When Populism Targets Europe: Anti-EU Rhetoric and User Engagement in the Visegrád Countries

Alena Pospíšil Macková [1] ⬡, **Lucie Čejková** [1] ⬡, **Martina Novotná** [1] ⬡, **Krisztina Burai** [2,3] ⬡, **Paweł Baranowski** [4] ⬡, **and Michal Garaj** [5] ⬡

[1] Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Czech Republic
[2] Institute for Political Science, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary
[3] Doctoral School of Political Science, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary
[4] Institute of Journalism and Social Communication, University of Wrocław, Poland
[5] Institute of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia

Correspondence: Alena Pospíšil Macková (amackova@fss.muni.cz)

Abstract

Criticism of the EU has become a common feature of political communication in Central and Eastern Europe and it is often tied to broader concerns about democratic erosion and distrust in institutions. This study investigates how anti-EU rhetoric was employed on Facebook by political actors in the Visegrád countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) during the 2024 European Parliament elections and how it relates to the populist style of communication. Drawing on a comparative content analysis of more than 6,000 posts, the study examines how messages that negatively target the EU incorporate elements of populist rhetoric and emotional tools, such as fear speech and patriotic symbols. The findings show that populist actors were the most frequent users of anti-EU messaging, with anti-elitist framing as the strongest and most consistent rhetorical strategy, often accompanied by other emotional tools. Despite political differences, anti-EU campaigning showed consistent regional patterns. This article contributes to research on political communication by offering a regional comparison, incorporating visual analysis, and challenging the idea that negative messaging is a reliable strategy for mobilising audiences online.

Keywords

anti-EU rhetoric; European Parliament elections; fear speech; negative campaigning; patriotic visuals; populism; social media; user engagement; Visegrád countries

---

1. Introduction

In the context of rising political instability and democratic erosion across Europe, criticism of the EU has become a common feature of political discourse. In Central and Eastern Europe, anti-EU rhetoric is often used to challenge institutional authority and mobilise disillusioned voters. Such rhetoric has been linked to increasing political distrust, polarisation, and the revival of nationalist sentiment (Brosius et al., 2018; Kiratli, 2023).

Social media allows political actors to directly deliver emotionally charged, visually striking, and conflict-oriented content to audiences (Charvát et al., 2022; Engesser et al., 2017). These affordances are particularly well-suited to negative and populist campaigning (Engesser et al., 2017). Moreover, emotionally resonant and visually impactful content may help mobilise support and generate user engagement, even in elections that typically suffer from lower visibility and voter engagement. The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, which placed the EU at the center of the debate, thus provide a timely opportunity to examine how political actors across different countries strategically deployed anti-EU messages on social media.

This study focuses on the Visegrád countries (V4; Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), where EU-critical narratives have become central to political communication and populist actors have gained prominence. Examining the Visegrád region provides insights into Facebook-based political campaigns within post-communist contexts that were marked by shared accession to the EU in 2004 and recurring criticism of EU institutions (Végh, 2018). Despite these similarities, communication strategies differ across countries because they are shaped by local political dynamics and electoral competitiveness. This diversity enables a comparative perspective that can reveal shared and divergent patterns.

While previous research has explored the link between populism and anti-EU rhetoric (Kneuer, 2019; Pirro & Taggart, 2018; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019), this study introduces new contributions. First, it provides a cross-national comparison from Central and Eastern Europe, a region still underrepresented in communication studies. Second, it incorporates the visual and emotional repertoire of online campaigning, specifically patriotic symbolism and fear-based appeals, which are often overlooked in studies that focus solely on textual content. Third, it evaluates whether these rhetorical strategies increase user engagement during elections that typically lack strong mobilising power.

Grounded in theories and research on issues that include negative campaigning, anti-EU rhetoric (Maier et al., 2025; Nai et al., 2022), populist communication (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), visual framing (Schill, 2012), and the role of emotional appeals (Jost et al., 2020; Tønnesen et al., 2025), the study empirically tests the use and effectiveness of these strategies in a context where populist actors are prominent and the EU is a frequent target. Combining comparative quantitative content analysis with engagement metrics on Facebook challenges the assumption that negative or emotionally charged content automatically translates into higher interaction. In doing so, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how anti-EU discourse functions online, particularly during second-order elections like those to the EP.

2. Theory

2.1. Negative Campaigning Against the EU

Facebook has long been a key tool in election campaigns to primarily disseminate political content (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Its centrality to campaign communication has grown, especially during elections, where parties rely on it to reach and activate supporters. In the V4 region, Facebook remains the most widely used platform among the population. It is heavily employed for political communication, even though its importance as a news source is declining and other platforms, such as TikTok, are gaining popularity (Newman et al., 2024). At the same time, the platform's affordances make it suitable for more aggressive forms of messaging, including attacks on political opponents and institutions.

Negative campaigning refers to communication that criticises or attacks political opponents rather than emphasises one's strengths (Surlin & Gordon, 1977). Politicians who employ negative campaigns typically use aggressive language, strategic framing, or disinformation to differentiate themselves from opponents (Nai, 2021). Although such tactics can help voters distinguish among candidates (Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014; Papp & Patkós, 2019), research shows they negatively impact society and reduce trust (Ansolabehere et al., 1994).

These risks are severe when the target is not a competing candidate or party, but the EU itself. Frequent anti-EU messages reinforce the mistrust of EU institutions (Brosius et al., 2018; Kiratli, 2023). In the context of EP elections, this strategy takes on specific relevance. These elections are often seen as lower-stakes and less visible, which gives parties (particularly radical ones and those in opposition) more space to use confrontational language. Recent research shows that the EP setting can encourage stronger attacks on the EU itself, because parties face fewer political costs and they can use the campaign to challenge the legitimacy of supranational institutions (Maier et al., 2025).

It is important to distinguish negative campaigning toward the EU as a rhetorical practice from broader Euroscepticism. Whereas Euroscepticism represents a long-term critical stance toward EU integration or policies (Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019; Ruzza et al., 2021), anti-EU campaigning refers to rhetorical efforts to undermine the image, credibility, or authority of the EU during campaigns. While Eurosceptic politicians frequently use negative campaigning, not all negative campaigning necessarily reflects deeper Eurosceptic beliefs. This makes it a flexible and potentially opportunistic tactic that is employed across diverse ideological contexts. This distinction is important when analysing online campaigning, where strategic negativity may not reflect long-term ideological commitments. Anti-EU rhetoric itself also varies: it can take an exclusionary form, focused on sovereignty and identity (typical for the radical right), or an inclusive form, which emphasises the democratic or social deficits of the EU—which are more common on the left (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

The V4 offer valuable insights into this phenomenon due to their shared history and distinct differences in anti-EU rhetoric and attitudes. In Czechia, traditional EU criticism is often mixed with conspiracy theories and sovereignty-focused narratives, despite recognition of the economic benefits of EU membership (Havlík, 2011). Slovakia has recently seen intensified rhetoric that combines anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiments with pan-Slavic nostalgia and conspiracy theories (Dubóczi & Ružičková, 2023). Poland's ruling party, Prawo i

Sprawiedliwość, maintains a moderate institutional criticism, though more radical actors voice stronger anti-EU positions (Nai et al., 2022). Hungary, under Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz, presents the most illustrative case of systematic anti-EU messaging, combining state-sponsored narratives with strategic communication against EU institutions (Klingová, 2020). However, the 2024 EP elections in Hungary were held alongside municipal elections, which likely shifted campaign priorities toward domestic issues. Additionally, Fidesz's recent communication has increasingly focused on the war in Ukraine, while some of its more confrontational messages have been outsourced to affiliated media and influencer networks (Bene & Juhász, 2025).

