Patterns of Polarizing Communication During COVID-19: Emotionality, Incivility, Conflict, and Negativity in Facebook Posts of Government and Opposition Leaders

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Contemporary politics has been filled with increasing political disagreements beyond opinion contestation essential for democratic competition. This study examines the polarizing communication of government and opposition leaders on the social networking site Facebook in the Czech Republic during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bringing a communication approach to the social identity perspective on polarization, we conceptualize polarizing communication as simultaneous expressions of in-group favoritism toward allies and out-group hostility toward opponents in political messages. We empirically examine the role of negativity and affiliation with a populist party and the government in using polarizing communication during different pandemic waves. We use the data from a manual content analysis (n = 1,581) of social media content created by government actors (prime minister, ministers) and leaders of opposition parties (2020–2021). Our results reveal that polarizing communication during a crisis is associated with the use of incivility and conflict in political messages, and its usage depends on the characteristics of political actors driving it, with populist and opposition leaders employing polarizing communication more.

Keywords: polarizing communication, emotionality, incivility, conflict, negativity, government, populist, COVID-19

Contemporary politics has been filled with increasing disagreements and hostile discursive attacks against political opponents beyond opinion contestation essential for democratic competition (Egelhofer, Aaldering, & Lecheler, 2021). Political elites have grown distant from each other, increasingly dislike the opposing political camp, and use harsh and uncivil rhetoric (Meeks, 2020). At the same time, politicians voice support for their parties and employ positive attributions to members of their own in-groups (Russell, 2021). Denouncing adversarial and praising congenial opinions may contribute to societal cleavages and

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foster polarization between those who are presented as "right" and "wrong" (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022). Yet, we know less about how potentially polarizing messages are communicated to the public by politicians on social media.

To fill this gap, we examine the polarizing communication of government and opposition leaders on the social networking site Facebook in the Czech Republic during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bringing a communication approach to the social identity perspective on polarization (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012), we propose the conceptualization of polarizing communication as simultaneous expressions of in-group favoritism toward allies and out-group hostility toward opponents. We thus look beyond the understanding of polarization as the outcome of partisan identities and extend its understanding as a communicative strategy of social identities: Politicians concurrently express positive sentiments toward their in-groups and negative sentiments toward those perceived to be affiliated with the opposing camp (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018).

We consider different conditions that potentially shape polarizing communication of political leaders online and empirically investigate three theoretical areas. First, we focus on the role of negativity (i.e., negative emotionality, incivility, conflict, and negative tone) in employing polarizing political messages on social media. Second, we explore the role of political actors driving such communication, particularly the characteristics of populist politicians and affiliation with the government. Third, we investigate the differences in polarizing communication during different pandemic waves. Our results indicate that polarizing communication in politicians' online messages is not frequent but tends to be associated with incivility and conflict and is driven by populist and opposition actors, particularly the populist radical right. This investigation is important because although existing research on political elite communication suggests variations among parties in their use of anti-elitism and attacks against their opponents (Valli & Nai, 2022) as well as the expressive elements associated with such adversarial messages (e.g., Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020), we know little about what conditions the use of polarizing communication, especially in a crisis context.

The case of the Czech Republic during several COVID-19 pandemic waves presents us with a suitable study to examine the polarizing communication during an exceptionally impactful public crisis. Although the global outbreak of COVID-19 has been challenging for countries worldwide, Czechia, after the successful handling of the first wave of the pandemic, became one of the worst-affected countries (Buštíková & Baboš, 2020). As crises often trigger the deepening of polarized perceptions of "us" versus "them" in society (Wodak, 2021) and the public often uses elite cues in forming their opinion (e.g., Zaller, 1992), political leaders' communication during the pandemic was essential for compliance with measures to the spread of the virus (Box-Steffensmeier & Moses, 2021).

In what follows, we underline the relevance of politicians' direct communication on social media (Gross & Johnson, 2016) and offer a conceptualization of polarizing communication, advancing the understanding of potentially polarizing messages in three aspects: first, we look beyond the simple "going negative" toward opponents in campaign messages (e.g., Nai, 2020), recognizing identity and affective elements in politicians' communication; second, by formulating how negativity can potentially shape polarizing communication, we consider both its content and style, thus reflecting polarization of public

debate more comprehensively; and third, we look at the role of contextual factors, particularly actors' characteristics, and different crisis stages, in using polarizing communication. We discuss the results from a manual content analysis of Facebook posts (n = 1,581) published by government and opposition politicians in the Czech Republic during a timeframe covering the three COVID-19 waves (March and November 2020, March 2021).

