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Abandoned by Elites, United by Crisis: Anti-Discourses and the Reinforcement of a Dissatisfied Collective Identity Online

Martina Novotná [a] and Lenka Vochocová [b]

[a]Department of Media Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic; [b]Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

During times of crisis, fear may prompt a greater need for identity confirmation in order to reduce uncertainty. People find comfort in identifying with an online in-group, but this could worsen societal division. Our study analyzed Facebook discussions about the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war in order to identify the common patterns of economic and social uncertainties expressed through repeated anti-narratives. We focused on the public Facebook pages of the two Czech TV news outlets with the largest and most diverse audiences during two phases of each crisis. We analyzed 1,680 comments with grounded theory coding procedures. The findings reveal that, regardless of the media outlets' ideology, crisis topic, and political representation, similar polarizing narratives that resemble populist discourse are used to construct the identity of "the people" standing against "the elites." The study highlights how repetitive narratives in mainstream online spaces can reinforce polarization and pose broader societal risks.

The accumulation of crisis periods in the past few years has raised social scientists' interest in the psychological, social, economic, and political consequences of crises (Palgi et al., 2023). Alienation, feelings of marginalization, and general self-uncertainty are among the most important psychological impacts of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (Hogg, 2023). Given the highly digitalized character of today's societies, in which people can share their thoughts online with other digital media users and contribute to creating citizens' online discourses, these crises represent a crucial subject for media and communication scholars. Research into the role of social media usually tends to focus on the specific negative aspects of a crisis and their consequences, such as high levels of emotional response (Eisele et al., 2022), societal polarization and fragmentation (Mihelj et al., 2021), populist rhetoric (Hameleers, 2022; Thiele, 2022), and the spread of disinformation (Schmid et al., 2022). Prior studies examined individual crises (e.g., COVID-19, immigration crisis) in the Czech context (see Kluknavská et al., 2024; Novotná et al., 2023; Vochocová, 2020) and proved that crisis periods heighten negative and emotional responses and may foster societal polarization. However, less attention has been given to how different crises generate distinct discursive contexts and how conversation dynamics unfold over time. Our study offers a comparative health and security crisis analysis in different phases to address this gap.

The research presented in this article considers theories and studies that reflect the ambivalent nature of digital communication among citizens, acknowledging both its potential to facilitate expression and connection and its tendency to contribute to societal polarization and division. We follow two major theoretical directions to understand and interpret our findings. Firstly, we borrow from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), mainly Hogg's (2023) conceptualization of the uncertainty-identity theory, to explain the motivation of people in uncertain times to reduce their perceived self-uncertainty by

CONTACT Martina Novotná mnovotna@fss.muni.cz Department of Media Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Joštova 218/10, Brno 602 00, Czech Republic

identifying with groups that offer clearly defined social identities (Hogg, 2023). This perspective may help us understand online users' contributions not necessarily as intentional expressions of political opinion but as identity-building discursive acts that enable discussants to fulfill their psychological needs.

Secondly, we recognize the role that social media (especially its affordances) plays in social identity formation. We build upon theories that identify the importance of the performative aspects of social media in online collective identity formation (Martinsson & Ericson, 2022) and, more specifically, its potential to strengthen out-group stigmatization, exclusion, and social fragmentation (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022). We are inspired by studies that suggest that people who are involved in the process of discursive online community formation do not necessarily hold the same ideological views or values, because belonging to the community is based on the sense of belonging to a tribal identity and carefully nurturing out-group aversion (Törnberg, 2022; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022). We thus follow studies that stress the role of anti-discourses in identity formation and protection. These expressive acts, named anti-discourses by some authors (Martinsson & Ericson, 2022) and metalanguage by others (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021), circulate in the (online) public sphere and repeatedly target specific groups or ideologies.

The above-outlined theoretical approaches and previous research findings informed the design of our study as follows: First, societal division and polarization within online communities have been extensively studied in the various online discussion arenas of diverse media outlets (Blassnig et al., 2019; Galpin & Trenz, 2019; Hameleers, 2022; Thiele, 2022). However, a qualitative approach that would provide deeper insight into the formation of online communities is largely missing, and existing work has predominantly focused on Western contexts, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other regions (Hameleers, 2022). We thus deliberately designed our qualitative study around the two most mainstream, non-specialized media in the Czech Republic, which is in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, whose audiences represent a wide range of socio-demographic and socio-cultural characteristics, as well as political positions. The Facebook pages of the two television stations represent the two most popular public news pages on that platform in the country.

Second, users' public online discourse has primarily been studied in the context of separate crises (Eisele et al., 2022; Hameleers, 2022). We aim to understand the patterns through which citizens express their concerns and insecurities in online discussions during crises more broadly. Therefore, our study investigates whether similar narratives can be identified across discussions of different crises and different political representations. Third, inspired by researchers who identify the role of bottom-up populism within mainstream media discourses (Galpin & Trenz, 2019; Thiele, 2022), and reflecting on the connection between crises periods and populist discourse in literature (Hogg, 2023), we are specifically interested in whether populist rhetoric is included, and in which form, in the citizens' crisis narratives.

This study is particularly interested in how social media facilitates the spread of "small stories" or narratives (understood as meaning-making processes that support collective identity formation) that may help individuals make sense of crises and foster a sense of community (Georgakopoulou, 2016; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2024; Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). At the same time, we examine the recurring narrative patterns used by discussants across different crises to reveal the repetitive ways in which the in-group community and its values are built discursively in a mainstream online discussion environment. Based on a comparison of the two crises and two of their phases, we specifically aim to understand how the process also involves the symbolic construction and rejection of the out-group, potentially contributing to societal tension and division.