These national differences shape the intensity and nature of anti-EU messaging on social media and motivate our central research question:

RQ1: How does the occurrence of negative campaigning against the EU on Facebook differ across V4?

2.2. Campaigning Against the EU and Populism

Building on the growing prevalence of negative campaigning that targets the EU (Holtz-Bacha & Johansson, 2022), this section explores how such communication is embedded within populist narratives. Populist communication typically frames politics as a struggle between "ordinary people" and a distant, self-serving elite. In this study, we follow a widely used definition of populist communication that includes three key elements: anti-elitism; appeals to the people as a unified and morally superior group; and portrayals of threatening "others," such as immigrants, feminists, or international institutions, who are seen as endangering national identity or values (Bos, 2024; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Jost et al., 2020). These rhetorical elements form a flexible toolkit that can be adapted to different ideological positions and environments.

Populism has been conceptualised in three main ways: as a "thin-centered" ideology (Mudde, 2004), as a political strategy, and as a communicative style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Each perspective offers insights into how and why populist actors embrace EU critique. The first perspective views populism as a thin ideology that must attach itself to more substantial host ideologies or issues. The EU is a convenient host issue because it is often depicted as remote and technocratic, showing elite governance as disconnected from citizens in individual countries. It makes the EU an ideal target for actors who portray themselves as defenders of "the people" against a distant power. The EU plays a key role in populist narratives because it embodies the right kind of elite that populism opposes. Pirro and Taggart (2018) argue that the EU's technocratic character, lack of transparency, and weak links to citizens make it especially vulnerable to populist criticism.

Importantly, the relationship between populism and EU criticism works both ways. Populist actors often adopt anti-EU messages to support their broader narratives of elite betrayal and rapid national decline (Styczyńska & Meijer, 2024). Conversely, political actors who criticise the EU frequently employ a populist communication style. This overlap is especially pronounced among radical right parties, but it is not exclusive to them. Populist and Eurosceptic narratives frequently coincide, though not automatically (Havlík & Kaniok, 2016; Pirro & Taggart, 2018; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019).

The "tandem" of populism and EU criticism (Kneuer, 2019) is particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe, where right-wing populist parties have portrayed the EU not only as technocratic but also as morally corrupt and culturally threatening (Csehi & Zgut, 2021). This framing aligns with sovereignty-based nationalism and signals a shift from soft to hard Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024).

However, this pattern is not uniformly applicable across the V4 region. In Czechia, the link between populism and EU criticism is less straightforward. As Havlík and Kaniok (2016) argue, populist attitudes do not necessarily translate into Euroscepticism. ANO, a dominant centrist-populist party, avoids systemic EU critique. Its style, described as technocratic populism, combines anti-elitist rhetoric with managerial pragmatism (Buštíková & Guasti, 2018). While avoiding systemic EU criticism, the party has recently shifted toward soft Euroscepticism, stressing national sovereignty and attacking "European elites." However, unlike Svoboda a přímá demokracie, the radical-right party that pushes hard Eurosceptic rhetoric and even EU withdrawal, ANO's stance remains mild (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2024). This distinction echoes broader trends in the region. Centrist and radical right populists diverge in their EU-related discourse. While radical right actors often rely on framing to portray the EU as a threat to national identity (Styczyńska & Meijer, 2024), centrist populists tend to adopt a more pragmatic and depoliticised communication style (Petrović et al., 2023).

These dynamics were reflected in the campaigns for the 2024 EP elections, where several prominent populist parties from the region played a central role. In Czechia, centrist ANO, led by Andrej Babiš, won the elections with a focus on domestic issues and selected policy critiques rather than overt anti-EU messaging. In contrast, the far-right Svoboda a přímá demokracie ran a distinctly Eurosceptic campaign, emphasising national sovereignty and opposing EU migration and climate policies (Charvát et al., 2022; Havlík & Kluknavská, 2024). Fidesz maintained its dominant position in Hungary with its long-standing portrayal of the EU as threatening national values. In Slovakia, SMER–sociálna demokracia, under Robert Fico, emphasised strong anti-EU and nationalist rhetoric and emerged as the leading party. In Poland, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość remained one of the strongest parties by continuing to combine cultural conservatism with criticism of EU institutions. These parties participated in the elections and set the tone through the consistent use of anti-elitist and, in several cases, strong anti-EU rhetoric.

In summary, populist framing offers both a symbolic and strategic advantage in anti-EU communication, though its manifestation varies across political and national contexts. Based on this reasoning and previous research, we propose the following hypotheses:

> H1a: Posts on Facebook that employ negative campaigning against the EU are more likely to include populist communication styles.

> H1b: Populist parties and candidates use negative campaigns against the EU on Facebook more than non-populist parties and candidates.

2.3. Visual Nationalism and Fear Speech in Communication

Negative rhetoric against the EU often includes more than just critical language. Eurosceptic and populist actors also use strong visuals and emotional cues to make their messages more powerful. We focus on two

prominent strategies: patriotic imagery, which highlights national identity; and fear-based language, which presents the EU as a threat. Though different in form, both approaches help intensify the emotional tone and persuasive influence of anti-EU communication.

Patriotic symbols can be used to strengthen anti-EU narratives. These visuals counter the threat posed by European integration, appealing to the voters' sense of identity and national pride. References to flags, maps, national traditions, and historical events help construct a collective image of "the people" and contribute to boundaries between "us" and "them" (Schertzer & Woods, 2021).

These patterns reflect how patriotic imagery works as a symbolic push back against European integration, as explained by theories of visual framing and banal nationalism. The visual framing theory (Schill, 2012) posits that images act as "implied arguments," without explicit statements. Such imagery gains persuasive force in highly visual environments, especially when it appeals to identity or evokes threat-related emotions. These emotionally charged cues are also more likely to amplify engagement based on algorithms (Huang, 2024). At the same time, these visuals gain power from what Billig (1995) calls banal nationalism, which is the everyday use of national symbols to build a sense of belonging. In online settings, this kind of symbolic reinforcement becomes part of what Huang (2024) calls the "digital fabric of nationalism," where social media keeps reminding users of national identity. These visuals act as emotional symbols of national belonging, often contrasting with the EU's more abstract image.