Polarization and Direct Communication of Politicians on Social Media

Empirical research concerning polarization and communication has mainly dealt with the relationship between polarization and the media, specifically focusing on social networking sites (e.g., Yarchi, Baden, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Social media has become a channel for communication of challenger and incumbent political actors, in both election and nonelection periods, with politicians promoting their issue positions, demonstrating beneficial personality traits, organizing, mobilizing, and building relationships with adherents (Stier, Bleier, Lietz, & Strohmaier, 2018).

The technological affordances of social media and the logic of algorithms create an environment where certain types of content and communication styles are more visible and have a more significant impact. Whereas some politicians might not be able to attract considerable attention (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013), social media seem to favor those who apply conflict-driven, anti-elite, hostile, or uncivil communication (e.g., Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2019). Its environment provides an ideal space for politicians to fuel animosities by using polarizing language and building on affective distinctions between political enemies and allies.

Although there is growing interest in researching the link between the use of social media and polarization, a gap in the polarizing communication of political actors remains. Political polarization, often linked to partisanship, is mainly studied through partisan cues and polarizing rhetoric, particularly in the U.S. Congress (Russell, 2021), even when applied to crises such as the pandemic (Gardner & Russell, 2023). Researchers typically investigate social media messages' negative or hostile tone (Russell, 2021) and partisan differences in sentiment sharing, especially on Twitter (Box-Steffensmeier & Moses, 2021). Some studies also consider stylistic characteristics related to polarizing communication, such as incivility (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), but usually treat them as synonymous with polarizing messages, explored to understand its psychological and media triggers (Post, 2019). Overall, there is a relative scarcity of research on the role of politicians in polarization, especially outside the United States, and focused on online political communication.

Social Identity Approach to Polarization in Communication: Liking Allies and Disliking Opponents

Polarization generally describes a state or a trend of having two contradictory aspects, opinions, positions, or attitudes. Polarization has been traditionally considered from an ideological perspective as an increasing ideological distance and divergence in political views (e.g., Dalton, 1987). Such a perspective looks at policy-based divisions, in the public or among elites, considering differences between policy preferences and party ideologies.

We focus on the affective dimension of polarization, which considers the role of identity politics. Affective polarization is perceived as the extent to which people feel warmth toward their political allies and feel a lack of warmth or dislike toward their political opponents (Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2020; Iyengar et al., 2012). From a social identity perspective, in-group/out-group distinction triggers positive feelings for the in-group and negative out-group evaluations (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019). In this view, the world is divided into a liked in-group (one's party or members of the in-group), toward which one feels a positive sentiment, and a disliked out-group (the opposing party or opposing groups), toward which one feels negative sentiment. This group affiliation based on social identities can lead to a polarized "us" against "them" distinction: The supporters of the opposing political camps are perceived as threats to one's in-group and their way of life (Iyengar et al., 2012).

When we extrapolate affective polarization to political communication, politicians can strengthen in-group identities and increase negative affect toward the out-group by communicating about their allies and opponents. Through the creation of "us" against "them" division in the sense of own party, party supporters, and kindred publics versus opposition party, their supporters, and oppositional publics, politicians divide people into opposing camps, which increases polarization. Polarizing communication thus refers to the use of messaging by politicians that exacerbates divisions between different groups, creating a sense of belonging to the allied members of the in-group and animosity toward the oppositional out-groups.

The communicative expressions of liking and disliking of other actors in politicians' discourses can be manifested in attributing positive or negative characteristics to their allies and opponents. This way, politicians assess personal character and other traits or attribute evaluations to the behavior and activities of different political or public actors. Assigning positive references to kindred allies or negative references to adversarial opponents, politicians either praise or undermine their character, views, reputation, positions, credibility, motivations, and behavior or assign gratitude or blame for their actual or perceived successes and faults (De Nooy & Kleinnijenhuis, 2013; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011).

In their messages, politicians can voice support or assign responsibilities to certain political or public actors, expressing appraisals, or blame toward others. These evaluations can be presented concurrently in the same message: liking kindred and disliking antagonistic actors can occur simultaneously, potentially drawing a contrast between the two groups. Based on assumptions from affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012), such a strategy can increase perceived distance among groups and reinforce negative affect toward the group with which the information receiver does not identify. This can happen regardless of whether positive or negative evaluations are justified or employed as strategic partisan appraisals or anti-elite attacks. Politicians can share such content, unintentionally or strategically, as part of the tactics intended to mobilize support for a particular issue, policy, or candidate.

In this study, we argue that polarizing communication is characterized by the expressions of *concurrent* attributions of liking and disliking of political, public, and societal actors' characteristics or their actions in political messages: simultaneous discursive constructions of positive and negative evaluations of personality traits and actions of opponents and allies. As such, political elites can be crucial in spreading and nourishing polarizing content (Tucker et al., 2018).

