

# The rise of nativism in populist political communication: A case study of the Facebook communication strategy of Freedom and Direct Democracy during the 2021 Czech parliamentary elections

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**Abstract:** *The 2021 elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic brought a shift in populist political communication. While previous research has shown that the emphasis is on accentuating the theme of migration, the 2020 Senate elections have indicated that attention is shifting to patriotic themes. This was confirmed by the 2021 elections to the Chamber of Deputies, when nativism became a key element of populist political communication in the Czech Republic. The research included data from the hot phase of the campaign and two election days (8 and 10 October 2021) and focused on the populist political communication of the Freedom and Direct Democracy movement on Facebook.*

**Keywords:** *populist political communication, nativist discourse, argumentative strategy, Freedom and Direct Democracy, critical discourse analysis*

## Introduction

It is undeniable that in Western democracies, including the Czech Republic, populist parties have achieved considerable electoral success in recent years. Populist political actors are increasingly holding high positions of power, whether they be prime ministers or presidents. But successes are also being recorded by radical populist right-wing parties that now form an integral part

of parliamentary representation across Europe. Populists situate themselves as representatives of the voice of the people, using the narrative of a nation (the good people) in danger, both from evil elites and from some excluded, dangerous groups of 'others'. They come with an emotional, combative, desperate, negative rhetoric swept up in a wave of nationalism, patriotism and xenophobia. It is here that the political discourse of nativism is increasingly articulated.

Populist political actors articulate the nativist perspective as primarily concerned with preserving or restoring partial aspects of native (indigenous) culture, or building cultural unity (Mudde 2007), in response to perceptions of external threats. Populism in this communicated form has crossed the boundaries of xenophobia and transformed into a form of cultural nativism, which is meant to prevent the loss of cultural identity. In their communication, particularly but not only on social media, populist actors make full use of the narrative of a nation at risk (the populist pillar of the people), often in the context of the migration crisis. This is also the case with the communications of Tomio Okamura, chairman of the Freedom and Direct Democracy political party (hereinafter referred to as 'SPD').

Using the specific example of populist political communication of the SPD on the social network Facebook, we will look for expressions of the nativist approach and policy with the help of critical discourse analysis, as well as the argumentation strategies used in the communication line of nativism. First, using quantitative content analysis, contributions that can be described as populist will be selected,<sup>1</sup> which will then be submitted for qualitative content analysis. The research will include data from the so-called hot phase of the campaign, i.e. 14 days before the election, and the two days of the election itself. Thus, the period of time examined was from 24 September to 9 October 2021 inclusive. The results of the research present the individual elements of the communication and argumentation strategy used in the communication line of nativism, in addition to focusing on the portrayal of the populist dichotomy of us vs them, which manifests itself in the search for a common enemy that is as abstract as possible in order to focus general anger on it.

## Nativism

Nativism can be understood as an ideology,<sup>2</sup> a particular construction of nationalism (Guia 2016). It is often seen as a dangerous and aggressive ideology rooted in racism and populism (Riedel 2018: 18). In general, nativism is based on beliefs that nation-states should consist exclusively of indigenous, homogeneous groups of people, be monocultural, namely without the influence of foreign,

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1 In order to be labelled populist, they must bear the characteristics of at least one of the three populist pillars – the people, the elites or the 'other' group.

2 Originally, nativism was mainly associated with developments in North America (Katerberg 1995: 495).

non-indigenous cultures, religions, ideas and minority persons belonging to the populist pillar of the ‘others’ group (Schwörer & Fernández-García 2020), as a consequence of which it is necessary to protect the interests of indigenous peoples,<sup>3</sup> native culture and way of life from the possible influences mentioned above (Knoll 2018), and from potential cultural and economic harm (Gratton 2018; Zhao 2019).

The essence of nativism is deeply rooted in populist logic; populism and nativism exhibit some common elements, as a result of which the terms *nativism*, *nationalism* and *populism* can be confused and merged (Riedel 2018: 18). In addition, populists skilfully use traditional tools of populist and far-right actors in their communication, such as anti-EU attitudes, and appeals to ‘normality’ in the case of gender and family issues (Cabada 2021).