The interplay of uncertainty, group identification, and social media performativity in relation to societal polarization

In his elaboration on the classical social identity theory (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Hogg (2023) states that self-uncertainty, alienation, and marginalization rise during times of social change

and crisis, specifically pandemics, war, and mass immigration. In such times, people who feel marginalized and unheard are strongly motivated to reduce their perceived self-uncertainty by "identifying with distinctive groups that have unambiguously defined social identities" (p. 825). According to Hogg, group identification has important positive consequences for individuals, groups, and society, such as group cohesion. However, when self-uncertainty becomes chronic and people feel threatened during crisis times, the principle of collective identity formation may result in societal division, polarization, and hostility. Hogg stresses that people may not only join new groups when they feel uncertain and strive for validation and feelings of belonging, but they can also "identify more strongly with a group they already belong to" (p. 829).

This mechanism of identity confirmation can especially thrive in the digital and social media era (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021; Hogg, 2023; Martinsson & Ericson, 2022; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022). As described by Martinsson and Ericson (2022), social media is typical because of its performativity is inscribed in the social media affordances. This performativity (including the possibility to express ourselves and connect with others) facilitates identification, connection to other people with similar ideas, and recognition "by those who express them without any demand for meeting in real life" (Martinsson & Ericson, 2022, p. 14). Hence, through their engagement in expressive acts, which often exclude other groups or ideologies (i.e., *anti-discourses*), people "are drawn in, connected, and recognize each other, identifying as those who can finally speak the truth" (Martinsson & Ericson, 2022, p. 2). The authors explicitly mention the "cacophony of comments" and "the constant flow" of similar content as performative practices through which imagined collective identities are constantly being developed on the internet. Specifically important for our study is the suggestion that these collectively shared expressions form specific anti-discourses. They are typically narratives that target certain ideologies or groups, manifested through repetitive "tropes" that are actualized in relation to various topics (p. 4). Similarly, Barla and Bjork-James (2021) use the term *metalanguage* to describe the discursive exclusion of certain worldviews and hostility toward some ideas as a means of identity protection and self-legitimization.

Törnberg and Törnberg (2022) describe discursive online community formation where "online communities emerge in and through the construction of a shared culture" (p. 4512). The authors connect the formation of collective identities with "identity work" based on conversational rituals performed on digital platforms. During such "interaction rituals," people are "using digital messages to develop a common sense of 'we' and a strong sense of group solidarity" (p. 4515). Thus, according to the authors, the content of such conversations is less important than their symbolic function. They represent moments "of shared focus on a common activity" and constitute collective identity and its cultural capital (p. 4517–4518). The authors link collective identity to discourses that "demarcate insiders from outsiders" (p. 4513). They, however, stress that most digital platforms are relatively interconnected across the ideological divide and that politics is "driven by deeply rooted mechanisms of group affiliation in human psychology" and founded "on out-group aversion rather than political ideals" (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022, p. 4514).

Populism and social identity theory in crisis times

While strong collective social identities can have positive effects, such as helping individuals navigate uncertainties and finding their place in society, they can also contribute to hostile exchanges and fuel populist rhetoric and polarization (Hogg & Gaffney, 2023; Schmid et al., 2022). According to Hogg (2023), a very effective way to reduce uncertainty in crisis times is the affirmation of the "us versus them" that is rooted in populism. This option, Hogg explains, "is readily available in the era of social media and widespread internet access" and it results in an "atmosphere of inter-subgroup conflict" (p. 827–834). Importantly for our study, the author specifically blames populist interests for nurturing in-group solidarity and out-group exclusion in crisis times, because populists boost the "sense of collective narcissism and under-appreciated superiority" and spread the "narrative of collective victimhood" to unite collective identities (p. 833). Other researchers also document that populist

rhetoric flourishes especially during times of crisis (Thiele, 2022) when social media becomes a central space for seeking information and sharing opinions (Mihelj et al., 2021; Thiele, 2022). This trend was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic: With people isolated under strict quarantine and facing uncertainty, social media enabled interactive dialogue and collective emotional expression (Botha & Mills, 2012; Eisele et al., 2022). While it facilitated information exchange and opinion formation, it also increased the risk of spreading disinformation and polarizing messages (Schmid et al., 2022). Crises often encourage antagonistic "us vs. them" distinctions and foster populist rhetoric as a coping mechanism during unprecedented situations (Hameleers, 2018), and citizens frequently target national governments as enemies (Choli & Kuss, 2021; Lee et al., 2023).

In this study, we refer to populism as a thin-centered ideology that consists of three pillars: (a) people-centrism, which focuses on people as the bearers of knowledge whose voices should be forced forward; (b) anti-elitism, which captures the contrast between the people and the corrupt elites, who do not behave according to peoples' will; and (c) the exclusion of others, which describes out-group members who do not meet the criteria for belonging to the people (Blassnig et al., 2019; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

The defining characteristic of populism is the creation of an antagonistic separation between different groups. The boundaries are strengthened by the rhetoric of defining oneself against a common enemy, such as the government, political parties, and the media (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Populist rhetoric often prioritizes everyday experiences, so-called common sense, over the viewpoints expressed by the elite. The use of such antagonistic rhetoric may decrease trust in the expert-based information that is spread by the media and politicians, further deepening the polarization between citizens and experts (Hameleers, 2022).

Although populist rhetoric is often investigated from the perspective of political actors, it is employed by citizens as well (Krämer et al., 2021; Thiele, 2022) and it might fuel disconnection and segmentation (Pfetsch, 2018). It is thus important to focus on bottom-up populism to better understand how populist ideology is negotiated in everyday life (Krämer et al., 2021), especially in the context of social media, where technological affordances allow messages to spread virally.