The Role of Negativity in Polarizing Communication: Emotionality, Incivility, Conflict, and Tonality

Studies suggest that political communication has become overly negative (e.g., Klinger, Koc-Michalska, & Russmann, 2023), with politicians engaging in negative campaigning (Nai, 2020), using populist (Martella & Bracciale, 2022) and dramatic elements (Klinger et al., 2023), negative emotions, or us-them rhetoric (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020).

Negativity can be linked to polarizing communication through appeals to social identities. Because negativity appears to be an effective strategy (e.g., Nai, 2020), which can backfire under some circumstances (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011), politicians may be strategically incentivized to accentuate negativity when criticizing and praising political actors. To explore the use of negativity in polarizing communication, we are particularly interested in how such messages are expressed with negative emotions, incivility, conflict, and tonality.

Emotions play an essential role in shaping political and personal decision making, influence people's attitudes or behavior, and thus play a vital part in political communication (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019; Gerstlé & Nai, 2019; Nai & Maier, 2021). Politicians have strong incentives to reveal feelings because messages that ignite emotions are likely to be persuasive (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019). Although communication by populist actors is often claimed to be particularly emotional (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017), politicians across the political spectrum tend to employ emotional rhetoric (Klinger et al., 2023). They include emotions through framing, emotional disclosure of feelings, or technological affordances such as emotional reaction buttons (Park, Sang, Jung, & Stroud, 2021). Emoticons provide additional emotional cues beyond the text itself, clarifying the intended meaning of a message. On social media, they can be used to convey genuine emotions (Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). Politicians can use social media affordances that indicate negative emotions to appeal to people's identities and intensify the perceived divide between kindred and antagonistic actors.

Incivility has often been conceptualized through the lenses of a threat to democratic norms, seeing it as negative stereotyping or harmful content such as hate speech, dehumanization, and discrimination (Chen, 2017) or in terms of vulgar speech, considering it a violation of the norms of politeness (Mutz, 2015). We follow Rossini (2022), who distinguishes uncivil and intolerant content and defines incivility as a violation of communication rules by showing a deliberate lack of respect for an opponent or their opinions and arguments, the topic, or the situation by using rude, pejorative, offensive, vulgar, profane, or insulting language. Politicians are argued to increasingly use uncivil speech in their messages (e.g., Hwang, Kim, & Huh, 2014), strategically applying these elements in their communication to "fire up" the base of supporters by grabbing people's attention and making their messages more resonant with audiences (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). Polarizing communication can be associated with the use of incivility. The criticism and praise of political or public actors may be accompanied by uncivil language, signaling amazement or righteous outrage (Rossini, Stromer-Galley, & Zhang, 2021), and reinforcing social identities used to mobilize people around shared identities.

Conflict emphasizes disagreement and the opposition between parties, individuals, groups, or institutions in aims, values, and goals (Van der Goot, Kruikemeier, de Ridder, & Vliegenthart, 2024). Since the clash of political ideas and beliefs is at the heart of politics, politicians often use conflict framing in their messages to accentuate clashes with other politicians and parties or to emphasize fundamental political tensions (Auter & Fine, 2016). Although conflict is sometimes treated in terms of one-sided criticism of other elites (e.g., Van der Goot et al., 2024), we can also understand it as highlighting the fabricated or actual disagreement between involved actors, making it look like a simplistic competition instead of a consensus-driven process (Kim & Zhou, 2020). Conflict can thus be connected to polarizing communication: a conflict situation can be understood as a potential threat to an in-group by an out-group, and as such, it can affect the perception of the groups involved. Politicians might be incentivized to refer to these disagreements directly when expressing concurrent appraisals of and blame toward certain actors in their messages.

Negative tonality tends to emphasize elements of emergencies, failures, adverse outcomes, and crises, usually interpreted as a general or comprehensive message tone (Ernst et al., 2019). A rather straightforward link between negative tonality and communication has been identified, particularly in the context of anti-elite and antagonistic attacks (e.g., Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). Although some studies indicate that negativity has increased in online electoral campaigns (e.g., Klinger et al., 2023), the communication of political actors presents a mix of positively and negatively valenced messages. As polarizing communication mixes criticism and praise of other actors in a message, it is not clear whether the polarizing messages would be prevailingly framed negatively (i.e., in terms of crisis, urgency, or negative developments) or positively (i.e., in terms of success, achievements, or positive developments).

To explore the connection between the four negativity-related elements and polarizing communication, we pose the following question:

RQ1:   *To what extent are negative emotions, incivility, conflict, and negative tone associated with polarizing communication in the COVID-19 political messages?*

The Role of Political Leaders' Characteristics in Polarizing Communication: Government and Populist Actors

The government and populist affiliations of politicians can potentially influence the shape of polarizing communication. In the Czech case, the incumbent and populist characters of parties are not straightforwardly divided; both governing and opposition sides include actors considered populists in the literature.

