin (PjG)	0% (0)	4.1% (113)
			Paweł Kukiz (K'15)	6.0% (8)	4.1% (111)
			Wojciech Konieczny (PPS)	0.8% (1)	2.1% (57)
Total	100% (126)	100% (2,549)	Total	100% (133)	100% (2,729)

Note: Ivan Bartoš, Barbara Nowacka, Jarosław Kaczyński, and Elżbieta Bińczycka did not have Facebook pages. We drew on the pages of the Pirates party, Polish Initiative, Law and Justice, and Union of European Democrats, respectively. We do not include those leaders who were inactive (zero initial posts).

aiming to answer the question of the extent to which populist leaders use accusations of untruthfulness in different countries compared to non-populist leaders, showed that populist leaders in Czechia ($b = -0.447$, $p = 0.378$, odds ratio = 0.640) and Poland ($b = -0.714$, $p = 0.159$, odds ratio = 0.490) were less likely to use accusations of untruthfulness than non-populist leaders in Germany. Quite contrary, the chances that the populist leaders in Austria ($b = 1.389$, $p < 0.05$, odds ratio = 4.013) employ accusations of untruthfulness were significantly higher in comparison to German non-populist leaders.

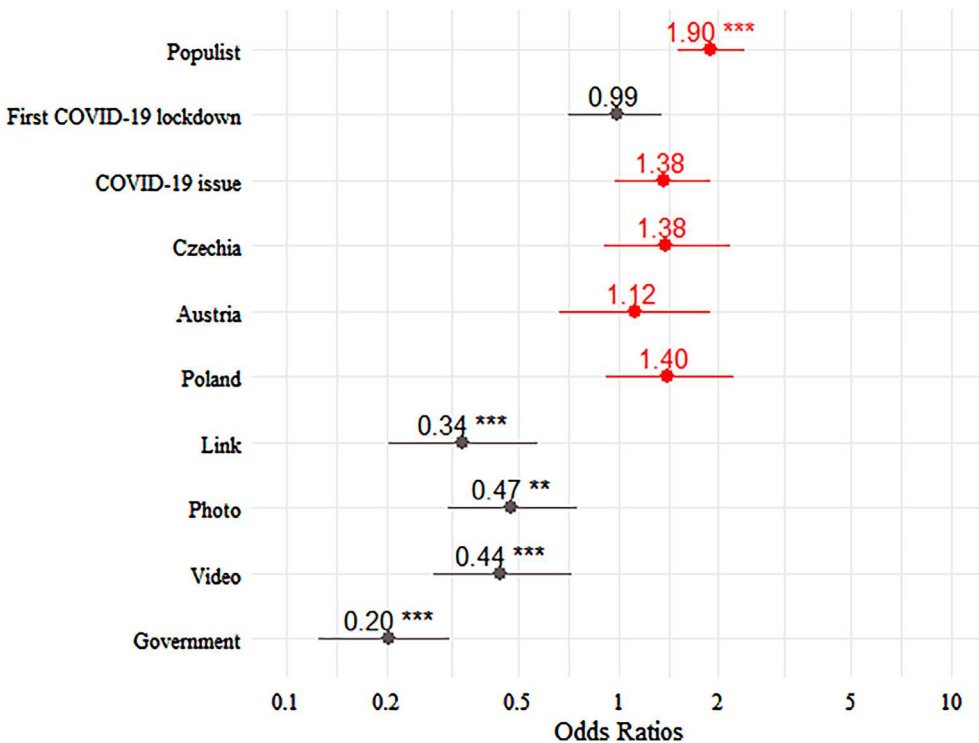


Figure 1. Coefficient plot for baseline model.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we analyzed party leaders' use of accusations of untruthfulness on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic in four European countries – Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland. We examined three areas that may potentially affect whether and how much politicians utilize accusations of untruthfulness in their social media messages: the context of the pandemic crisis, politicians' populist affiliation, and specific country contexts.

Accusations of untruthfulness are overall not very frequent but similarly prominent to the presence of anti-elitism in politicians' online communication (e.g., Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). Nonetheless, they follow discernable patterns. Our findings revealed that populist leaders were more likely to employ accusations of untruthfulness in their social media messages, supporting the argument of affinity between accusations of untruthfulness and populist politics (Waisbord, 2018). Populist politicians do take anti-elitist stances more often than mainstream politicians (e.g., De Bruycker & Rooduijn, 2021; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). Populist communication has also been found to be more persuasive when people identify with populist ideology (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Populist attacks on truthfulness thus might fall onto fertile ground with an audience already receptive to anti-elitist communication overall, but especially when communicated to their followers during a crisis with elevated public emotions. Their social media followers who identify with them may internalize these positions and be more likely to believe these accusations are true.