Populist political actors also use the image of a polarised society in their communication, i.e. the dichotomous construct of us vs ‘them’, two antagonistic groups, where the pure, uncorrupted people are contrasted with the construct of evil, corrupt elites and maladjusted ‘others’. In order to legitimise their positions (recognition of the dominance of the native population and culture), they apply an argumentative strategy of inducing fear and a sense of threat, or threat from the ‘others’ (non-natives). The idea of a culturally homogeneous society necessarily implies a negative attitude towards European integration, which leads to a loss of national identity and sovereignty. And the countries of the so-called Visegrad Group seem to be an example of a trend where nationalist and xenophobic sentiments have returned to the mainstream of Central European politics (Riedel 2018: 18–19).

## Data

The analysis covers the period before the 2021 elections to the Chamber of Deputies in the Czech Republic. The 2021 parliamentary elections took place in the spirit of a referendum on Andrej Babiš. This was underlined by the candidacy of a number of opposition parties in coalitions, from which these parties hoped for stronger electoral support. Otherwise, the key to the electoral success of the opposition parties was the necessity of a high voter turnout, which was eventually realised. The turnout was 5.4 million voters, or 65.43% of those eligible to vote. This was an above-average turnout, and the highest since 1998. Candidates from four parties entered the Chamber of Deputies, with SPD winning 9.56% of the vote, confirming its stable electoral support, which has been hovering around the 10% of the voters. As a result, the SPD earned 20 seats in the lower house, two fewer than in the previous elections.

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3 The definition of indigenous peoples is based on references to shared historical and cultural traditions (Mudde 2007).

While in the previous elections to the Chamber of Deputies in 2017, political campaigns were dominated by billboards, the handing out of leaflets, and also contact campaigning in stands in town squares (contact campaigns in the 2021 elections were significantly reduced by the Covid-19 pandemic), campaigns in 2021 shifted significantly to social media. ‘Political campaigns have expanded into many previously ignored media formats (video blogs, podcasts, small online media, social networks)’ (Transparency International 2022a: 4). A new phenomenon – the so-called lifestyle governance – which was introduced by the ANO and ČSSD coalition government, has emerged. However, this trend of misusing public functions with the application of product marketing on social media was on the edge of the law (Transparency International 2022b). There have also been abuses of civil servants in election campaigns. The most famous borderline case is the post made by Alena Schillerová, then minister of finance, who was photographed astride the bonnet of a Customs Authority car. Although the ANO movement was identified on social media as the advertiser, the posing of two members of the Customs Authority was problematic. The Office for Supervision of the Financing of Political Parties and Movements investigated everything, but found no wrongdoing (Rambousková 2022).

Pre-election surveys have shown that SPD spent CZK 79 million (cca EUR 4 million) on pre-election campaigning, making it the fourth highest-spending entity after the SPOLU coalition, the ANO party and the PirSTAN coalition. Okamura invested CZK 1.5 million of that amount in political advertising on social media, namely Facebook and Instagram (Scribbr 2022). From 8 August to 20 September 2021, Okamura increased the number of paid posts to 1632, which equates to 54 ads per week. Thus, he became the second most expensive electoral profile after that of Petr Fiala, the leader of the SPOLU coalition and later prime minister. Okamura bought 21 million impressions, while the total number of Facebook and Instagram users reached was 1.59 billion, with an average of 974,000 impressions per ad.<sup>4</sup> This is evidenced by massive proliferation and response generation among users, algorithm targeting, political advertising and systematic activation of the supporter community. Thanks to this, Okamura’s profile has seen an increase of 15,000 followers the six weeks before the election, which can be considered an eminent mobilisation success (Transparency International 2022b). The deliberate targeting of regional advertising was also evident. Okamura focuses on mobilising voters primarily from regions with socio-economic problems and an age of 65+, so it is not surprising that the highest number of paid posts in the political campaign occurred in the Moravian-Silesian and Ústí nad Labem regions, where Okamura was the

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4 To provide a point of reference, Petr Fiala bought 44 million impressions, but the reach was ‘only’ 243 million in stark contrast to Okamura’s numbers.

second most active advertiser after the then Prime Minister Babiš (Transparency International 2022b).