In general, incumbent politicians are usually less likely to attack other political actors (e.g., Hansen & Pedersen, 2008) or, quite contrary, more likely to run positive campaigns (e.g., Nai, 2020). Moreover, during the crisis, government actors face questions over their legitimacy and possible consequences for their public support. They are thus expected to act decisively and manage the perception of the crisis in their public communication (Eisele et al., 2021). As incumbents need to be perceived as successful, they have incentives to appear less conflictive and more supportive of political and public handling of the crisis to boost compliance with government measures.

However, the main governing party during the COVID-19 crisis was ANO (in coalition with the Czech Social Democratic Party), considered populist (Havlík, 2019). On the one hand, populism is characterized by pronounced hostility toward elites and celebration of the people and is argued to thrive under crisis conditions (Mudde, 2007). This might increase accusations against elite actors and positive appraisals of societal and public actors' achievements (Ernst et al., 2019). However, when populist parties enter the national office, they tend to moderate, either to attract the most votes or to coexist in coalition governments (Akkerman, de Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016), which would decrease the presence of anti-elite attacks. Moreover, populist parties' reactions to changing circumstances vary depending on their abilities and strategies (Akkerman et al., 2016); the ANO party has focused on anti-party technocratic discourse and governance with a supposed preference for a majoritarian vision of democracy undisturbed by political quarrels (Havlík, 2019), which theoretically makes their involvement in conflictual communication less likely.

Further, the opposition politicians generally seek to replace the incumbents. For this reason, they have fewer incentives to run positive campaigns, and instead, they question and criticize the government's activities, hold them accountable for their actions and policies, and offer themselves as their alternatives (Seeberg, 2020; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011). This strengthens in-group belonging but also creates a distance from the opponents. It aims to turn people's attention to the government's failures and invites voters to disapprove of its competence in handling the issues (Seeberg, 2020). This was particularly important during the COVID-19 crisis when the public's attention to the measures undertaken by executives increased.

The presence of a populist radical right party in the opposition can also play a role in fostering polarizing communication. The party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), led by Tomio Okamura, intensively blamed decision makers by criticizing unsystematic policies implemented by the government (Buštíková & Baboš, 2020). As populist actors often present themselves as alternatives, their attacks could be accompanied by praising their own or societal achievements. To better understand the role of government and populist actors in polarizing communication, we pose the following question:

RQ2:   *To what extent do (a) government versus opposition political leaders and (b) populist versus nonpopulist political leaders differ in employing polarizing communication on social media?*

Polarizing Communication in the Czech Republic in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic

We further ask about the differences in polarizing communication during specific pandemic periods in Czechia. The pandemic started in China in late 2019 and has rapidly spread worldwide. Dramatic events, such as COVID-19, pose a severe threat to a system's basic values and norms and thus present significant challenges for political leaders who make decisions under time pressure and uncertain circumstances (Erhardt, Freitag, Filsinger, & Wamsler, 2021). Czechia reacted by adopting strict measures very early: a state of emergency (March 12, 2020), lockdown, the closure of schools, universities, or shops, movement restrictions, and border closure (Navrátil & Kluknavská, 2020). While the measures, combined with the high public solidarity, slowed down the spread of the virus within weeks, political leaders were criticized for failing to track the chain of infected people and secure enough protective equipment. The initial shock of the global

health crisis could have, however, also created a temporary rally-around-the-flag effect when politicians tend to lower their normal critical voices (Van Aelst & Blumler, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a series of several intensive waves spanning several years. The tendency of public opinion to remain favorable toward political leaders had begun to fade away in many countries as the pandemic progressed (e.g., Johansson, Hopmann, & Shehata, 2021). Similarly, initial attempts at political consensus soon turned to partisan politics and growing oppositional rhetoric (Garland & Lilleker, 2021). This included the Czech Republic, which had recorded more new cases per million inhabitants than any other country by mid-October 2020 (PAQ Research, 2021). The public decreased its willingness to comply with delayed and inconsistently communicated measures. As the regional and Senate elections approached in October 2020, political leaders focused on garnering votes, and the government waited to introduce further strict measures only after the election. This could have provided fertile ground for polarizing communication: politicians praise the good efforts of political and public actors but, at the same time, engage in partisan attacks to increase their legitimacy.