Crisis context in the Czech Republic: COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian conflict

Considering some key characteristics of the Czech Republic, a country in the CEE region, is important for our data analysis. Firstly, there is an apparent lack of trust in politicians and institutions, which is only increasing (Pospěch, 2021). The affairs of politicians who did not follow the pandemic measures (Němcová, 2020) have served to exacerbate the public's mistrust and may have led to greater skepticism toward the government's response to the crisis. Secondly, the rather dismissive attitudes of Czech citizens toward providing help during the previous European immigration crisis, which involved Syrian refuges, represent an important context for understanding their approach to Ukrainian refugees. Whereas the proximity of the war in Ukraine and a shared historical experience with Russia (and, previously, the Soviet Union) may have contributed to a huge wave of support for Ukraine at the beginning of the conflict, Czech citizens quickly adopted rather negative stances toward Ukrainian refugees, possibly due to xenophobia, which is common in the country (Prokop, 2019).

Research questions

Based on social identity theory and the performative nature of social media, we formulated research questions to explore how online social identities are reinforced through discursive acts that express similar opinions, which strategies are used to strengthen in-group cohesion, and how users distance themselves from perceived enemies. These questions provide insight into the dynamics of the discursive reinforcement of collective identities online and their roles in responding to unprecedented events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The first question delves into the identification of repetitive narratives that are pervasive and overarching:

RQ1: What repetitive narratives do people use to express their social and economic uncertainties in Facebook discussions during crises (e.g., COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian war)?

The second research question aims to explore the role of populist rhetoric in narratives expressed by citizens online during crisis periods:

RQ2: How do the elements of populist discourse (e.g., conflict between elites and ordinary people, distrust in official information) manifest in these narratives?

The third research question focuses on the community-building attributes and characteristics that highlight in-group membership:

RQ3: In what ways do the discussants express their belonging to an in-group community?

Method

Data collection

We analyzed comments posted on the two most popular public news pages on Facebook in the Czech Republic—CT24 (Czech Television)[1] and TN.CZ (TV Nova)[2] (Novotná & Vochocová, 2025). Facebook is the most widely used social network in the Czech Republic, making it a key platform for examining its influence on public opinion. Its user base is gender-balanced, with slightly more active female users, and it is especially popular among older generations, according to current data (Newman et al., 2025a). Among news sources, Czech Television remains the most popular (44% weekly reach), followed by TV Nova (37%) (Newman et al., 2025b). The large reach of these channels offers insight into the mainstream Facebook audience, while their ideological contrast—Czech Television is seen as neutral, and TV Nova is considered conservative—adds further relevance (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024).

We downloaded the data in two stages—posts and comments—using Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2019). In the first stage, we collected 5,752 Facebook posts related to both crises—COVID-19 and Russo-Ukrainian war. These posts were downloaded in two waves for each crisis, covering the periods from February 28, 2020 to March 31, 2020, and February 28, 2021 to March 31, 2021, for COVID-19, and from February 23, 2022, to March 26, 2022, and February 23, 2023, to March 26, 2023, for the Russo-Ukrainian War.[3] Then, we sorted these posts based on the number of reactions they received (i.e., likes, shares, comments), from highest to lowest, and chose the ones that featured one of the crisis topics. We only selected posts related to COVID-19 or the Ukraine conflict within the selected timeframes (see Figure 1) that had an impact on the daily lives of Czech citizens (or Europe and the Western world with a clear link to Czechia). A post was considered to impact everyday life if it directly addressed how the crisis

[1]The number of followers during the first wave of COVID-19 ranged from 448,065 to 747,299, while the second wave increased. In the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the number of followers during the first wave was 818,521, and it increased to 871,219 during the second wave.

[2]The number of followers during the first wave of COVID-19 ranged from 289,242 to 328,009, while the second wave saw a smaller increase than in the case of CT24. For the Russo-Ukrainian war, the number of followers during the first wave was 341,496, and it increased to 356,799 during the second wave.

[3]To ensure consistency, we aligned the two COVID-19 data collection waves, which were conducted one year after the crisis began, with the two waves of Russo-Ukrainian war data. This enabled a unified temporal comparison of both crises and the evolution of the anti-narratives and collective identity-building.

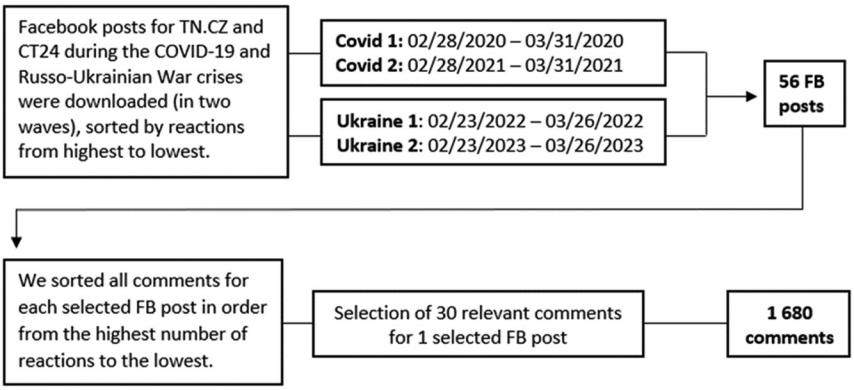

Figure 1. Facebook posts and comment selection process.

affected citizens' daily routines, financial situation, freedom of mobility, access to services, or public safety. A key factor in this assessment was the proximity and relevance to the Czech context. For example, news posts that addressed the risk of the conflict spreading within Europe in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war were coded in this category, because that had direct implications for Czech citizens. In contrast, posts about COVID-19 policies in other countries without a clear link to the Czech Republic were excluded (for Codebook, see the Appendix).