This finding does not imply that populist actors render the general idea or understanding of 'the truth' meaningless. Quite the contrary, populists put emphasis on the

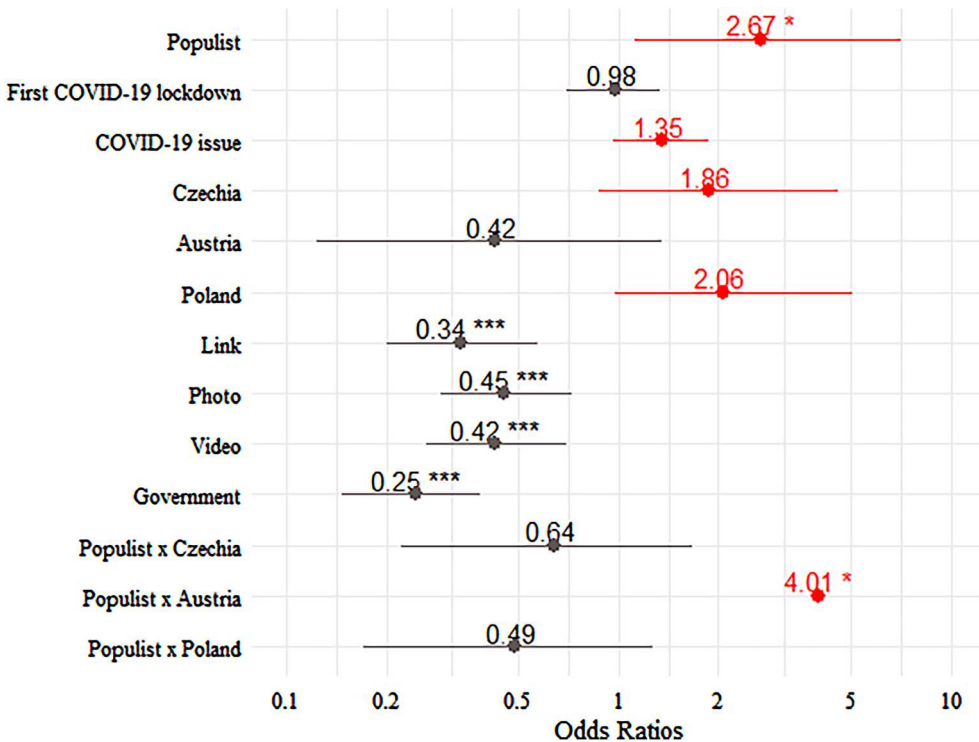


Figure 2. Coefficient plot for interaction model.

wisdom and the truth possessed by ‘ordinary people’ (Ylä-Anttila, 2018) and try to claim authority over what constitutes ‘true’ knowledge (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). Populists thus shift the meanings associated with the truth but still underscore its importance. In the context of the contestation of truthfulness (Kluknavská & Eisele, 2023), populist actors seem efficient in strategically utilizing the perceptions of dishonesty by employing anti-elite attacks on the truth-telling of oppositional actors.

Our results revealed some noteworthy country-level differences. Austrian, Czech, and Polish politicians have utilized accusations of untruthfulness more than German politicians. However, adding an interaction with populism shows that the Czech and Polish leaders affiliated with a populist party were less likely to employ accusations of untruthfulness. While we might not see a pattern of the accusations based on discursive opportunities, particularly public responses to the measures to deal with the pandemic across all countries, the political configuration of elites, specifically the presence of populist actors in the respective governments, could shed light on the results. In Austria and Germany, the pandemic was managed by non-populist actors. In the Czech Republic, however, the populist party ANO was a part of the governing coalition, with its leader Andrej Babiš serving as the country’s Prime Minister. The Polish populist party Law and Order also held executive power during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, while overall, populist leaders engaged more than non-populist leaders in making accusations of untruthfulness, this effect appears stronger in the two countries where populist leaders are not a part of the governing coalition. Thus, the participation of populist actors in the government during a profound crisis might have somewhat of a

taming effect. The opposition role of populists, on the other hand, offers itself for aggressive criticism of ‘those in power.’ Nevertheless, more research is needed to bring more robust evidence in this area.

Interestingly, our results did not reveal a positive connection between the COVID-19 crisis and accusations of untruthfulness, as neither the first lockdown nor bringing up the COVID-19 issue in the posts increased the use of accusations of untruthfulness. While for some political actors, the pandemic opened up an opportunity to attack their opponents or the decision-makers (e.g., Boin et al., 2009), for those tackling the impending dangers and making vital decisions under time pressures (Erhardt et al., 2021), the crisis may have hindered the accusations as they were preoccupied with finding solutions and increasing society’s resilience. Our results suggest that incumbent actors, even populist ones, are indeed less likely to make accusations of untruthfulness in their social media posts. These differing strategies of government and opposition leaders might be why our findings have not uncovered a pattern for all political leaders. However, as our analysis is situated in a period in which the pandemic was an extremely salient topic, future research should also analyze the utilization of accusations of untruthfulness before the outbreak of the Coronavirus in 2020 to further substantiate the pandemic’s effect.

Regarding the limitations of our study, it focuses on a single social networking platform, prompting future research to compare different media channels, which would help shed light on how social media affordances are connected to truth contestation. In addition, a more extended period could help uncover dynamics over time, potentially even covering a change in governmental coalitions to understand better how ‘being in charge’ influences the discourses of untruthfulness in different political camps. Regarding the taming effect of the governmental role for populist parties, recent research highlighted that the target of anti-elitism can be re-defined in accordance with the perspective of the party – populist governments will simply find new elites to attack (Schwörer, 2022). Future research should include more variables, also accounting for the sort of elites targeted by accusations of untruthfulness, to explore the effects of governmental responsibility on the populist agenda.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, our findings contribute to the broader discussion on the importance of discursive constructions of truthfulness and falsehoods in political communication and shed light on the challenges of maintaining transparency and accountability in times of crisis. The study also advances the evolving debate about perceived disinformation, post-truth politics, and its affinity between populism and attacks on truthfulness. Doing so contributes to the pressing discussion of democracy’s crisis and how to make democratic societies more resilient to potentially damaging developments.

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