The quantitative content analysis of Okamura's Facebook communication was conducted on 158 posts with a total length of 39,167 words. Compared to the second-order elections (European Parliament 2019 and Senate and Regional Councils 2020), this is the highest number of shared posts.<sup>5</sup> On average, Okamura made 9.9 posts per day. The most posts in a day were eleven, which occurred on seven days. A long-term trend in Okamura's communication is the addition of a video or image attachment to individual posts. The amount of user reactions, whether likes or comments, was high. Users have given posts a total of 423,078 likes and commented on them a total of 71,673 times. Posts with image attachments had a total of 43,930 shares.<sup>6</sup>

For the primary classification of Okamura's media outputs on Facebook in terms of their relevance for further research, a quantitative content analysis method was chosen to help classify populist status. To be classified as populist, a message had to have at least one of the following characteristics: references to the people, the elites or the 'others', including references to popular sovereignty, direct referendum, elements of Euroscepticism, attacks on the media, nationalism or patriotic appeals. In Okamura's case, about 73% of the content bore the hallmarks of populism.

Even if the message did not bear signs of populist rhetoric, it was mostly a statement about selected events, including from the Chamber of Deputies, an invitation to watch Okamura's appearances on television or other media, or sharing experiences from the novelty of this election – Okamura's Czech Fair ('Český jarmark SPD'; SPD 2021). As part of his pre-election communications, Okamura distributed flyers with cheap food to his Czech Fairs, which were held in August and September 2021 in regional towns across the country. The advertising leaflets presented the sale of products of Czech farmers at fair prices, lower than in large supermarket chains. At the fairs themselves, however, it was impossible to determine the origin of the fruit and vegetables (yet, for example, cheap onions sold out at the first fair within two hours). Experts agreed that selling produce at these prices would not be profitable for farmers at all. At first the event functions as a market with cheap food, then there is political agitation, where individual representatives of the SPD party appear on stage (Janáková 2021). This way of supporting and promoting Czech food and farmers at election fairs, a nativist line of communication, also became one of the pre-election strategies to justify – in a generalising statement – the

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5 In the run-up to the 2019 European Parliament elections, there were 134 status updates, and before the 2020 Regional and Senate elections there were 124 posts.

6 Sharing could only be measured for image attachments, and only the number of views was reported for videos.

necessity of enforcing a law that would no longer make the Czech Republic an agricultural 'dependent colony':

We support Czech farmers and Czech food. What about you? The European Union has destroyed Czech agriculture. It is in a catastrophic condition. Zdeněk Jandajsek, a former president of the Agricultural Chamber and a successful farmer, pointed to the disastrous state of Czech agriculture, where we are not self-sufficient in terms of food, where farmers from Western Europe receive much larger subsidies, and where comparable Western European countries produce much more food and have made us a dependent colony. The facts below are alarming! This is why we are pushing for a law to support Czech food and farmers and also why we promote Czech farmers at our fairs! (Okamura 2021a)

Hence, the patriotic, or nativist, discourse in Facebook communication is built on the principle of traditional, or national, values. Primarily one can encounter the glorification of Czechism and everything originated in the Czech Republic (see e.g. the post above). One of the central points of the communicated manifesto is that 'The Czech Republic and a decent and working citizen come first! We cannot steal from our country!' (Okamura 2021b). However, patriotism also masks xenophobic views ('we love the Europe of free nations and Christian European civilisation. We do not want an Islamicized, do-gooder totalitarian European Union that is killing European nations and Christian European civilization!' (Okamura 2021c)) and are moreover adored as a moral value (ibid.).

In the analysed sample there are pseudo-argumentation strategies that were already used in the period before the European Parliament elections in 2019 (Charvátová & Niklesová 2020), as well as other strategies, such as the overuse of the possessive pronoun 'our', whether it is our nation, our culture, our traditions or our values. The communication is about promoting a narrative of the need to protect 'our safe home', 'our country' from evil 'outside' influences, such as 'the main points of the manifesto called "Our Country, Our Family, Our Safe Home" are the promotion of family and traditional values and national sovereignty. We will protect our nation and our state' (Okamura 2021d). This work with fear (among other things, the purposeful conjuring up of images of a possible state of war) is often combined with a description of how to cope with a difficult situation. Part of the communication includes considerations of the need to build a strong military that will be able to protect 'our' commodities and wealth from hostile 'outside' influences. In terms of rhetorical strategies, the hot phase of the campaign is dominated by the repetition of key words, a suggestive speech device in the form of repetition of the same or synonymous terms ('support'/'supporting', 'protection'/'protect', 'our'/'ours' state/country/territory/border).