Two trained coders coded the occurrence of the crises as the dominant topic in these selected posts. To assess inter-coder reliability, we conducted a post-hoc test on 410 Facebook posts, which represented approximately 7% of our data sample. The results were satisfactory, with a Krippendorff's Alpha of .88. Out of the total Facebook posts, 2,187 did not include a crisis topic, and 1,915 posts included a crisis topic (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic and Russo-Ukrainian war) that was not dominant or that lacked an impact on Czech citizens. In the end, we had 1,650 Facebook posts that had a crisis as their dominant topic. In the second stage, we then selected 30 relevant comments for each post that were related to one of the crisis topics. These were the focus of our analysis and consisted of 1,680 comments[4] overall, as described in Figure 1. We considered as irrelevant those comments that included off-topic remarks, personal attacks, newly initiated conversations unrelated to the original post and topic of crisis, or overly brief, opinion-based reactions to the post headline without further elaboration. We also excluded comments that contained spam, advertisements, or minimal content, such as name tags, single-word replies, interjections, emojis, or expressions that lacked substantive meaning. We intentionally selected comments that were ordered from the highest to the lowest number of reactions because these comments are most visible online and might reach a larger audience than those with a lower number of reactions.

Data analysis

We conducted an explorative qualitative content analysis with Atlas.ti software (version 23). We began the initial phase by reading all of the material and familiarizing ourselves with the comments. We implemented an inductive analytical approach based on coding procedures in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The selected methodological approach enabled us to identify narratives formed during times of crisis without imposing pre-defined categories. This inductive strategy allowed themes to emerge directly from the data and support our aim to examine how collective identities and uncertainties are articulated and reinforced within the online public sphere in times of crisis.

[4]The 56 Facebook posts generated a total of 56,695 comments. To select 30 relevant comments per post for in-depth qualitative analysis, we reviewed 7,306 comments (including those that were deemed irrelevant). After analyzing 1,680 comments, we reached theoretical saturation, indicating that collecting additional comments was no longer necessary.

In the first stage, which involved open coding, our research aim was to identify all of the mentions related to possible economic and social uncertainties during crisis times. Our interest lied in identifying which uncertainties were present during different crises (such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine) and how they highlighted long-standing issues that may have become more visible during these crises. This process allowed us to create an initial list of codes that captured the various specific aspects of the possible uncertainties related to the general fields, such as health, the economy, education, immigration, integration policy, civil rights, and the related sub-topics. Upon recognizing the open codes, we employed axial coding to identify relationships between these codes (e.g., incompetent government, refugees and hate toward them, ineffective measurements, limitations on citizens' freedom) and grouped them into broader categories. This phase allowed us to uncover patterns within the data and the relations among the categories (as presented in the Results section below). A mind-map visually outlined the interconnectedness of the identified themes and organized the initial codes. We continually cross-referenced the themes with the coded segments and determined the specific characteristics of each theme. In the final stage, we implemented selective coding. This thorough analytical process led us to delineate four predominant narratives, each consisting of multiple codes intricately linked to the overarching narratives that explain the central themes of the study. Some codes were found to span across various narratives, indicating their multifaceted roles within the dataset. The two authors of the article coded an entire sub-sample of comments. Initially, we went through about 10% of the dataset to create categories and become familiar with the data. After this initial phase, we discussed and exchanged our coding schemes and negotiated the grouping, redefinition, and creation of new categories. All of the codes were carefully described, and we made revisions during regular meetings. Reading each other's coding schemes provided consistency. The quotations presented in the results section were selected to illustrate the key findings.

Results

The study's findings (see Figure 2 for the four narratives and the main narrative categories) indicate that the discussants use certain repetitive narratives to distinguish between "us," a collective identity created in the discussions, and "them." We identified four key narratives that make up one overarching story about citizens (i.e., us) who found themselves without the support of the elites (i.e., them) and had to rely on their own resources. These narratives indicate that populist rhetoric became an inherent part of the collective imagery that is shared and developed online, and that key features of populism, such as the people-elite divide and nationalism, are further disseminated through these powerful narratives in the online sphere.

In the case of the first narrative, the "people abandoned by their elites (i.e., government)," we observed traces of populist rhetoric that were linked to the alleged lack of transparency in the dissemination of official information and some illogical measures that underline public distrust. The second narrative expressed an isolationist belief that "we Czechs should not involve ourselves in foreign matters [Ukraine] and should focus on our own issues instead." The third narrative reveals the discussants' mistrust of official sources—"the government and the media are always lying to us to manipulate and violate citizens' rights." In the fourth narrative, discussants suggested a solution to the hopeless situation—"we'll take care of ourselves because the government has given up on us."

Through these narratives, we simultaneously reveal elements of populist rhetoric and demonstrate how in-group membership and community belonging are articulated through discursive and interactional strategies.

People abandoned by their elites (i.e., government)

Politicians and the government are considered responsible for fueling the uncertainties and economic struggles of Czech citizens, which were both amplified during crisis time. In our data, the patterns appear in several storylines. Commenters emphasized the incompetence of politicians as well as their

