The Relationship Between Topics, Negativity, and User Engagement in Election Campaigns on Facebook

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Abstract

Negativity is a common feature of current online political communication during elections. Previous studies on negativity and its impact on user engagement focused mainly on Western European countries. Considering the political particularities of the Central and Eastern European countries, the present study focused on Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania, where national election campaigns took place from 2020 to 2022. We aimed to investigate comparatively different topics prevalent in the negative messages and look at users' engagement with negative communication. We applied manual content analysis of $N = 4,095$ Facebook posts published four weeks before the elections by political parties elected in the national parliament. Results showed significant differences across countries using negative messages and the associated topics. The posts' highest rate of negative statements was identified in Czechia (52%), while the lowest was in Lithuania (17%). There are topics consistently associated with negative statements across most countries, such as corruption, economy and finance, foreign policy, labor, and social issues. However, given that those elections took place during the Covid-19 pandemic in Czechia, Lithuania, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova and, in Hungary, after Russia invaded Ukraine, we also identified contextual topics such as health, war, and conflicts with other countries and defense that were mainly associated with negative messages. Furthermore, negative posts generate more reactions and comments than posts containing no negative statements. Addressing foreign policy in negative posts generates significantly more reactions and comments.

1. Introduction

Negativity is a prevalent element in contemporary political communication during national elections (Nai, 2020; Nai & Walter, 2015), with documented effects on the erosion of trust in political institutions, exacerbating political polarization and growing disillusionment among voters. Beyond these immediate consequences, research indicates that negativity in election campaigns can have lasting implications for the overall health of a democracy and political communication in terms of political incivility (Rossini, 2021; Rossini et al., 2021). Additionally, negativity contributes to voters' political disinterest, distrust, and cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Klinger et al., 2022; Nai et al., 2022).

As election campaigns become more competitive (Green-Pedersen, 2019), political parties discovered the advantages of campaigning on social media. Hence, parties can directly communicate with followers, get immediate feedback on the issue strategy (Ceron et al., 2016), and strengthen issue ownership (Sandberg, 2022). Research suggests that social media discussions revolve around current events and political actors are expected to react to them (Reveilhac, 2023). Considering that political landscapes struggle with various challenges and extraordinary events (e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine), understanding the dynamics of election campaigning takes on growing relevance for strengthening the resilience of democratic processes. These events changed the political context of the campaigns, requiring parties to react by concentrating on these newly emerging, unexpected issues or keeping their issues at the center of their campaigns (Kreiss et al., 2017). Moreover, delving into the relationship between negativity and the topics addressed during election campaigns on Facebook reflects how political parties frame their national election campaigns by adjusting challenges.

While research on negativity in political communication and campaigning has made significant progress focusing on Western democracies (e.g., Blassnig et al., 2021; Ceron & Curini, 2018; Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020; Russmann, 2018; Staender et al., 2019), studies focusing on Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are scarce. However, there are differences between experienced European democracies and CEE countries that might influence how negativity is used during election campaigns about topics. First, previous research suggests that parties from CEE countries adopt some established campaign methods differently due to differing political cultures (Bērziņa, 2019; Eibl, 2019). Second, in CEE countries, democracy is still young, and party systems are more volatile and fragile than in Western countries (Andrews & Bairett, 2014). Moreover, several countries in the region are experiencing democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2022). Third, due to geopolitics and different economic developments in the CEE countries, some of the topics prevalent for negative campaigns in traditional European democracies are not pivotal in the CEE countries (Tønnesen et al., 2023). Fourth, CEE citizens trust institutions and political actors less than Western Europeans and tend to score high in affective polarization (Orhan, 2022; Torcal, 2017).

Our study examines how political parties in CEE countries use negativity in topics in election campaigns on Facebook, representing the region's dominant social media platform for political communication (Newman

et al., 2023). Hence, we investigate the relationship between negativity in the posts and topics related to users' reactions and not negative campaigning. We focused on Hungary, Lithuania, Czechia, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania, where national election campaigns took place from 2020 to 2022. Furthermore, we investigate how users respond to negative messages and salient issues by testing the relationship between negativity, topics, and user engagement. By focusing on the relationship between topics and negative statements and delving into the dynamics of user engagement about topics and negative communication in CEE, our article contributes to a nuanced understanding of election campaigns on social media.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Negativity in Political Campaigns on Social Media