Traditional nativist culture is highly idealised and contrasted with the dangerous uncivilised culture of the ‘other’ group, which is most often brought by refugees (see picture) or members of the LGBT+ group. In these types of posts, traditional irrational means and strategies (hypothetical threats, working with fear, emotions and ideas, etc.) are used to persuade the formation of attitudes and opinions, which can be classified as a ‘flawed argument’. This is in particular an argumentum ad baculum, used to ‘induce fear and terror’ (Szymanek 2003: 55).

An example of this line of argumentation is the narrative of the traditional family, which is threatened by gender. The threat here is represented by the discursive construct of the dangerous and excluded LGBT+ group, which represents a distinct specificity of the period under study. The SPD party has articulated family first as one of its main election slogans, with members of the LGBT+ group being accused in communications of threatening the values of the majority society, identity and people’s rights. The discourse of LGBT+ and gender ideology also serves as a tool to discredit the elites because of their views and attitudes on the issue. Although there was a partial tendency to distance oneself from xenophobic attitudes in the statement below, we get a hint of the prevailing viewpoint of the addressee.

the definition of gender ideology; Gender ideology claims that gender is a construct and is arbitrarily selectable regardless of biological characteristics. But everyone knows that there are two sexes – male and female. The others are identity issues. And everyone knows that only a man and a woman can get married and start a family. We should have compassion for these people with different preferences, but their lifestyle must not become a norm or a model for society to admire, sexual orientation is a private matter for everyone. The SPD party rejects the persecution of homosexuals, and believes that homosexuals have the right to the same civil liberties as other citizens. The greatest danger to homosexuals as persons today is the hateful religion Islam, which advocates the death penalty for homosexuality. According to the SPD party, the foundation of the state is the traditional family in which mum and dad raise their children. The traditional family deserves all-round support and protection from the state. Same-sex unions cannot replace male and female role models and their compatibility for children (ibid.) or “everyone knows that only a man and a woman can get married and start a family. We should have compassion for people with different sexual and “gender” preferences, but their lifestyles must not become the norm or a model for society to admire. Same-sex unions cannot replace male and female role models and their compatibility for children (Okamura 2021e).

**Figure 1: An example of a Facebook post with the appeal to protection of Czech national culture against so-called foreign influences, especially migration**



Source: Okamura 2021f

In order to provide an apparent argumentative support, references to historical parallels and events, as well as references to Christian values, are used to declare the above statements. References to historical parallels have a single and clear goal – the ‘brave’ defence of ‘our’ homeland (cf. e.g. ‘we must once again bravely defend our homeland like our ancestors!’), using the means of voluntary modalities. It is also the use of the ab exemplo argument, the essence of which is to appeal to ‘such an example in which the properties of an element are referred to and as a sufficient premise for the confirmation of a given thesis’ (Szymanek 2003: 51). At the same time, a false analogy is created, for which reference is made to key historical events that are generally known and which are among the most serious in modern Czech history. In this way of erroneous argumentation, the producer can purposefully influence social groups; his statement is calculated for effect, using – as mentioned above – emotions, especially fear and threat (argumentum ad baculum), means typical of



demagoguery (Szymanek 2003: 93) and populism, ‘demagogic argumentation aimed at winning the crowd’, using ‘simplistic thought processes appropriate to the mindset of that crowd’ (Ibid: 64). With the aim of reconstructing historical narratives (cf. Cabada 2021), references are used to personalised icons of ‘our’ history, especially St. Wenceslas, together with the reference to the aforementioned Christian values, or the Czech Republic’s belonging to ‘European Christian civilization’. The cult and legacy of St. Wenceslas, the fame of the symbol of statehood, represents a significant and constant component of the pre-election communication strategy in the context of the analysed period, while this reference to a significant historical figure can also be understood as a pseudo-argumentative strategy of *argumentum ad verecundiam*, ‘an obscure argument from authority’, whereby ‘the acceptance of the conclusions of such an argument does not take place in the factual analysis and consideration of the evidence, but solely by way of submitting to the psychological influence of definitions that make an impression’ (Szymanek 2003: 66).