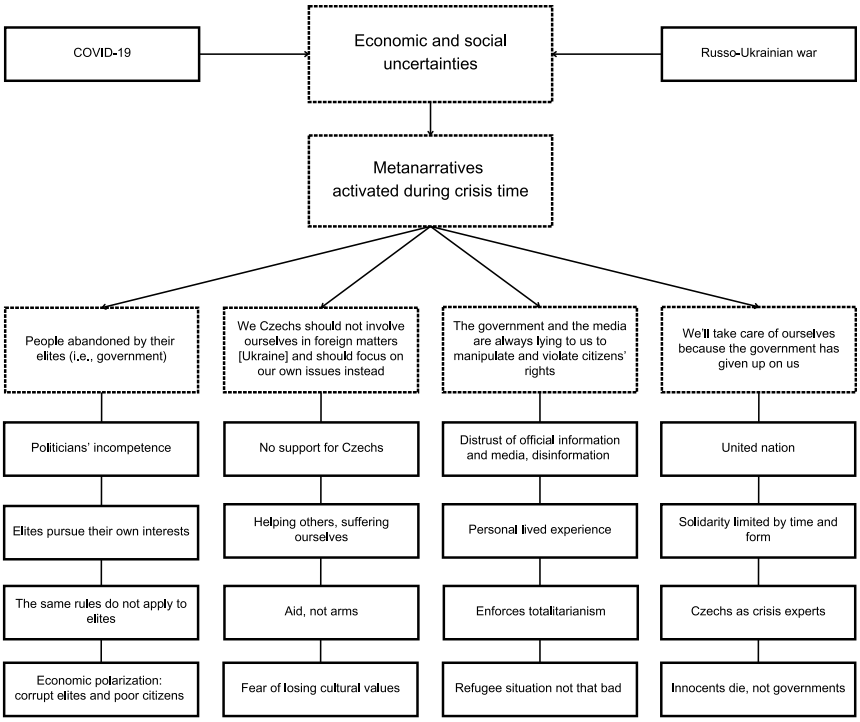

Figure 2. Main thematic narratives.

prioritization of their own interests above the interests of citizens. According to the discussants' criticism of the populist division between good citizens and corrupt elites, the same rules are not applied to all citizens.

> And will the prime minister also go to jail because he has already ignored the quarantine MANY TIMES, that quarantine that every ordinary mortal had to undergo after encountering a risky contact? The double standard is exactly what annoys people so much. (CT24, second part, COVID-19)

The lack of transparency for official information and last-minute measures (that were not always justified with data) appeared at the center of citizens' criticisms. The crisis period, therefore, can be perceived as an opportunity for the venting of frustrations that had been building up over time.

> So, our government makes everything more expensive in order to waste millions; it's unprecedented . . . I agree with humanitarian aid, where it's necessary, but this!????? . . .. Where was such generous aid to Moravia? After the tornado[5] ? . . ..Where is the government going! PEACE must be defended! (TN.CZ, first part, war in Ukraine)

> I am very happy for the Czechs that the majority finally understands. ❤cz Now you can look back at what covid was: exactly the same gang; everything they do goes against us and for their benefit. The world will change only after we stop buying this shit; all those powerful people, the 1%, must be brought to an end! (CT24, second part, war in Ukraine)

Negative comments express concerns that political elites receive certain privileges. Discussants blamed "exalted people" for being "given priority" in receiving the COVID-19 vaccine over "us, the ordinary people" (TN.CZ, first part, COVID-19). They also shared their feelings of injustice and frustration when politicians were not penalized for breaking regulations. The elements of bottom-up populist rhetoric are often present in statements that suggest that elites are exempt from the rules that ordinary people have to follow and may receive special treatment from the police: "First of all, do (politicians)

[5]The comment referred to the devastating tornado that struck South Moravia, Czechia, in June 2021.

wear face masks? Secondly, why should we wear them if they don't? Thirdly, penalties are brutal and inadequate; hopefully, there will also be punishments for them" (TN.CZ, second part, COVID-19).

The division between citizens and elites is also reflected in the narrative that connects long-term measures during crisis times to economic insecurity. Economic polarization appears as a comparison between poor citizens and corrupt elites. It highlights the fact that the elites are not harmed by ongoing crises in the same way as the citizens, and that their salaries are still enormously high and their profits are not at risk.

> It's strange that everybody does everything for free in this country and sends money [donations for Ukraine] except for politicians who keep their 200,000 CZK salaries and outrageous bonuses and don't agree to radically reduce their salaries for the sake of the Czech economy. (CT24, first part, COVID-19)

Whereas during the COVID-19 pandemic people pointed to perceived unfair privileges enjoyed by elites, in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, recurring narratives emerged that accused the government of misappropriating taxpayer money by financially supporting Ukraine without the citizens' consent.

We Czechs should not involve ourselves in foreign matters [Ukraine] and should focus on our own issues instead

During the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, some defended the government's actions, stating that they were doing their best in an unprecedented situation. Some expressed empathy for the policymakers and their roles. However, during the second wave of the pandemic and at the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war, there was a noticeable absence of empathetic voices. During the early stages of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, commenters blamed the prime minister for seeking fame by making certain decisions, such as traveling to Ukraine to meet with the Ukrainian president.

For both the COVID-19 crisis and the Russo-Ukrainian war, online commenters expressed concerns that the needs and struggles of the citizens of the Czech Republic were largely overlooked: "They are only giving away … and we, the Czechs, are going to eat weeds" (TN.CZ, first part, war in Ukraine). This narrative was emphasized with regard to those who were considered most vulnerable, such as single mothers, homeless people, and (sick) children: "How about the single mothers and families who lost jobs due to covid restrictions?" (TN.CZ, second part, COVID-19).

Soon after the beginning of the war, discussants developed a strong narrative about vulnerable Czechs who do not get governmental support as easily as Ukrainian refugees. This created a division between "us" (i.e., Czech citizens) and "them" (i.e., Ukrainians): "We are in debt. We don't have money for pensions, social benefits, but we are going to support war, which is destroying us" (CT24, second part, war in Ukraine).

A pragmatic approach to helping Ukrainians is based on clearly delineated boundaries for support. For instance, commenters suggested opening the borders for the refugees who fulfill expectations about people in need and for a predetermined limited amount of time. The main concern of such comments was to maintain Czech citizens' living standards while providing support to foreigners. Moreover, concerns that providing Ukraine with military aid could potentially escalate the conflict and jeopardize the safety and well-being of Czech citizens were largely expressed in comments:

> Dear all, there will come a time when the Czech citizen will be afraid to leave the house. […] We will become slaves and servants of the minorities who will live here. […] It is only the beginning of the war in the Czech Republic. (TN.CZ, first part, war in Ukraine)

In addition to concerns related to economic hardship and the risk of a conflict on the Czech border, some commenters showed concern about the risk of losing national cultural values. Such a narrative is typical for national civic discourse during large waves of immigration and, interestingly, it is often tied

[5]The comment referred to the devastating tornado that struck South Moravia, Czechia, in June 2021.

to worries about losing religious values, even though the majority of Czech citizens identify as atheists (see Prokop, 2019).