The animosities resulting from the crisis may have thrived under a long cycle of pandemic waves (Gardner & Russell, 2023), offering a rather aggressive tone of political discussion. In Czechia, the situation spiraled into a massive pandemic wave, with about 1.4 million COVID-19 cases (of 10.7 million inhabitants) recorded in March 2021, reaching the highest per capita infection and death toll rate globally. The government faced public criticism over the measures and delays in vaccination, which brought questions about the government's competency in handling the pandemic. These conditions could have offered favorable opportunities for intense criticism of political decision makers instead of praising positive achievements. Trying to understand the dynamics of different pandemic waves in polarizing communication, we pose the following research question:

RQ3:   Are there differences in polarizing communication during the different COVID-19 pandemic waves?

Methodology

Sample and Coding Procedure

Our study follows three distinctive periods during the COVID-19 pandemic, which differ in terms of confirmed cases, mortality as well as government measures, and public responses (PAQ Research, 2021): the first wave (March 2020), the second wave (November 2020), and the fourth wave (March 2021) of the pandemic.

The data for our study consists of a corpus of social media posts from the Facebook pages of the government actors (prime minister and ministers) and leaders of opposition parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies in the Czech Republic. We focus on Facebook as it is the most popular social networking site in Czechia for both the users (about 70% of citizens use Facebook; Štětka, 2021) and politicians, who use it as an important communication channel for reaching citizens and sharing their opinions publicly (Macková, Štětka, Zápotocký, & Hladík, 2018). In total, 24 politicians composed a pool of government (n = 15) and opposition (n = 9) politicians. Out of these, we include 15 politicians with an active (i.e., they posted

messages during our period) and public (i.e., not a personal account restricted to "friends") Facebook page during our study period: eight government actors and seven opposition leaders (see Table A1 in the Supplementary material; openly available at http://tiny.cc/wug3vz). We omitted seven government actors who did not use Facebook for public communication (e.g., four Ministers of Health during the first year of the pandemic; most were not professional politicians and did not engage in social media communication). We also omitted two opposition leaders: Ivan Bartoš, leader of the Czech Pirate Party (no active Facebook page), and Lubomír Volný, leader of the party Unified (elected to Parliament for SPD but left the party; Facebook deleted Volný's page after violating its rules).

We collected posts from three periods (March 2020, November 2020, and March 2021) through CrowdTangle (N = 3,523; CrowdTangle Team, 2020). From this sample, we manually selected all the posts in which COVID-19 was mentioned (n = 1,806) through keywords that directly (e.g., COVID-19, coronavirus, coronacrisis) or indirectly (e.g., social distancing, quarantine, isolation, crisis measures, vaccines, medicine such as Regeneron) refer to the pandemic. Our final sample includes 1,581 posts with the COVID-19 pandemic as a dominant topic: 737 posts from government actors and 844 posts from leaders of oppositional parties. By period, 855 posts were collected in March 2020, 229 in November 2020, and 497 in March 2021.

We then conducted a quantitative content analysis of politicians' posts. Three intensively trained coders coded the material using a detailed coding scheme (Supplementary material C). We coded all the posts in which COVID-19 was a dominant topic, manually excluding those posts where the topic was only mentioned. We coded the content created by a political leader, excluding reposts of other users. As textuality remains a pivotal part of political communication, we focused on the textual part of the message's content. We conducted several rounds of intensive training and an inter-coder reliability test, yielding satisfactory results (Krippendorff's Alpha above 0.7 for all variables: Table B1 in Supplementary material).

Dependent Variable

We base our dependent variable on the presence of polarizing communication, indicated by the simultaneous presence of at least one positive and one negative evaluation in the post (n = 84). For each Facebook post (a unit of analysis), we coded the presence of evaluation of any political or public actors. We focused on elite actors, including politicians, political parties, political figures, political institutions (domestic or foreign), economic actors (e.g., corporations), and public and societal actors (e.g., social movements, professional groups such as lawyers, medical doctors, experts, activists). For each post, we coded up to five evaluations (i.e., assessments of personal characteristics of a political, public, or societal actor or evaluations of actors' actions, behavior, or activities).

Independent Variables: Negativity, Government, Populist Actors, COVID-19

First, we coded variables related to negativity: (1) *emotionality*: the use of emoticons, which show any facial expressions, hand gestures, and hearts (emoticons showing objects were excluded), coded as a binary variable for the presence/absence of negative emotions (n = 45) and the presence/absence of positive emotions (n = 154); (2) *incivility* (n = 95): coded as vulgar or derogatory language, swear words, or insults, coded as a binary variable for each post, indicating its presence/absence in the post; (3) *conflict*

(n = 121): coded as the presence/absence of a frame explicitly emphasizing the actual or perceived conflict between policies, institutions, groups, people, or highlighting the societal or political divisions; (4) *tonality of the post*: the post's overall tonality, coded as positive (n = 463), indicating positive developments and success, or negative (n = 355), indicating negative situations and failures.