In V4, national identity plays a crucial symbolic role in political communication. Across country-related contexts, patriotic visuals are often used to portray the EU as a distant, bureaucratic threat to sovereignty (Charvát et al., 2022; Charvátová & Filipec, 2022; Dubóczi & Ružičková, 2023; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). Farkas et al. (2022) show that while emotional and symbolic visuals are common across populist and non-populist parties, national imagery is particularly prominent in populist and anti-EU discourse. This visual emphasis on national identity often contrasts with how the EU is portrayed—distant and technocratic. In the context of the EP elections, where national and supranational identities come into direct tension, such contrasts may intensify emotional responses. In this way, patriotic visuals not only express opposition to the EU but also lay the groundwork for fear-based narratives to mobilise support (Marchal et al., 2021).

Fear-based appeals often build on the contrast established by national symbolism. While patriotic imagery visually asserts the value of national identity, fear-inducing rhetoric emphasises the dangers posed by external force—the EU. Fear in political communication is typically strategic, aiming to provoke strong emotional responses and to enhance message impact. This is particularly effective when audiences are already engaged, such as followers of political parties on social media (Horowitz, 1969). According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) appraisal theory, individuals evaluate the perceived threats and this process can intensify emotions, like fear, especially when threats seem uncontrollable. Populist and radical actors often use such messaging to portray the EU as dangerous to national sovereignty, culture, and security (Scheller, 2019).

This framing is evident in Central and Eastern Europe. While overall negativity levels in EP elections are comparable to national elections (Maier et al., 2025), extreme parties tend to adopt a more confrontational tone. They intensify fear-based messaging, incivility, and criticism of the EU while reducing positive or enthusiasm-based appeals (Nai & Maier, 2021). In the V4, where Euroscepticism has long shaped political

discourse, parties such as Fidesz in Hungary and Kotleba's Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko in Slovakia consistently employ the harshest rhetoric and depict the EU as a threat (Scheller, 2019). Hloušek et al. (2024) show that leaders like Tomio Okamura (Czechia), Milan Uhrík (Slovakia), and László Toroczkai (Hungary) use emotionally charged language (i.e., fear and angry appeals) on social media to portray international crises as domestic threats, targeting the EU and migrants.

In EP elections, the supranational character of these elections can further intensify the contrast between national identity and European integration, reinforcing the appeal of patriotic and fear-based messaging. Therefore, we hypothesize:

> H2: Negative campaigning against the EU on Facebook will likely include patriotic symbols.

> H3: Negative campaigning against the EU on Facebook is associated with a higher prevalence of fear speech.

2.4. Campaigning Against the EU and User Engagement

Several studies indicate that negativity significantly boosts user engagement on social media because such content attracts attention, stimulates deeper cognitive processing, and triggers emotional reactions. Negative posts that involve attacks or blame-shifting, emotionally charged rhetoric (such as anger or fear), and anti-elitist messages consistently achieve higher engagement rates, including more comments, shares, and "anger" reactions (Balaban et al., 2024; Bene et al., 2022; Humprecht et al., 2024; Jost et al., 2020). Although foreign policy topics typically receive less attention on social media, EU-related negativity appears to be an exception. Posts that portray the EU as an elitist and distant institution can strongly resonate with populist anti-elitist sentiments, amplifying user engagement (Bene et al., 2022; Heidenreich et al., 2022).

However, EP elections, often viewed as lower-priority, second-order contests, introduce a dynamic that differs from national elections. The parties face fewer risks and have more freedom to use confrontational rhetoric (Maier et al., 2025). As shown by Daniel and Obholzer (2025), candidates from Eurosceptic parties post more frequently during EP campaigns and their content generates higher levels of user engagement. Comparative research about the 2019 EP elections by Baranowski et al. (2022) found that negative campaigning was among the most widely shared content, particularly when directed against the EU. This highlights the viral potential of anti-EU messaging in the context of EP campaigns. While Bene et al. (2022), on the same EP election, confirm the engagement-boosting effect of general negativity and populist appeals, they do not distinguish anti-EU content as a separate category. These findings support the view that the EP context can amplify the emotional and viral potential of negative messaging, especially when combined with populist, patriotic, or fear-based appeals.

User engagement is conceptualised as a measure of interaction with content (Russmann et al., 2024). While earlier studies primarily focused on metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, recent research also includes emotional reactions like anger, love, wow, haha, and sad, which capture affective responses more precisely (Bene et al., 2022; Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022; Humprecht et al., 2024; Tønnesen et al., 2025). Research shows that positive emotional responses often drive forms of engagement that require less effort (e.g., likes, emojis). In contrast, negative emotions more strongly predict more profound forms of

engagement, such as comments and shares, especially when linked to anti-elitist or threat-based messages (Jost et al., 2020; Martella & Bracciale, 2022; Tønnesen et al., 2025).

Building on this evidence, we examine how anti-EU posts that employ populist rhetoric, fear appeals, and patriotic symbols affect user engagement. Given their emotional and mobilising potential in the low-scrutiny environment of EP elections, such rhetorical strategies may affect how users react to political content online. We hypothesize:

> H4: Posts with negative messages about the EU on Facebook generate higher user engagement than those without.

Last but not least, considering the specific interplay of diverse elements of populist rhetoric, fear appeals, and patriotic symbols in anti-EU messaging, we pose a question:

> RQ2: How do including populist rhetoric, fear appeals, and patriotic symbols in anti-EU posts interact to influence user engagement on Facebook in the Visegrád region?

3. Method

3.1. Data and Procedure

This study employs standardised quantitative content analysis to examine Facebook posts from political parties and politicians during the 2024 EP campaign. This research is part of a larger scientific collaboration network, CamforS, that involves scientists from most EU countries; we focus here on four countries. Data collection was centralised to ensure maximum comparability across national contexts and the coding process was standardised. Data was collected from public pages with Crowdtangle, spanning the four weeks leading up to the elections (May 11, 2024, to June 9, 2024). Following the project rules, the sample includes national parties that received at least 5% of the 2024 EP election vote (Table 1). In cases where individual politicians and/or party coalitions with dedicated Facebook pages played a significant role in the campaign, the public pages of these politicians/coalitions were also included (see Table 1; a detailed list of political actors with their ideological affiliation is provided in Table A of the Supplementary File).

While automated methods are becoming more common (e.g., Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), manual coding remains important, especially for posts that combine text, images, and video. These elements often work together to shape meaning in ways that are hard to capture automatically. In this case, manual coding allows us to better interpret strategies and visual symbolism that are central to how actors communicate. Coding in each country was thus performed by three coders, following an international codebook (in English) with clearly defined categories developed by the leaders of the CamforS network. To ensure consistency and international comparability, coders participated in national training sessions. All coders participated in two intercoder reliability tests. The international test, conducted in English, used a set of 100 posts from various European parties and served as the primary benchmark for comparability across countries. Based on 100 posts from each country's dataset, national tests complemented this process by addressing context-specific challenges. We report results from the international tests conducted among all coders. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Brennan and Prediger's kappa and Holsti's coefficient (Quarfoot &

Table 1. Sample.