Studies on negativity in election campaigns reflected the wide range of the phenomenon encompassing negative statements, emotions, dramatization, and negative tone of communication (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene et al., 2022; Klinger et al., 2022). The research employed a more nuanced conceptualization of negative communication (e.g., with a focus on the use of uncivil language or sentiment) that goes behind the dualism of negative attack-based campaigning versus positive campaigns (e.g., Haselmayer & Jenny, 2017; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

Negativity in election campaigns intensified with the rise of social media, as specific platform affordances foster user responses, and negativity can extend its impact beyond social media platforms (Rossini et al., 2021). In recent years, we have also witnessed increasing interest in the role of emotions and emotionality (Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022; Blassnig et al., 2021; Klinger et al., 2022; Martella & Bracciale, 2022) in campaign communication. Emotions have been identified as a mediator of the impact of political messages on users' involvement with the messages (Brader, 2005; Wirz, 2018). Hence, emotional appeals emerged as an effective strategy for eliciting user interactions and reactions (Jost et al., 2020; Martella & Bracciale, 2022).

Bene (2016) addresses political messages' general tonality or valence while researching negativity. Tonality and emotionality are distinct but closely related phenomena (Heiss et al., 2019). While tonality refers to portraying negative content elements, emotionality describes how messages are conveyed and framed, including the explicit expression of emotions (Klinger et al., 2022). In the present research, the conceptualization of negativity aligned with previous research (Bene et al., 2022) by including both the tonality and negative emotions of the political communicator.

The prevalence of negative communication depends on the context, country, and election type. Only a few studies have investigated negativity in election campaigns in CEE countries. Thus, comparative studies focusing on the elections for the European Parliament included some countries from the region (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene et al., 2022; Ceron & Curini, 2018; Klinger et al., 2022). Nai (2020) included some CEE countries (e.g., Belarus, Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania) in the sample. Few studies looked at negative campaigning in Hungary (Bene, 2016, 2021) and Czechia and Poland (Stetka et al., 2019), mainly focusing on the relationship between topics and user engagement. Thus, Stetka et al. (2019) researched Facebook campaigning during the 2013 and 2015 parliamentary elections, focusing on the negativity in user engagement and pointing out that specific topics generate more negativity and females tend to be less

hostile towards home parties. However, this study does not investigate how political parties associate negativity with specific topics and does not reflect current Facebook usage patterns for parties and voters. An investigation of the 2014 parliamentary election campaign in Hungary revealed that negativity in the topics is associated with more user reactions on Facebook (Bene, 2016). In a follow-up study, Bene (2021) delved into the issue of ownership during the Facebook campaign for the 2018 Hungarian parliamentary election. According to this study, corruption and developmental policies were the prevalent topics.

Moreover, salient issues such as immigration and corruption generate more user reactions (Bene, 2021; Bene et al., 2022). Even though previous studies contributed to a better understanding of the national election campaigns on Facebook and developed robust methodological frameworks for future research, including the present research, these studies focused on a single country from the CEE region. Hence, none of the studies systematically compared CEE countries, considering topics addressed in negative campaigns and user engagement.

Previous studies address diverse aspects of negativity, focusing on the narrower area of negative campaigning, most often defined as a campaign strategy for attacking opponents, criticizing their behavior, ideologies, political positions, values, or personal qualities (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Baranowski et al., 2022; Geer, 2006; Samuel-Azran et al., 2017; Xenos et al., 2017. Hence, negativity in election campaigning is a concept related to negative campaigning. However, there are relevant differences, such as in negative campaigns: The focus is on highlighting perceived weaknesses or controversial aspects of political opponents rather than engaging in substantive political discussion (Klinger et al., 2022). This strategy aims to influence the voters' attitudes toward the targeted political opponent and evoke negative emotions toward political opponents (Baranowski et al., 2022; Klinger et al., 2022).

Nai (2020) examined the individual predictors of negative campaigning and found that while context matters, its influence is indirect and primarily alters the effects of individual candidate characteristics when engaging in negative campaigning. However, in an investigation of party communication during the 2019 election for the European Parliament, Bene et al. (2022) stressed that in polarized contexts characterized by heightened aversions and animosities in the political sphere, such as in the CEE countries, people would be more receptive to negativity. Similarly, we aim to investigate the role of context on negativity in national election campaigns on Facebook and ask the following research question:

> RQ1: How prevalent is negativity in campaign messages on Facebook across examined CEE countries during national elections?