Second, to assess our research question on the differences between incumbents and opposition leaders, we classified politicians based on their affiliations with the government or the parliamentary opposition parties. We then included a dummy variable concerning the affiliation of politicians with populist parties based on the PopuList project's framework (Rooduijn et al., 2023). We coded Andrej Babiš (ANO) and Tomio Okamura (SPD) as populists. Last, specific periods during the COVID-19 pandemic were defined as calendar months: March 2020, November 2020, and March 2021.

Control Variables

We included two control variables in the analysis. First, we consider the type of Facebook post (i.e., if the post was a link, photo, video, or only text). The Facebook post can be composed as a status (only a text) or include (in addition to the text or without text) a link, photo, or video. We also included a dummy variable indicating whether the video in the post dealt with COVID-19 as a dominant topic (n = 219). This way, we can control the potential influence of visual elements in the post and visuals related specifically to the COVID-19 topic.

Data Analysis

We show results from descriptive statistics and multilevel logistic regression modeling. For the second level of analysis, we aggregated data according to pages-period logic (n = 45); the second level captures each politician (their Facebook page) during each of the three months in our analysis period. For formatting a regression table, we relied on the Stargazer (Hlavac, 2022) package in R.

Results

We start our analysis by overviewing descriptive results. During the three months included in the analysis, government and opposition leaders published 1,581 COVID-19-related Facebook posts. Of these, 553 posts (35%) contained at least one evaluation of another political actor. As one post can contain up to five different evaluations in our analysis, the total number of assessments made was 978, making it a bit more than one evaluation every second post. The government generally evaluated other actors in 17% of their posts (125 posts), while the opposition leaders evaluated them in 50.7% (428 posts). Populist actors made assessments in 34.3% of their posts (126 posts), while nonpopulist leaders made assessments in 35.2% of their posts (427 posts).

Table 1. Total Communication and Posts Containing Polarizing Communication During Three Different Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Politician	Position (Party affiliation)	Total posts	Polarizing communication			
			March 2020	November 2020	March 2021	Total
Andrej Babiš	Prime Minister (ANO)	14.2% (224)	6.8% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	3.6% (3)
Jan Hamáček	Interior Minister (Czech Social Democratic Party)	5.2% (83)	0% (0)	0% (0)	6.9% (2)	2.4% (2)
Alena Schillerová	Minister of Finance (ANO)	6.8% (107)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Karel Havlíček	Minister of Industry and Trade, Minister of Transport (ANO)	4.6% (73)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Tomáš Petříček	Minister of Foreign Affairs (Czech Social Democratic Party)	6.3% (99)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Jana Maláčová	Minister of Labor and Social Affairs (Czech Social Democratic Party)	6.3% (100)	4.5% (2)	9.1% (1)	3.4% (1)	4.8% (4)
Klára Dostálová	Minister of Regional Development (ANO)	0.3% (5)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Lubomír Zaorálek	Minister of Culture (Czech Social Democratic Party)	2.9% (46)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Government		**737**	5	1	3	**9**
Vojtěch Filip	Leader of Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM)	2.3% (36)	0% (0)	18.2% (2)	13.8% (4)	7.1% (6)
Petr Fiala	Leader of Civic Democratic Party (ODS)	12.4% (196)	15.9% (7)	9.1% (1)	13.8% (4)	14.3% (12)
Vít Rakušan	Leader of Mayors and Independents (STAN)	5.2% (83)	9.1% (4)	9.1% (1)	3.4% (1)	7.1% (6)
Tomio Okamura	Leader of Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD)	9.0% (143)	54.5% (24)	27.3% (3)	51.7% (15)	50.0% (42)
Marian Jurečka	Leader of Christian and Democratic Union—Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL)	13.0% (205)	2.3% (1)	27.3% (3)	3.4% (1)	6.0% (5)
Markéta Pekarová Adamová	Leader of TOP09	7.5% (119)	4.5% (2)	0% (0)	3.4% (1)	3.6% (3)
Václav Klaus	Leader of Tricolor Citizens' Movement (TSS)	3.9% (62)	2.3% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	1.2% (1)
Opposition		**844**	39	10	26	**75**
Total		**100% (1,581)**	100% (44)	100% (11)	100% (29)	**100% (84)**

In total, 84 of 1,581 posts contained polarizing communication (5.3%), which indicates that such communication is not overly prominent in the messages of political leaders (Table 1). Notably, government actors (1.2%, n = 9) have not extensively employed this form of communication in their posts compared with opposition leaders, who used polarizing communication in 8.9% of their posts (n = 75). Politicians employed polarizing communication in the first (March 2020) and third (March 2021) periods more than in the second (November 2020; Table 1). Populist actors used polarizing communication more (12.3%, n = 45) than nonpopulist leaders (3.2%, n = 39). Based on chi-square tests, the relationships between the government character of the actor ($p < 0.001$) and the populist character of the actor ($p < 0.001$) with polarizing communication were significant.