Country	Number of parties, coalitions, and politicians	Number of all posts in the period	Number of posts in the sample	N (% of the sample) of negative posts against the EU
Czechia	8 parties 2 coalitions 7 politicians	2,242	2,242	169 (7.5%)
Hungary	5 parties 1 coalition 3 politicians	1,885	1,203	22 (1.8%)
Poland	10 parties 14 politicians	1,855	1,855	141 (7.6%)
Slovakia	5 parties 3 politicians	859	859	75 (8.7%)

Levine, 2016). All categories showed good reliability with the only exception being "people-centrism" which scored 0.59 in kappa (i.e., moderate agreement), but 0.90 in Holsti, indicating high raw agreement (see Supplementary File). Coding was implemented consistently with the SoSci Survey platform, and all data were centrally cleaned. In Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, we coded all available posts. Hungary used a standardised sampling strategy (described in the Supplementary File), following procedures established within the research network. While we acknowledge that this may affect the descriptive comparability (Table 1), it should not significantly bias the analytical results because our models control for country-level variation and actor-specific effects.

3.2. Variables and Measures

For the variable "negative campaigning toward the EU," we coded whether EU institutions were the target of such campaigning, defined as statements, images, or expressions conveying rejection, hostility, dislike, or hatred.

The category "populist communication" captures populist rhetoric in posts to analyse textual and visual content. Based on the conceptual definition (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), which is mentioned in Section 2.2, we distinguish three main elements associated with populist communication. "Anti-elitism" is the post that blames or discredits the elite (e.g., politicians, media) for societal problems, questions their legitimacy, or calls for resistance. "People-centrism" appeals to "the people" as a unified community, portraying them as the true sovereign against the elite. And, posts including "references to the dangerous others" present specific groups as threats to the nation's future or values. "Ethnic danger" refers to ethnic or cultural "others," while "political danger" applies to political "others" who are portrayed as holding allegedly dangerous opinions.

"Fear speech" was identified if the post explicitly conveyed fear-inducing content by emphasising threats, risks, or insecurity through detailed elaboration, brief alarmist statements, or broad threat narratives.

We captured the presence of "patriotic symbols," such as a national flag or coat of arms (see Farkas et al., 2022), in the first image or video of a post. For images, only the first visual element is coded. In videos, only

the first minute (excluding subtitles) is considered. The definition of patriotic symbols may vary depending on the national context and whether it has been discussed in national teams. A detailed codebook is available in Table B of the Supplementary File.

"User engagement" refers to how users interact with political content on Facebook, reflecting different levels of involvement, sentiment, and willingness to spread the message. Following the approach to user engagement by Balaban et al. (2024), we adopted a broader definition that includes all available reactions under the post on Facebook. Engagement on Facebook is measured through three main types of interactions: reactions, which go beyond the basic "like" to include love, haha, wow, sad, angry, and care; commenting, which involves adding text responses to the post; and sharing, which, together with commenting, indicates a higher level of active engagement.

3.3. Analysis

We utilised the generalised linear mixed-effects models module of IBM SPSS Statistics v30. Given the hierarchical structure of our dataset, where posts were nested within political actors' Facebook profiles, we specified the random effect block for actors. This approach allowed us to control for actor-specific variability.

For RQ1, three models were tested. First, we fitted the null model. Next, we built Model 1 (H1–H3) to examine the binary outcome variable for negative campaigning toward the EU. To capture cross-national differences, we included the country of origin of the posting actor as a fixed effect. The unbalanced nature of the data (i.e., differences in posts' numbers across countries) was addressed by applying the Satterthwaite approximation for degrees of freedom and employing robust estimation procedures. Model 2 (H4) extended the initial model by incorporating fixed effects for engagement.

For RQ2, we used models with the same random effect structure and country-level fixed effects. This set of models predicted reactions, comments, and shares. First, we produced the base null model, assessed only the main effects (Model 1), and finally included two-way interactions between negativity toward the EU, populist rhetoric, fear speech, and patriotic symbols (Model 2). The Satterthwaite approximation and robust estimation techniques were applied to correct for possible non-linearity issues and differences in the number of posts across countries.

We used Grammarly and ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4) to refine language and consult selected aspects of the statistical analysis.

4. Results

The first part of the analysis focused on factors related to the negativity against the EU (RQ1). We compared the null model with Model 1 (i.e., without engagement) and three versions of Model 2 (i.e., with engagement measures such as count, log-transformed, and square root-transformed) to obtain the best results. All model information criteria results are reported in Table C in the Supplementary File. Only Model 2, with log-transformed engagement values and binomial distribution with a logit link function, performed better than the null model. While this model omits posts with zero shares ($n = 687$, 11.2%) and comments ($n = 225$,

3.7%) due to log transformation, it is the only statistically reliable model from all of the models tested for RQ1. We thus interpret this model, highlighting its key findings in Figure 1 and reporting full results in Table D in the Supplementary File.
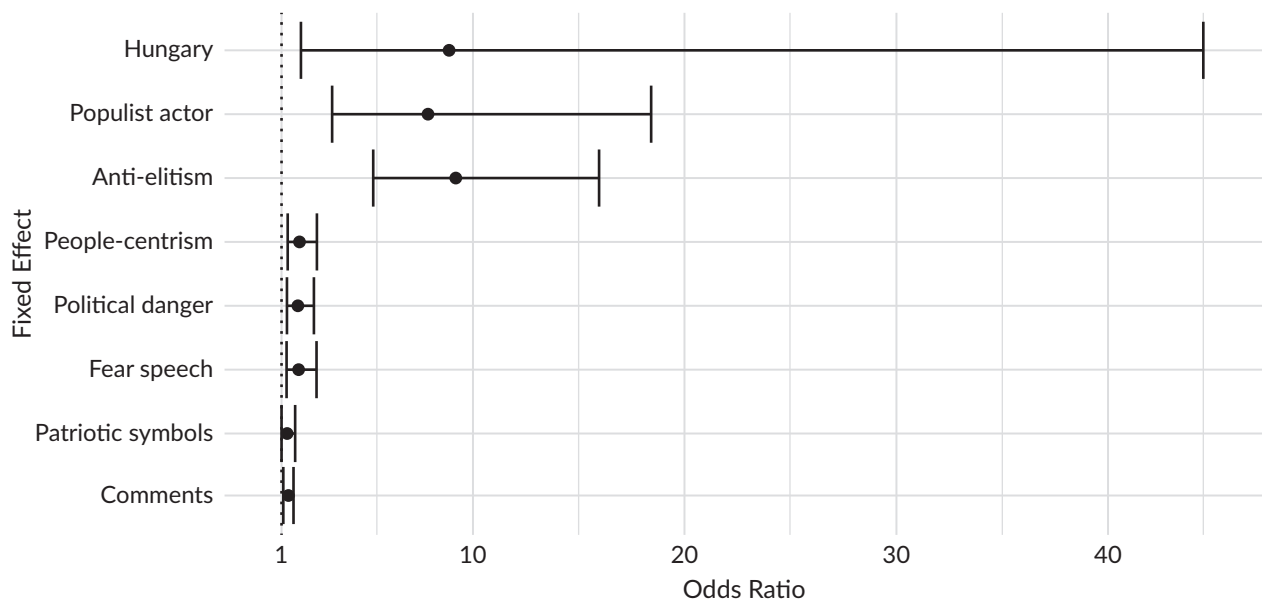

Figure 1. Odds ratios (with 95% CI) of significant fixed effects of negativity toward the EU.