The government and the media are always lying to us to manipulate and violate citizens' rights

Our data revealed strong skepticism about official political information (which is mainly from the government) and about the media. Accusations of lying, exaggerating the situation, and deliberately manipulating the situation are common in our dataset. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, discussants lacked trust in the measures and their effectiveness (such as wearing a face mask, spacing, and testing). The government was blamed for exaggerating the situation by spreading inaccurate information about infected and dead people:

> The comedians [politicians] have blown it again. Just fear spreading. I would punish this. After all, this is disinformation and it's outrageous. They make a camel out of a mosquito. Twenty-five thousand didn't die because of covid. There are also heart attacks, car accidents, and other diseases. Why are you lying to yourselves? (CT24, second part, COVID)

In the case of the war in Ukraine, attacks on the credibility of the information spread by the government mostly questioned the seriousness of the war, the government's actions (such as the plausibility of a Czech politician's official visits in Ukraine), and security measures, which were often seen as leading to the outbreak of war in the Czech Republic.

Concerns related to the spread of false information often referred to the conviction that the government was not trying to solve problems during the crisis but aimed to limit freedom and establish totalitarianism instead. Restrictions on freedom were a sensitive topic, particularly in the context of the Czech Republic, a post-communist country. We can thus read such a narrative as an expression of collectively shared fears that stem from collective memory. The discursive strength of the argument related to freedom restrictions can be illustrated with the parallels the discussants drew between the two examined crises. They typically argued that politicians use the same deception and manipulation tactics during the pandemic and the war, just adjusted to the different topics. Comments that the politicians had switched topics, but their tactics remained the same, were common in our data. The politicians are blamed for profiting from the situation, and alleged governmental lies are perceived to be tools to control the citizens who are helpless due to measures and a state of emergency: "Ordering us what to think is totalitarianism. Restricting information is totalitarianism" (CT24, first part, war in Ukraine).

The media is described as generating fear and division by spreading false and misleading information. "Don't believe that everything the official media is presenting is true. We witnessed their lies during the immigration wave [starting in 2015], later in the case of covid, and now in the case of war" (CT24, first part, war in Ukraine). The media is represented as compliant with the government and part of the mendacious and greedy elites, or simply a tool for the government to spread propaganda: "What the media is serving us is just spiel so that the people obey and those on the top just keep feeding their fat bank accounts" (TN.CZ, second part, COVID).

Alleged misinformation spread by the elites during the crises is interpreted as a propaganda tactic used to create fear and confusion, manipulate people, and gain financial profit. During the war in Ukraine, media outlets were accused of inaccurately portraying refugees in order to support solidarity in Czech society. It is, the comments suggested, that Czech politicians were leaving their citizens to bear the financial burden of donations to Ukrainians, showing that they were probably more concerned with gaining popularity among the international community than truly addressing the needs of their citizens.

We'll take care of ourselves because the government has given up on us

The government was believed to be guided by actions that would earn them political points rather than prioritizing expert advice and effective crisis management. Such perceived governmental incompetence led the discussants to conclusions that the people must take things into

their own hands and take care of themselves. This motive was especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic when citizens came together to sew homemade masks, made independent decisions about the official measures, and donated money to those who were in economic distress due to governmental measures. The solidarity among ordinary citizens who had to bear the burden was so strong that it even helped Czechs overcome their traditional nationalism and prejudice toward national minorities. The Vietnamese community in Czechia providing free food to healthcare workers became a viral example of kindness among the people across the nation: "I can see that people are not that rotten, that we can unite regardless of our nationality and help each other. YOU ARE SUPERB 💔😇" (CT24, first part, COVID-19).

At first, solidarity and togetherness were seen as positive elements of people being able to unite as a nation when a crisis occurs. Such actions may be related to the initial shock of the situation and linked to media reports that urged people to come together and overcome the crisis. Therefore, it is not surprising that posts that highlighted acts of solidarity received positive comments in the initial phases of both crises. Later, as the crisis progressed (and shortly after the onset of the second crisis, the Ukrainian war, within just a few days), bottom-up solidarity was reflected as a necessary reaction to the abandoned of citizens by their government: "We are a capable nation, just led by butter-fingers" (CT24, second part, COVID-19). Once the initial shock of the unforeseen situation lessened, the criticism of the government's incompetence started to emerge more forcefully (for a similar conclusion, see Ligo et al., 2021). People's sentiment shifted massively from solidarity to blame, and the comments started to reveal economic hardship and related feelings of anxiety and confusion: "We have to help ourselves again, and that is good, because we have what we have voted for . . . " (CT24, second part, COVID-19).

In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, a narrative emerged to emphasize the importance of Czechs helping themselves by mobilizing their resources (e.g., raising money for sick children without support from the government). In the narrative, such actions are presented as contrasting with the government and some Czechs sent money and support to foreigners (i.e., the Ukrainians). During both the first and the second phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war the debaters' reactions not only underscored the prevailing sentiment that Czech citizens' interests should be prioritized ("prices go high and who will help us") but also highlighted a sense of moral failure. This concern arose from the expressed conviction that financial resources should be directed only toward those in genuine need and that the potential fueling of the conflict through financial support to Ukraine should be avoided.