Within the analysed hot phase of the campaign we can see a stable communicative and argumentative element, namely a comparative approach to the representatives of the elite group. Emphasis is placed on the polarising tendency namely within the narrative of the correct direction of SPD, which is supposed to guarantee the security and sovereignty of Czech citizens, vs other members of the elites who threaten the aforementioned with their attitudes. An example of this tendency is the expressive rejection of the adoption of the Euro. The Euro is supposed to damage ‘our economy’ and be ‘the final nail in the coffin of our sovereignty’ (Okamura 2021g). At the same time, it points to the different approach to adopting the Euro prevalent among political rivals:

Adopting the Euro would fatally damage the Czech Republic. At the same time, its adoption is supported by Babiš and the “Democratic bloc”... SPD is the only party in the lower house that is fundamentally opposed to the adoption of the Euro. Adopting the Euro would significantly damage our economy and would be one of the last nails in the coffin of our sovereignty. The other parties will support the adoption of the Euro sooner or later. (Okamura 2021g)

All of this is usually combined with denigration of political competitors, the posts also being formulated with a high degree of expressiveness, again using fear and threats, and there is also a false analogy. The image of the enemy is created to support the attack using war metaphors (the verb ‘to fight’), that the Czech Republic is under threat by accepting the ‘dictates of Brussels’, all against the background of the declared comparison of the election manifestos of the SPD and ANO parties. In other cases, there is also an example of clear visual support, where an identical image of the enemy of Czech sovereignty is created (see image).

A comparison of the manifestos of the SPD and ANO parties. SPD is for leaving the EU and for a referendum, the ANO movement is against leaving and against a referendum, and Babiš clearly supports the EU. SPD is fundamentally opposed to the adoption of the Euro and is fighting to preserve the koruna, while Prime Minister Babiš and ANO are not opposed to the adoption of the Euro in the future. SPD are patriots, while Prime Minister Babiš will eventually kneel before the dictators of Brussels. (Okamura 2021h)

Figure 2: An example of a Facebook post with comparison of the programmes of political parties (SPD and the coalition SPOLU) as 2021 elections

SROVNÁNÍ PROGRAMŮ POLITICKÝCH STRAN VOLBY DO PS 2021	SPD 	ANO SUDE LIP POLITICKÉ HRADY 
Referendum o vystoupení z Evropské unie	ANO	NE
Zachování české koruny, NE euro	ANO	NE
Kvalitní české potraviny za přiměřené ceny	ANO	NE
Zásadní odpor k imigraci a k islamizaci	ANO	NE
Zásadní boj proti nepřizpůsobivým	ANO	NE
Zásadní boj proti politickým neziskovkám	ANO	NE
Zrušení tzv. pandemického zákona	ANO	NE
Zásadní odmítnutí povinné vakcinace	ANO	NE

Source: Okamura 2021h

Moreover, the image of the enemy is repeatedly created by comparing the approaches to the issue of migration and Islam as conceived by SPD and other elite representatives. In the spirit of Dijk's ideological square, the scheme of 'us' (SPD), i.e. those who reject Islam and migration, vs 'them' (e.g. ANO), supporters of accepting migrants, is represented and supported. The enemy is often personalised in the person of the then prime minister who is supposed to have supported the admission of the migrants. At the same time, it is implied that these refugees may include 'terrorists and criminals', who pose a danger to the native population. It has also been reported (without specific data) that Babiš had accepted Islamic Afghan migrants into the Czech Republic, but those statements are unverifiable. The blackening of a political rival's image is implemented by pointing out the contradiction between Babiš's media image (pretending to protect 'national interests') and his decisions that have/may have a direct impact on the security situation in the Czech Republic.