Results show that, compared to Slovakia (i.e., the reference category), Hungarian actors were more likely to post negatively about the EU ($OR = 8.917$, $p = .009$). However, we found no significant differences for actors from Czechia or Poland.

Building on these country-level patterns, we examined how anti-EU rhetoric relates to the populist communication style (H1a). The analysis shows that anti-elitist framing is by far the strongest predictor of EU-critical messaging ($OR = 9.207$, $p < .001$), which is consistent with the notion that the EU often functions as a symbolic elite in populist discourse (Bos, 2024; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Other elements, such as people-centrism ($OR = 1.841$, $p = .001$) and references to politically dangerous others ($OR = 1.772$, $p = .001$), also increased the likelihood of negative EU content though to a lesser extent.

In addition, posts published by populist actors were more likely to include anti-EU rhetoric ($OR = 7.898$, $p < .001$), supporting the idea that Eurosceptic messaging is closely intertwined with populist party communication (H1b; Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019). Beyond populism, two other rhetorical strategies were also linked to a higher likelihood of EU-critical content: fear-based language ($OR = 1.809$, $p = .002$) and the use of patriotic symbols ($OR = 1.282$, $p = .044$), pointing to the emotional and symbolic dimension of anti-EU appeals (H2 and H3). Lastly, posts that targeted the EU generated more comments ($OR = 1.282$, $p = .007$) though they did not significantly increase the number of reactions or shares.

The second part of the analysis examined how rhetorical strategies within anti-EU posts influenced user engagement (Table 2; RQ2, H4). Due to the skewness of the dependent variables, each type of engagement was estimated in three versions of the models to choose the best model for our data: first with original count values (i.e., negative binomial distribution, log link); second with log-transformed values of engagement

Table 2. Results for reactions, comments, and shares.

	Reactions						Comments						Shares					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2		
	b	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*
Intercept	6.684	.6041	<.001	6.526	.6065	<.001	4.362	.6293	<.001	4.043	.6168	<.001	4.527	.6702	.011	4.03	.6932	.009
Czechia	−1.296	.6077	.067	−1.292	.6083	.07	−.438	.6568	.516	−.432	.6575	.522	−1.461	.6669	.100	−1.454	.6668	.104
Hungary	−.318	.7933	.712	−.317	.793	.714	−.39	.912	.690	−.387	.9117	.692	.076	.7915	.928	.075	.7914	.928
Poland	−.542	.6019	.386	−.538	.6022	.389	.185	.6699	.783	.19	.6702	.778	−.453	.6418	.533	−.445	.642	.542
Neg. EU	.065	.0954	.499	.314	.2572	.241	.12	.0838	.158	.618	.308	.062	.05	.1323	.707	.901	.2492	<.001
Anti-elitism	−.065	.0658	.332	.06	.1494	.705	−.134	.0711	.085	−.16	.1058	.139	−.332	.0899	.002	−.087	.1669	.605
People-centrism	−.047	.0461	.323	−.119	.1314	.382	.005	.0508	.922	.008	.1339	.952	−.093	.0598	.131	−.064	.0813	.430
Ethnic danger	−.206	.1456	.159	−.2	.2462	.419	−.315	.1693	.067	−.344	.2713	.211	−.334	.1863	.084	−.262	.2828	.357
Political danger	−.126	.0596	.035	−.113	.1475	.447	−.175	.0637	.010	.029	.1278	.823	−.28	.0784	<.001	−.067	.1588	.672
Fear speech	.001	.0785	.985	.203	.0982	.041	−.101	.0829	.229	.256	.1415	.089	−0.118	0.0915	.212	.167	.133	.216
Patriotic symbols	.012	.0567	.841	.105	.1864	.583	.034	.0627	.593	.128	.2026	.532	−0.013	0.0523	.805	.104	.1909	.588
Neg. EU × Anti-elitism				−0.144	0.1436	.364				.036	.1021	.729				−.286	.1606	.109
Neg. EU × People-centrism				0.081	0.1458	.588				−.012	.149	.936				−.065	.1071	.550
Neg. EU × Ethnic danger				−0.057	0.2535	.830				−.069	.3696	.854				−.288	.2347	.228
Neg. EU × Political danger				−0.008	0.1609	.959				−.232	.1327	.082				−.242	.1778	.176
Neg. EU × Fear speech				−0.239	0.1142	.042				−.416	.1586	.016				−.33	.1389	.020
Neg. EU × Patriotic symbols				−0.099	0.183	.592				−.103	.1919	.594				−.126	.1869	.504

Table 2. (Cont.) Results for reactions, comments, and shares.

	Reactions						Comments						Shares					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2		
	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p	b	SE	p
N		6,159			6,159			5,934			5,934			5,472			5,472	
R^2 marginal		.081			.082			.022			.023			.134			.137	
R^2 conditional		.655			.655			.637			.638			.602			.603	
Adj. ICC		.624			.624			.629			.629			.540			.540	
−2LL		17,971.720			17,976.685			19,459.228			19,454.769			17,433.501			17,420.763	
AIC		17,975.722			17,980.687			19,463.230			19,458.771			17,437.503			17,424.765	
BIC		17,989.168			17,994.131			19,476.601			19,472.140			17,450.711			17,437.971	

Notes: Reference category for countries–Slovakia;Values of reactions, comments, and shares are based on their log-transformed values, with random intercept controls for the level of actors.

(i.e., normal distribution, identity link); and third with square root-transformed values of engagement (i.e., normal distribution, identity link). After fitting these three sets of models, we compared the information criteria of all alternative models with their respective null models. Table E in the Supplementary File summarises this process. Again, the alternative models with log-transformed engagement values best fit all three types of engagement.