> We will take off the masks and put on the helmets 😃 [. . .] We'll use a campfire instead of heating at home and drive on air [irony]. We will care about Ukrainians, but who will care about us? (TN.CZ, first part, war in Ukraine)

> When money is to be collected, for example, to cover some very expensive medicine for children, oh my, that's a problem. But when money is needed for such crap as a weapon to kill people, the Czechs bend over backwards. (TN.CZ, second part, war in Ukraine)

In line with the tendency to rely on themselves, the discussants questioned the government's reliability by contrasting official information with their personal experiences. As the crisis continued, particularly during the second phase of COVID-19, people became increasingly critical of certain measures, such as restrictions on smoking and children wearing face masks. People expressed frustration and labeled such rules as foolish and unnecessary, stating that the state or government should not dictate what to do to "us" (i.e., citizens). Blaming the government for risking children's health, hindering children's education, and restricting freedoms were often based on real-life experiences shared by family members and friends.

Everyday experiences were also used to evaluate the range of support to Ukraine that was considered necessary by the discussants. Ukrainians who lived in the Czech Republic and wore luxury clothes or used expensive technology became symbols for outrage related to the amount of help that was being given to the refugees. That picture did not match Czech expectations for someone who had fled a war zone. While women and children were seen as deserving of help in the comments, men were

often criticized for taking advantage of Czech solidarity instead of fighting for their country. The reason for the people's reluctance to help was, however, again connected mainly to a deep sense of betrayal by the government, which provides financial aid to foreigners but fails to support its own needy residents.

> You interpret the money spent by the state on the Ukrainian machinery as an aid from the Czechs, and you will also declare the stolen pensions as an aid from the Czechs . . . you're stealing and bending the truth. Disgusting. (CT24, second part, war in Ukraine)

In contrast to concerns about incoming refugees, some voices emphasized the absurdity of hateful comments against war refugees. Such comments pointed out the illogical nature of the attacks on people escaping war and the idea that they would seek to benefit financially from the support the Czech Republic offers. Some also highlighted that the Ukrainians who come to Czechia for work pay taxes, ultimately benefiting the country. It is important to note that supportive comments toward incoming refugees are relatively rare in highly rated comment threads.

There was an apparent frustration among Czech citizens due to the perceived lack of support from the government, which led to the need for self-reliance. The autonomous reaction of the citizens followed such a disappointment, especially in the form of local initiatives, like the collection of plastic bottle caps to raise money for sick children or citizen-led fundraising initiatives to aid those in need in Czechia. Commenters used these examples to highlight their own self-reliance and independence when no governmental support could be expected: "I love my daughter and I won't let the government destroy her health by forcing her to wear a mask the whole day. Children have headaches as a result, they can't concentrate at school and feel sick. Thus, I will keep her at home and hope that the government will give up such nonsense" (TN.CZ, second part, COVID).

Discussion

Our analysis shows that social media discussants create shared identities by identifying common enemies, like the government, elites, or Ukrainians, and by repeatedly framing social and economic injustices that involve themselves and others. These discursive acts strengthen the collective identity and help to cope with crises (see also Martinsson & Ericson, 2022), but they also foster distrust in the government and media, deepening societal divisions. The gap between official information and the supposedly more trustworthy content shared among users can exacerbate crises, spread falsehoods (Hameleers, 2022), and undermine societal resilience and recovery by discouraging adherence to government decisions.

The contribution of our study, which expands upon the knowledge related to societal polarization in online communities (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2024), is as follows: Firstly, it reveals that repetitive narratives with similar structure and actors are actualized by online Czech discussants across different crises (i.e., COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian war) and phases, which particularly fills the gap of previous research studies that focused on one crisis in mainly Western countries (Eisele et al., 2022; Hameleers, 2022; Thiele, 2022). It indicates that frustration and distrust of the government and societal elites, including the media, existed prior to the crises and are activated in times of uncertainty (Hameleers, 2018; Thiele, 2022).

Secondly, our results are consistent with prior research that showed that crises activate citizen-led populist discourse (He et al., 2023; Thiele, 2022). During the analyzed crises, online collective identities were typically strengthened by the discussants through the creation of divisions between themselves, the "suffering citizens," and the "corrupt elites." We observed this division in all of the phases of the two crises. As the pandemic progressed, its occurrence increased, aligning with prior quantitative research findings (see Thiele, 2022). In the case of our research, what is particularly noteworthy is the decline in solidarity and the willingness to help, alongside a shift toward more antagonistic statements to criticize the government and emphasize the suffering of the Czech nation. Such a trend may be attributed to "pandemic fatigue," a state of prolonged exhaustion and resignation

(Jørgensen et al., 2022), possibly arising from recurring crises, which can contribute to increasing polarization (Hogg, 2023).

Also, populist comments trigger populist responses, potentially leading to a more widespread prevalence of populism in online discussions (Hameleers, 2018). Populist rhetoric also tends to generate more reactions to online posts, which makes messages that include these patterns more visible (Blassnig et al., 2019), although their prevalence in the discussions may not necessarily reflect society's dominant perception or opinion at a given moment. By amplifying "us vs. them" narratives, social media can deepen societal divisions and facilitate disinformation (Schmid et al., 2022), a pattern that may also emerge in other national contexts as part of the broader rise and adoption of populist rhetoric across Europe (Hameleers, 2022).

Thirdly, our data shows that similar, unanimous, repeated narratives flood discussions in mainstream online spaces across both public service and commercial media, suggesting that the emergence of populist discourse is independent of outlet ideology. One possible explanation is that social media discussions are generally more heated than those on media websites, as a previous study showed (Rowe, 2015). Therefore, the prevalence of sharpened comments, including populist rhetoric, may be influenced by the settings and the affordances of the social network site, which possibly erased the expected difference between substantially different media outlets and their audiences.