SPD fundamentally rejects the acceptance of immigrants and Islam. Andrej Babiš supports the Organization for the Support of Refugees, he supported the Global Pact for Refugees and the Marrakesh Declaration, and ANO MEPs voted in favour of supporting migration. Moreover, the Prime Minister has now supported the hiring of Afghan “interpreters”. France, Britain and Germany have already warned that terrorists and criminals can be found among the Afghan evacuees. Prime Minister Babiš did not support our law banning the wearing of Islamic veils in public and banning the promotion of hateful Islamic ideology. (Okamura 2021i)

While Prime Minister Babiš is having his photo taken with Viktor Orbán and talking about border protection, he has also taken in Islamic Afghan immigrants. (Okamura 2021j)

Andrej Babiš is playing the role of defender of national interests, but in Brussels he undoes everything. The EU is not helping, rather it is damaging. The sooner we leave it, the better. SPD advocates sensible environmental protection, not on the basis of dictated terms from Brussels, but on the basis of the realistic needs of our citizens and our economy. (Okamura 2021k)

Okamura works with positive connotations when considering the Czech Republic’s withdrawal from the EU, and at the same time with the presupposition that, in terms of the current situation, the requirements for freedom, self-sufficiency, prosperity and security of the Czech Republic are not being met. The EU, as the representative of the elites, is portrayed (again without any support in the form of expert sources) as the originator of the above negative, dangerous and ‘harmful’ factors, for which the symptomatic enumerative accumulation of synonymous terms with positive connotations is used (in the case of the Czech Republic’s withdrawal from the EU). This strategy can be understood as a demonstration of Dijk’s argumentative procedure with the aim of creating polarity, creating contrast, etc. (Homoláč 2009):

If we don’t leave the EU, Brussels will destroy us with mass immigration, do-gooder neo-Marxism and eco-terrorism. Of course we have to prepare for the exit. Our country will once again be free, self-sufficient, safe and prosperous. (Okamura 2021l)

The principle of gradations and hypothetical judgements without any facts to support the argument is also the basis for the statements that directly link the EU’s support for its political rivals with the subsequent mass immigration and so-called genderism. This is not just a list of the negatives associated with the Czech Republic’s membership in the European Union, but also a prediction of

the future development and direction of the Czech Republic if it remains in the EU. A flawed argument (*argumentum ad baculum*) is used with the intention to induce fear of possible developments that contradict the ideal of a closed and traditionalist society in which ‘foreign’ elements are not present (Cabada 2021).

## Conclusion

Based on an analysis of the populist political communication of the Freedom and Direct Democracy movement on Facebook in the 14 days before the elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic, it can be concluded that nativist elements represent one of the key communication strategies. Nativist visions became a solid part of the election agitation, and were – for example, as exemplified by SPD’s Czech Fair mentioned above – also translated into a form of contact campaign taking place in Czech regional towns, whereby voting for the SPD was supposed to provide Czech citizens with a ‘more favourable’ future.

The whole analysed period was characterised by the promotion or creation of the nativist narrative ‘we’ (SPD) as the protectors and defenders of Czech wealth, security and property, and on the other hand, the image of the enemy was systematically created (among other things, by comparing the SPD manifesto with other ‘enemies’ of Czech sovereignty. The dominant strategy throughout the analysed period was thus to support or create the nativist narrative of ‘we’ (SPD) as the protectors and defenders of Czech wealth, security and property, and on the other hand, the image of the enemy was systematically created (among other things, by comparing the SPD manifesto with other ‘enemies’ of Czech sovereignty.

Towards the end of the hot phase of the pre-election campaign, the overall sharpening of the nativist communication strategy was evident, among other things through the use of abbreviated, punchy, expressive and hyperbolic slogans (e.g.: ‘the total destruction of Czech society, the Czech nation and the Czech economy’) with the aim of even more intensive and explicit support for the narrative of evil symbolised by the elites and ‘the others’, which would be represented by the election of other political parties. The threat of losing ‘the last vestiges of independence’, the strategy of inducing fear and threat from migration, the ‘theft’ of the Czech Republic by foreigners, the evil EU, etc. (*argumentum ad baculum*), the impossibility of autonomously influencing ‘our’ politics and the resulting destruction of the native society, and the subsequent offering of solutions to the unbearable situation (e.g. a referendum on the Czech Republic’s withdrawal from the EU, which is possible if SPD is supported in the elections) were emphasised.

With the end of the pre-election period, SPD communication shows a greater degree of explicit outreach to potential voters and a deepening of persuasive influence on the final decision of (potential) voters.

In the future, it would be interesting to see whether this is a repetitive communication framework or communication strategy that has a similar character before different types of elections, or whether these narratives are changing in some way. It would also be useful to focus on researching the audience, how they react to the appeals and challenges and whether they identify with the above.

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