When looking at how different populist elements relate to user engagement, political danger framing was the only element consistently associated with lower levels of engagement (Model 1 only; reactions: $b = -.126$, $p = .035$; comments: $b = -.175$, $p = .010$; shares: $b = -.280$, $p < .001$). In other words, posts that refrained from highlighting political danger were more engaging; however, the effects were no longer significant in Model 2 when interactions were included, which indicates that the effect may disappear in combinations of rhetorical strategies. Similarly, anti-elitist posts had fewer shares ($b = -0.332$, $p = .002$), but only in Model 1.

Furthermore, fear speech had a positive main effect on reactions in Model 2 only ($b = .203$, $p = .041$), meaning that posts including fear speech induced more reactions. Model 2 also revealed that anti-EU posts generated more shares ($b = .901$, $p < .001$). No other variables had significant main effects.

In Model 2, we tested whether rhetorical strategies generated engagement when presented with negativity toward the EU. Significant interaction effects were observed between fear speech and anti-EU messaging across all types of engagement. The interaction was negative, indicating that combining fear speech with negativity toward the EU reduced the amount of reactions ($b = -.239$, $p = .042$), user comments ($b = -.416$, $p = .016$), and shares ($b = -.330$, $p = .020$).

Other interactions were non-significant across all models. Additionally, there were no differences in engagement between countries.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on insights specifically from studies of negative campaigning (Nai, 2021; Reiter & Matthes, 2022; Surlin & Gordon, 1977) and populist communication (Bos, 2024; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Jost et al., 2020), this study explored how anti-EU rhetoric was deployed during the 2024 EP elections in the Visegrád region. By focusing not only on verbal but also on emotional and symbolic strategies, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of online campaigning in low-salience, second-order elections.

Our research demonstrates that anti-EU rhetoric in the Visegrád region's EP campaigns is far less country-specific than expected. Only Hungary, which is typical for strong Euroscepticism, showed stronger negativity toward the EU once we controlled for actors and the populist party's effects. This means that Hungarian political actors were more likely to engage in anti-EU campaigning. However, Hungarian posts contained fewer negative references to the EU, overall, likely due to overlapping municipal elections and the method of systematic random sampling. This suggests that the EU critique in Hungary is not confined to fringe or populist actors but it is more deeply rooted in the broader political landscape, where different political actors express various forms of EU criticism. Moreover, critical messaging is likely amplified by parallel channels, such as affiliated influencers or media networks like Megafon which fall outside the scope of our data (Bene & Juhász, 2025).

Despite notable differences in party landscapes, levels of Euroscepticism, and political actors across the V4, our findings reveal several shared trends. These resonate with earlier work and suggest that populist discourse, mainly targeting EU institutions as elitist and detached from people, transcends national contexts (Holtz-Bacha & Johansson, 2022; Styczyńska & Meijer, 2024). Anti-elitist framing emerged as the most consistent predictor of anti-EU rhetoric, reaffirming the role of the EU as a symbolic elite within populist discourse (Kneuer, 2019; Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn & van Kessel, 2019). People-centric appeals and portrayals of political opponents as dangerous also played a role, whereas references to ethnic or cultural "others" did not. This marks a mild departure from earlier findings that emphasised xenophobic or ethnically framed threat narratives in anti-EU rhetoric (Styczyńska & Meijer, 2024).

Furthermore, across the region, anti-EU posts employed emotionally laden patriotic visuals (Farkas et al., 2022) and fear-based language (Nai et al., 2022), reflecting a broader populist strategy that leverages emotional appeals and national pride (Bos, 2024). These elements are also commonly associated with higher engagement on social media alongside negativity and elements of populist communication (Balaban et al., 2024; Bene et al., 2022; Tønnesen et al., 2025). However, our findings challenge this assumption and previous research, even in the context of the EP election (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene et al., 2022). While posts that feature fear speech alone elicited a slight increase in reactions, their combination with anti-EU messaging reduced engagement. Importantly, other rhetorical strategies (including anti-elitism, people-centric framing, and patriotic symbolism) did not show positive effects on engagement either. In the case of political danger framing, they were even associated with lower interaction. An exception was general anti-EU messaging, which was associated with a slight increase in user comments, suggesting that such content (without additional emotional elements) may trigger deliberative responses. Overall, this contradicts the prevailing findings in populist communication and negative campaigning research, which often link emotional appeals to increased interaction (Jost et al., 2020; Nai et al., 2022).

The likely explanation may lie in EP elections (Heidenreich et al., 2022), where political interest and involvement tend to be low. In such settings, emotionally intense or complex content may not spark user engagement but lead to avoidance (Ansolabehere et al., 1994). Research on EP elections shows that Eurosceptic parties can benefit from more online activity and engagement (Baranowski et al., 2022; Daniel & Obholzer, 2025), primarily through negative and populist messaging. However, our findings suggest that such rhetorical strategies are not reliably effective in boosting engagement, particularly when fear and negativity are combined. This highlights how even emotionally charged rhetoric may lose its impact when audiences are less attentive or more selective, as is often the case in second-order elections.

These insights prompt a reevaluation of the presumed mobilising power of negative content. They suggest that in the EP context, negativity or emotion does not guarantee broader audience mobilisation and, consequently, increased reach. This suggests emotional intensity may be ineffective in low-engagement settings.

These patterns should be understood in the context of a broader digital landscape. While Facebook remains a key platform in V4, others, like TikTok, are gaining prominence (Newman et al., 2024). Platform choice is strategic: Recent research shows that moderate candidates diversify across platforms, while radical actors dominate specific ones (Daniel & Obholzer, 2025). For instance, Czech politician Filip Turek, an openly anti-EU, right-wing politician, avoided Facebook and mobilised young male voters via TikTok and Instagram. His coalition's success (10% of the vote) shows that such messages can bypass Facebook and still gain

traction. These cases highlight the need for multi-platform research to capture varied communication strategies and platform-specific dynamics.

Besides this, our study has several limitations. First, since we only captured the pre-election period, future comparative research in the region should also examine how campaigning evolves in different periods. Second, engagement metrics provide only a partial view of audience response. They do not capture the nuance of attitudes, interpretations, or offline behavior, and they are shaped by algorithmic filtering. In addition, the possibility of artificial amplification through bots, coordinated sharing, or paid promotion complicates the assessments of what constitutes genuine user interaction.

From a methodological perspective, our analysis highlights social media data's complexities. Although our sample included over 6,000 posts, key rhetorical features were rare or unevenly distributed. Engagement metrics were skewed, with few posts receiving the most attention. Furthermore, excluding zero-engagement posts may have introduced a particular selection bias, particularly if certain types of content such as anti-EU messages, are generally less likely to elicit interaction. We recognise this as a limitation for interpreting overall engagement. At the same time, only posts with engagement revealed interpretable patterns across V4 countries which may indicate that even minimal user response helps distinguish communicatively relevant messages from other electoral content. Finally, while some rhetorical strategies showed significant effects, the patterns were inconsistent across countries. They sometimes emerged in very low counts in certain clusters of countries and actors, making it challenging to identify cross-national trends.