Our findings thus broaden the validity of the role of the performative aspects of social media in shaping online collective identity, out-group stigmatization, and societal fragmentation by demonstrating their validity across different media outlets and crises (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021; Hameleers, 2022; Martinsson & Ericson, 2022; Thiele, 2022; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022). The repeated spread of manipulative narratives (see also Šefčíková, 2023) in mainstream online spaces, particularly concerning national context, can potentially lead to the proliferation of extreme views within the population, thereby representing a substantial societal threat.

Fourthly, one of our crucial findings is that similar narratives are shared by discussants regardless of political representation—they blame, in a very similar way, the policies of two successive governments that represent two distinctively different political agendas. Despite the 2021 change in the Czech government—from former populist prime minister Andrej Babiš to right-wing conservative prime minister Petr Fiala—populist attacks toward the government persisted across different government groups according to a remarkably consistent pattern. The collective identity of discussants in our sample is created around the populist duality of abandoned citizens standing against the elites. It is developed and sustained through the constant discursive nurturing of aversion toward the country's political representation. Put simply, discussants in our sample unite by forming a collective identity based on opposition to ruling elites and by constructing in-group cohesion with shared values and expressions of solidarity. Although the positive result of such unification against the elites may be greater unity and mutual understanding across ideological divides, on the negative side, it simultaneously leads to citizens feeling disconnected from their government and questioning its actions, regardless of the impact of those actions. In crisis times, such lack of trust may have significant consequences for the ability of the society to face the challenging events. This is particularly relevant in a post-communist country, where trust in political institutions was already low (Pospěch, 2021).

To sum up, our study highlights the risk of broader societal polarization by documenting an online discursive community built on othering and exclusion. We show that these dynamics occur on mainstream platforms across commercial and public service media and increase over time. At the same time, we demonstrate how collective identity forms through solidarity among individuals facing shared uncertainty, empirically confirming theoretical assumptions proposed by Hogg (2023) and echoed in recent work focused on different online platforms and country contexts (Ligo et al., 2021; Ruiu & Ragnedda, 2024). This highlights how community building can both foster a sense of belonging and, conversely, promote divisive behaviors such as out-group exclusion and polarization, particularly during times of crisis.

Limitations and future research

Our study is not without limits. We are aware of the possible relationship between the Facebook posts and the related comments (see Blassnig et al., 2019; Thiele, 2022), for which we did not control in our study. Moreover, our data is based on the most visible comments (i.e., those with the potentially highest impact on opinions; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017) that, by virtue of popularity, play an important role in the online public sphere.

Furthermore, we focused on the Czech Republic, a country in the CEE region with a distinct post-socialist history and specific responses to both the COVID-19 pandemic (including severe restrictions to citizens' freedoms) and the war in Ukraine. Our analysis is limited to two television news outlets, one commercial and one public, on Facebook. Even on the same platform, online environments vary in structure and audience, potentially shaping users' online behavior, which must be considered when interpreting our findings. A similar variation likely exists across other pages, including those of different media outlets or political actors (Kluknavská et al., 2024).

Despite these limits, we believe that our research contributes to our knowledge about the mechanisms of the discursive construction of shared online identities and the spread of populist narratives among citizens during various times of crisis. Focusing on top-rated comments enables us to identify the narratives that are most visible and resonant within the mainstream online discourse.

To build on these findings, subsequent studies could explore different social media environments and include comparisons with platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, where younger users are more active. In future research, exploring the characteristics of collective identity construction in the online space through quantitative content analysis would be valuable because it provides deeper insight into the connections between specific narratives and various types of populist discourse.

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Notes on contributors

Martina Novotná (Ph.D., Masaryk University) is an assistant professor at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University, Czech Republic. Her research focuses on online political communication and participation, with an emphasis on the roles of polarization, incivility, and intolerance.

Lenka Vochocová (Ph.D., Charles University) is associate professor at the Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Czech Republic. Her research interests cover the fields of gender media studies, online political participation, public sphere theories, and the political economy of communication.

ORCID

Martina Novotná http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5536-4790
Lenka Vochocová http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9873-4536

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Appendix. Codebook for identifying a crisis-dominant topic

General Instructions

Coders must first determine the presence of a dominant crisis topic related to the Czech context—either COVID-19 or the Russo-Ukrainian war—based on the content of the Facebook post. When the dominant topic is not apparent from the text, coders must check any additional content. This includes clicking on attached links and reviewing accompanying photos, videos, or articles to accurately determine the dominant topic. If the post contains an external link, coders must click on it to further assess the presence and relevance of the dominant crisis topic. If the post includes a video, coders must watch the first minute to evaluate whether COVID-19 or the war in Ukraine are the primary focus. Coders identify the main topic of Facebook posts by its prominence, which typically occupies the most space and serves as the central argument for the entire post.

The dominant crisis topic should be coded with particular attention to its Czech context and its potential impact on the everyday lives of Czech citizens. Coders must code the post accordingly if it explicitly addresses how the crisis affects Czech citizens' daily routines, financial situation, freedom of movement, access to services, or public safety. Posts about movement restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic or rising fuel or energy prices around Europe due to the war in Ukraine can qualify for presence in the Czech Republic and should be coded as 1.

Coders must include only those posts in which COVID-19 or the Russo-Ukrainian war is clearly the dominant topic. Posts with only general or vague references—such as global pandemic statistics or abstract geopolitical commentary on the war in Ukraine—without a clear and explicit connection to Czech citizens or the European context must be coded as 99 (i.e., crisis topic unrelated to the Czech context).

Dominant crisis topic

Three coding options were coded as follows:

Code	Description
0	The dominant crisis topic is not present.
1	The dominant crisis topic is present (e.g., *How do Ukrainians living in the Czech Republic perceive their native country?*)
99	The crisis topic is present but not connected to the Czech Republic (e.g., *Bratislava closes kindergartens and primary and secondary schools for five days*).