Table 2. Multilevel Logistic Regression Model.

	Dependent variable: Polarizing communication
Negative emoticons	1.869
	(0.706)
Positive emoticons	1.446
	(0.506)
Incivility	2.610**
	(0.356)
Positive tone	0.950
	(0.397)
Negative tone	1.115
	(0.350)
Conflict	3.098**
	(0.356)
Government	0.153***
	(0.435)
Populist	3.652***
	(0.356)
March 2020	1.032
	(0.344)
November 2020	1.291
	(0.427)
Link	0.668
	(0.537)
Photo	0.756
	(0.468)
Video	0.489
	(0.618)
COVID-19 video	3.247*
	(0.496)

Constant	0.043***
	(0.541)
Level 1 N (Facebook posts)	1,581
Level 2 N (Facebook pages-period)	45
Log Likelihood	−247.413
Akaike Inf. Crit.	526.826
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	612.679

Note. The reference category for the time period is March 2021, and the post type is "status." Reported odds ratios, with standard error in parenthesis.
*$p < 0.05$; > **$p < 0.01$; > ***$p < 0.001$.

To analyze our research questions, we show results from multilevel logistic modeling (Table 2) showing polarizing communication (vs. nonpolarizing communication) in politicians' Facebook messages. When we look at negativity-related stylistic characteristics (RQ1), our model indicates that polarizing communication is more likely to be associated with incivility ($b = 0.959$, $p < 0.01$, odds ratio = 2.610) and conflict frame ($b = 1.131$, $p < 0.01$, odds ratio = 3.098). Interestingly, the use of both negative ($b = 0.625$, $p = 0.376$, odds ratio = 1.869) and positive ($b = 0.369$, $p = 0.466$, odds ratio = 1.446) emoticons were positively connected to polarizing messages, yet the relationships were not significant. Unlike emotionality, only the negative tone of the messages ($b = 0.109$, $p = 0.756$, odds ratio = 1.115) showed a positive relationship to polarizing communication. Positive tonality ($b = −0.051$, $p = 0.897$, odds ratio = 0.950) was less likely to be employed in connection to these messages; however, these results were not significant.

About the character of actors (RQ2), we found that government actors ($b = −1.879$, $p < 0.001$, odds ratio = 0.153) were less likely to use polarizing communication in their communication in comparison to opposition leaders. Populist leaders ($b = 1.295$, $p < 0.001$, odds ratio = 3.652), on the other hand, showed much higher odds of employing polarizing messages compared with nonpopulist actors. Inquiring about the differences in polarizing communication during the different COVID-19 pandemic waves (RQ3), our results did not uncover a significant relationship. Still, they showed that the odds of using polarizing communication during the first two pandemic periods (March 2020, $b = 0.032$, $p = 0.926$, odds ratio = 1.032; November 2020, $b = 0.255$, $p = 0.550$, odds ratio = 1.291) in comparison to the third pandemic wave (March 2021) were slightly higher.

Controlling for visual elements in the analysis, we see that those posts that include a link, photo, or video had lesser odds of containing polarizing communication than those messages composed of only a text; these results were not significant. However, messages where COVID-19 was a dominant topic of the video included in the post ($b = 1.178$, $p < 0.001$, odds ratio = 3.247) were significantly more likely to contain polarizing communication.

Conclusion

Although contemporary politics and society have been considered to polarize, we know less about how politicians employ polarizing messages in their social media communication. Approaching polarizing

communication as a communicative strategy for expressing social identities in political messages, we examine the roles of negativity and the characteristics of politicians in using polarizing communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Polarizing communication is not frequently present in politicians' online communication but follows noticeable patterns. Our results reveal that polarizing communication is associated with incivility and conflict in political messages. As uncivil speech can attract peoples' attention, increasing the visibility and reach of politicians' posts (Kosmidis & Theocharis, 2020), polarizing communication expressed with incivility can further deepen the distances, alienate those with differing political beliefs, and contribute to public divisions on contentious issues (Rossini et al., 2021). Increasing the divide between different political factions and using uncivil language to emphasize group conflict can make it more difficult to find common ground and make political and societal deliberation possible. Polarizing communication using uncivil language can also potentially affect people's emotions, creating a sense of anger or fear when they feel their identities, beliefs, or values are threatened (Kim & Kim, 2019). This can provoke partisan citizenship (Gervais, 2019), feelings of disconnection from the political process, or lower trust in politicians and political institutions (Skytte, 2021). Similarly, emphasizing conflict in politics and society and highlighting incompatibilities between groups may not benefit democracy as it can foster polarization (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Deep disagreements could also hinder people from engaging in discussions, especially when connected to their social identities (De Ridder, 2021).