Even with these constraints, our study brings valuable insights into negative campaigning and populist rhetoric in European politics, highlighting how anti-elitist anti-EU messages resonate in the region. It also challenges assumptions about the effectiveness of negative and emotionally intense content in mobilising audiences, particularly in the context of the EP election. As debates over Europe's future continue, it is crucial not only to track how often populist or anti-EU messages appear but also to assess their impact on public attitudes and behavior.

Acknowledgments

Funding

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used the professional version of ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4, team subscription) and Grammarly for language refinement, style edits, and to consult aspects of statistical interpretation. The authors critically assessed all outputs.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

References

Alonso-Muñoz, L., & Casero-Ripollés, A. (2020). Populism against Europe in social media: The Eurosceptic discourse on Twitter in Spain, Italy, France, and United Kingdom during the campaign of the 2019 European Parliament election. *Frontiers in Communication*, *5*, Article 54. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2020.00054

Ansolabehere, S., Iyengar, S., Simon, A., & Valentino, N. (1994). Does attack advertising demobilize the electorate? *American Political Science Review*, *88*(4), 829–838. https://doi.org/10.2307/2082710

Balaban, D. C., Macková, A., Burai, K., Grechanaya, T., & Gërguri, D. (2024). The relationship between topics, negativity, and user engagement in election campaigns on Facebook. *Politics and Governance*, *12*, Article 8098. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8098

Baranowski, P., Kruschinski, S., Russmann, U., Haßler, J., Magin, M., Bene, M., Ceron, A., Jackson, D., & Lilleker, D. (2022). Patterns of negative campaigning during the 2019 European election: Political parties' Facebook posts and users' sharing behaviour across twelve countries. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *20*(4), 375–392. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2022.2115598

Bene, M., Ceron, A., Fenoll, V., Haßler, J., Kruschinski, S., Larsson, A. O., Magin, M., Schlosser, K., & Wurst, A. K. (2022). Keep them engaged! Investigating the effects of self-centered social media communication style on user engagement in 12 European countries. *Political Communication*, *39*(4), 429–453. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2022.2042435

Bene, M., & Juhász, V. (2025). The long-range character assassination machine: The role of Megafon's astroturf influencers in the 2022 pro-government campaign in Hungary. *American Behavioral Scientist*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642251344210

Bil-Jaruzelska, A., & Monzer, C. (2022). All about feelings? Emotional appeals as drivers of user engagement with Facebook posts. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(1), 172–184. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i1.4758

Billig, M. (1995). *Banal nationalism*. Sage.

Bos, L. (2024). Populist rhetoric: Concepts, uses, and contexts. In D. Jackson, B. Kalsnes, D. G. Lilleker, C. Mellado, F. Trevisan, & A. Veneti (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of political campaigning* (1st ed., pp. 13–25). Routledge.

Brosius, A., van Elsas, E. J., & de Vreese, C. H. (2018). Trust in the European Union: Effects of the information environment. *European Journal of Communication*, *34*(1), 57–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118810843

Buštíková, L., & Guasti, P. (2018). The state as a firm: Understanding the autocratic roots of technocratic populism. *East European Politics and Societies*, *33*(2), 302–330. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418791723

Charvát, J., Charvátová, D., & Niklesová, E. (2022). Populism as a communication strategy: A case study of the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party and Tomio Okamura. *Communication Today*, *13*(2), 107–120. https://communicationtoday.sk/wp-content/uploads/07_CHARVAT-et-al_CT-2-2022.pdf

Charvátová, D., & Filipec, O. (2022). The populist construct of migration: Framing within SPD's communication strategy ahead of the 2019 European elections. *Politické Vedy*, *25*(4), 43–68. https://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2022.25.4.43-68

Csehi, R., & Zgut, E. (2021). 'We won't let Brussels dictate us': Eurosceptic populism in Hungary and Poland. *European Politics and Society*, *22*(1), 53–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1717064

Daniel, W. T., & Obholzer, L. (2025). Social media campaigning across multiple platforms: evidence from the 2024 European elections. *West European Politics*. Avance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2025.2501464

Dubóczi, P., & Ružičková, M. (2023). *Disinformation landscape in Slovakia*. EU DisinfoLab. https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/disinformation-landscape-in-slovakia

Engesser, S., Ernst, N., Esser, F., & Büchel, F. (2017). Populism and social media: how politicians spread a fragmented ideology. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(8), 1109–1126. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1207697

Enli, G. S., & Skogerbø, E. (2013). Personalized campaigns in party-centred politics: Twitter and Facebook as arenas for political communication. *Information, Communication & Society*, *16*(5), 757–774. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.782330

Farkas, X., Jackson, D., Baranowski, P., Bene, M., Russmann, U., & Veneti, A. (2022). Strikingly similar: Comparing visual political communication of populist and non-populist parties across 28 countries. *European Journal of Communication*, *37*(5), 545–562. https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231221082238

Havlík, V. (2011). A breaking-up of a pro-European consensus: Attitudes of Czech political parties towards the European integration (1998–2010). *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *44*(2), 129–147. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2011.04.003

Havlík, V., & Kaniok, P. (2016). Populism and euroscepticism in the Czech Republic: Meeting friends or passing by? *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, *16*(2), 20–35.

Havlík, V., & Kluknavská, A. (2024). The race of populists: The 2024 EP elections in the Czech Republic. In G. Ivaldi & E. Zankina (Eds.), *2024 EP elections under the shadow of rising populism*. European Center for Populism Studies. https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0066

Heidenreich, T., Eisele, O., Watanabe, K., & Boomgaarden, H. (2022). Exploring engagement with EU news on Facebook: The influence of content characteristics. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(1), 121–132. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i1.4775

Hloušek, V., Meislová, M. B., & Havlík, V. (2024). Emotions of fear and anger as a discursive tool of radical right leaders in Central Eastern Europe. *Frontiers in Political Science*, *6*, Article 1385338. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1385338

Holtz-Bacha, C., & Johansson, B. (2022). Attacking each other, attacking Europe: Negative advertising in the 2019 European election. In E. Novelli, B. Johansson, & D. Wring (Eds.), *The 2019 European electoral campaign: In the time of populism and social media* (pp. 125–142). Palgrave Macmillan.

Horowitz, I. A. (1969). Effects of volunteering, fear arousal, and number of communications on attitude change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *11*(1), 34–37. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/h0027024

Huang, J. (2024). The digital fabric of nationalism: How social media weaves banal nationalism into everyday life. *Advances in Social Behavior Research*, *8*(1), 60–65. https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7102/8/2024074

Humprecht, E., Amsler, M., Esser, F., & Van Aelst, P. (2024). Emotionalized social media environments: How

alternative news media and populist actors drive angry reactions. *Political Communication*, *41*(4), 559–587. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2350416

Jagers, J., & Walgrave, S. (2007). Populism as political communication style. *European Journal of Political Research*, *46*(3), 319–345. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00690.x

Jost, P., Maurer, P., & Hassler, J. (2020). Populism fuels love and anger: The impact of message features on users' reactions on Facebook. *International Journal of Communication*, *14*, 5157–5179.

Kiratli, S. (2023). Social media effects on public trust in the European Union. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *87*(3), 749–763. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfad029

Klingová, K. (2020). *Exploiting historical grievances and fears: Disinformation narratives in Central Europe*. Security and Human Rights Monitor. https://www.shrmonitor.org/exploiting-historical-grievances-and-fears-disinformation-narratives-in-central-europe

Kneuer, M. (2019). The tandem of populism and Euroscepticism: A comparative perspective in the light of the European crises. *Contemporary Social Science*, *14*(1), 26–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2018.1426874

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.

Maier, J., Nai, A., & Verhaar, N. (2025). More negative when it matters less? Comparing party campaign behaviour in European and national elections. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *32*(9), 2307–2329. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2404154

Marchal, N., Neudert, L., Kollanyi, B., & Howard, P. (2021). Investigating visual content shared over Twitter during the 2019 EU Parliamentary election campaign. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 158–170. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i1.3421

Martella, A., & Bracciale, R. (2022). Populism and emotions: Italian political leaders' communicative strategies to engage Facebook users. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, *35*(1), 65–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2021.1951681

Mattes, K., & Redlawsk, D. P. (2014). *The positive case for negative campaigning*. University of Chicago Press.

Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*(4), 541–563. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

Nai, A. (2021). Fear and loathing in populist campaigns? Comparing the communication style of populists and non-populists in elections worldwide. *Journal of Political Marketing*, *20*(2), 219–250. https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2018.1491439

Nai, A., & Maier, J. (2021). The wrath of candidates: Drivers of fear and enthusiasm appeals in election campaigns across the globe. *Journal of Political Marketing*, *23*(1), 74–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2021.1930327

Nai, A., Medeiros, M., Maier, M., & Maier, J. (2022). Euroscepticism and the use of negative, uncivil and emotional campaigns in the 2019 European Parliament election: A winning combination. *European Union Politics*, *23*(1), 21–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/14651165211035675

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Arguedas, A. R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2024). *Digital news report 2024*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism; University of Oxford. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024

Papp, Z., & Patkós, V. (2019). The macro-level driving factors of negative campaigning in Europe. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *24*(1), 27–48. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218803426

Petrović, N., Raos, V., & Fila, F. (2023). Centrist and radical right populists in Central and Eastern Europe: Divergent visions of history and the EU. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, *31*(2), 268–290. https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2022.2051000

Pirro, A. L., & Taggart, P. (2018). The populist politics of Euroscepticism in times of crisis: A framework for analysis. *Politics*, *38*(3), 253–262. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718770579

Quarfoot, D., & Levine, R. A. (2016). How robust are multirater interrater reliability indices to changes in frequency distribution? *The American Statistician*, *70*(4), 373–384. https://doi.org/10.1080/00031305.2016.1141708

Reiter, F., & Matthes, J. (2022). How partisanship matters: A panel study on the democratic outcomes of perceived dirty campaigning. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(4), 247–260. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5672

Rooduijn, M., & Pauwels, T. (2011). Measuring populism: Comparing two methods of content analysis. *West European Politics*, *34*(6), 1272–1283. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2011.616665

Rooduijn, M., & van Kessel, S. (2019). Populism and Euroskepticism in the European Union. In E. Hannah (Ed.), *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*. https://oxfordre.com/politics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1045

Russmann, U., Klinger, U., & Koc-Michalska, K. (2024). Personal, private, emotional? How political parties use personalization strategies on Facebook in the 2014 and 2019 EP election campaigns. *Social Science Computer Review*, *42*(5), 1204–1222. https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393241254807

Ruzza, C., Berti, C., & Cossarini, P. (Eds.). (2021). *The impact of populism on European institutions and civil society: Discourses, practices, and policies*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Scheller, S. (2019). The strategic use of fear appeals in political communication. *Political Communication*, *36*(4), 586–608. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1631918

Schertzer, R., & Woods, E. T. (2021). #Nationalism: The ethno-nationalist populism of Donald Trump's Twitter communication. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *44*(7), 1154–1173. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1713390

Schill, D. (2012). The visual image and the political image: A review of visual communication research in the field of political communication. *Review of Communication*, *12*(2), 118–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2011.653504

Styczyńska, N., & Meijer, J. D. (2024). The 'pure polish people' vs the 'European elite'—How do populism and Euroscepticism interact in Polish politics? *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, *32*(4), 1033–1046. https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2251000

Surlin, S. H., & Gordon, T. F. (1977). How values affect attitudes toward direct reference political advertising. *Journalism Quarterly*, *54*(1), 89–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769907705400113

Szczerbiak, A., & Taggart, P. (2024). Euroscepticism and anti-establishment parties in Europe. *Journal of European Integration*, *46*(8), 1171–1191. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2024.2329634

Szebeni, Z., & Salojärvi, V. (2022). "Authentically" maintaining populism in Hungary—Visual analysis of prime minister Viktor Orbán's Instagram. *Mass Communication and Society*, *25*(6), 812–837. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2022.2111265

Tønnesen, H., Bene, M., Haßler, J., Larsson, A. O., Magin, M., Skogerbø, E., & Wurst, A.-K. (2025). Between anger and love: A multi-level study on the impact of policy issues on user reactions in national election campaigns on Facebook in Germany, Hungary, and Norway. *New Media & Society*, *27*(4), 2313–2335. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231208122

Végh, Z. (2018). From pro-European alliance to Eurosceptic protest group? The case of the Visegrad Group. *Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies*, *2018*(7), 1–12. https://sieps.se/media/zudfpikt/2018_7epa.pdf

About the Authors

Alena Pospíšil Macková is an assistant professor at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University. Her research focuses on political communication, social media, news consumption, and political attitudes.

Lucie Čejková is a junior researcher and a PhD candidate at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University. She focuses on conspiracy thinking among news media audiences with a particular interest in media and political attitudes.

Martina Novotná is an assistant professor at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University. Her research focuses on online political expressions and interactions, emphasizing the role of cross-cutting discussions, polarization, incivility, and intolerance.

Krisztina Burai is a junior research fellow at HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences, and a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Political Science at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Her research focuses on political communication, social media, and news consumption.

Paweł Baranowski is an assistant professor and deputy director at the Institute of Journalism and Social Communication, University of Wrocław. He co-edits *Dziennikarstwo i Media* journal and collaborates on international research projects. His interests include political communication, journalism studies, social media, advertising, and emerging communication technologies.

Michal Garaj is an assistant professor at the Institute of Political Science and Public Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. He is interested in research on political parties in the region of Central and Eastern Europe and political participation.