Even though we have not uncovered a significant relationship between emotionality and tonality with polarizing communication, our results suggest that politicians include both positive and negative emoticons to accentuate polarizing messages but mostly frame the posts negatively. The inclusion of emotions through technological affordances is interesting. Politicians have strong incentives to reveal feelings in their communication, as messages that ignite emotions are particularly likely to be effective and persuasive (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019). Moreover, studies suggest that negative messages are counterproductive as people usually dislike negative campaigns, especially when engaging in character attacks (Carraro, Gawronski, & Castelli, 2010; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011). Including positive emotions might thus foster positive feelings toward a positively evaluated group in the message (Nai & Seeberg, 2018).

Importantly, we showed that the affiliations of political actors with government or populist parties play an important role in how political leaders use polarizing communication. Although government actors are less likely to employ polarizing communication, populist affiliation increases the odds of leaders creating polarizing messages. In general, opposition politicians and populist leaders make anti-elitist attacks more often than mainstream politicians (e.g., De Bruycker & Rooduijn, 2021; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). However, the finding that populist and opposition actors not only criticize opponents and hold the decision makers accountable but also praise other political or public figures is significant, suggesting an active role of these actors in the potential polarization. Polarizing communication employed by populist leaders might be especially effective when communicated to their social media followers, as the research suggests that populist messages are likely persuasive when people identify with the sources of these messages (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Our findings also indicate that even though populist leaders included in our sample create polarizing messages to a greater extent, the usage appears to be driven mainly by the opposition actor, populist radical right politician

Tomio Okamura, and not by the governing populist party ANO. This finding suggests that the aspiration and participation of some populist actors in the government might effectively tame polarizing communication. It also implies that when populist parties become aware of the available opportunities, they might be incentivized to adapt their communicative strategies (Akkerman et al., 2016).

The polarizing communication could indicate a more general trend across European democracies. Political campaigns have become negative in tone and increasingly used attacks against political opponents (Nai, 2020), driven mostly by populists who are substantially more hostile and emotional toward their opponents (Nai, 2021), but as our results suggest, also polarizing. However, nonpopulist politicians' engagement in polarizing communication may reflect a new divide in political contestation (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022), created mostly as a response to perceived populist threats. A divide between illiberal politics and democratic forces has intensified political competition, contrasting populist challengers and anti-populist democratic defenders, for instance, in Greece, Italy, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.

Politicians' communication during crises plays a crucial role in shaping people's perceptions of societal events (Eisele et al., 2021), and it can contribute to societal polarization (Widmann, 2022). Our results did not reveal significant differences in the communication of polarizing messages throughout different COVID-19 waves in the Czech Republic. Yet, the first and second pandemic waves showed slightly higher chances of using polarizing communication, despite potential rallying around the flag effect (Van Aelst & Blumler, 2021). Moreover, the fourth pandemic wave was characterized by increased political and public tensions resulting from strict measures and mortality rates, creating conditions for increased discursive attacks against opponents and decision makers.

This study adds a dimension to the research on social identities in political communication and polarization. It contributes to our understanding of how political elites leverage social identities to intensify group divisions in their communication, suggesting that the use of positive and negative attributions serves as a tool to entrench partisan and societal divides. This expands our knowledge of how elites can strategically manipulate group identities, showing that the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups are not static but can be shaped by how leaders communicate.

From a normative perspective, our findings have ambivalent consequences for democracies. Although polarizing communication is not prevalent in the discourse of political actors, choosing to use polarizing messages may signify shifts in communication relating to broader societal and political environments. This is important, as elite cues are pivotal in shaping information in public debate, particularly on contentious issues filled with adopting extreme positions. Polarizing communication may increase affective polarization (Gidron et al., 2020; Guber, 2017) or drive the relativization of expert knowledge (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Instead of engaging in constructive discussions, assigning positive evaluations to those presented as "right" and negative assessments to those presented as "wrong" may make it harder to differentiate between actual and fabricated reality (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022).

There are limitations to our study. The case study and manual coding restrict the scale of the analysis and generalization of the findings. Future research should engage in larger-scale analyses to understand patterns across countries. Future research could also consider how various dimensions of

incivility relate to polarizing communication. Approaching emotions through technological affordances prompts research to investigate how politicians use emotionality to evaluate actors. Future research could also employ multimodal analysis or focus on the role of visuals in polarizing communication. Last, as elite polarization, addressed through ideological distances, increases societal polarization (e.g., Gidron et al., 2020), future research could analyze the effects of polarizing communication on citizens.

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