2.2. Campaign Topics and Engagement With Negative Messages

While negative campaigning often focuses on opponents rather than specific political issues, negative tonality and emotionality can be strategically linked to specific topics to attract attention and evoke emotions. Prior research indicates that more salient issues are often linked to negative emotions and higher user engagement, resulting in greater visibility (Bene, 2021). Negative tonality and emotionality are specifically more employed by populist and far-right parties (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022; Blassnig et al., 2021; Eberl et al., 2020; Klinger et al., 2022) that often employ salient and polarizing issues in communication. Negative framing is thus characteristic of topics and policy issues

perceived as salient and significant, compared to more routine topics such as the economy or domestic policy (Bene et al., 2022).

In Western European democracies, studies found evidence that immigration, terrorism, extremism, and social policy issues are salient topics addressed by negative messages (Blassnig et al., 2021; Eberl et al., 2020). Considering the specificity of the CEE region, revolving around differences in political cultures reflected in campaigning strategies (Bērziņa, 2019; Eibl, 2019), geopolitics and economic development influence relevant campaign topics other than in Western Europe (Toennes et al., 2023). Moreover, we assume that national elections occur in more polarized environments, possibly exacerbated by crises, which could lead to increased negativity in political communication. Therefore, we asked the following research question:

> RQ2: What political topics are associated with negativity in campaign communication on Facebook across the examined CEE countries?

The visibility of political posts depends on reactions and user engagement, prompting parties and candidates to adapt to get higher visibility (Blassnig et al., 2021). Viral algorithms favor posts with high engagement, influencing a broader audience (Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022). Political actors aim to attract new voters through their existing supporters by making user engagement a critical strategic goal in political communication on Facebook (Bene, 2016). Previous studies argued that negative tone and emotions enhance user engagement as individuals tend to pay greater attention to and exhibit stronger reactions toward negative information than positive information (Heiss et al., 2019; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). The frequent explanation of the effects of negativity on engagement is that negativity triggers stronger emotional reactions and garners more attention, potentially leading to increased cognitive involvement and subsequent action (Heiss et al., 2019; Soroka, 2014).

Previous research linked different aspects of negativity in political posts on Facebook with user engagement in the form of reactions (such as likes), comments, and shares (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene, 2016; Blassnig et al., 2021; Klinger et al., 2022; Lappas et al., 2021; Staender et al., 2019; Xenos et al., 2017). Comments are the prevalent response to negativity, engaging both those in agreement and those with differing views. Many social media users respond to negative messages by commenting and sharing rather than simply using the Like button (Bene, 2016; Eberl et al., 2020). Therefore, investigating comments and reactions will provide a more detailed and accurate picture of users' engagement with negative posts.

Furthermore, Blassnig et al. (2021) argue that specific campaign issues are more likely to attract attention and elicit user engagement. Few studies comparing engagement in political campaigns on Facebook in Western democracies with countries from the CEE region showed different focal points of the topics (e.g., Tønnesen et al., 2023). Hence, considering the high scores in affective polarization in the CEE countries (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023; Orhan, 2022; Torcal, 2017), we hypothesized and asked the related research question:

> H1: Posts incorporating negativity elicit more engagement in the form of (a) reactions and (b) comments than posts without negativity.

> RQ3: What political topics addressed with negativity elicit more reactions and comments?

2.3. Context and Outcomes of National Elections

Our research focused on five CEE countries where national elections were conducted in 2020–2022. The countries we selected represent diverse political environments within the region. Hence, we investigated Czechia, Hungary, and Lithuania, which joined the EU in 2004; Romania, which became a member in 2007; and the Republic of Moldova, which became a candidate for EU membership in 2022. While Czechia and Romania showcased relative democratic stability, previous literature expressed concerns regarding Hungary over democratic backlashing (Orhan, 2022). Lithuania offered insights as a Baltic state, and the Republic of Moldova provided valuable perspectives on the challenges of democratization in a post-Soviet country.

Elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic took place on October 8 and 9, 2021 (turnout of 65%). After a long negative campaign (including the issue of migration and strategic use of misinformation) and a tough fight between the former government led by the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) and two opposing democratic coalitions, the coalitions—Together (SPOLU) encompassing the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODU), Tradition Responsibility Prosperity (TOP 09), and Christian Democrats (KDS) together with Pirates and Mayors as a coalition of the Czech Pirate Party and Mayors and Independents, defeated the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (Czech Statistical Office, 2021).

In Hungary, the parliamentary election took place on April 3, 2022 (turnout of 70%). Three coalitions or parties gained seats in the parliament: the governing Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz)—Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) coalition, opposition parties running together under the name United for Hungary, and the far-right Our Homeland Movement (Nemzeti Választási Iroda, 2022). The platform blocked the latter's Facebook page on the week of the election and was not included in our sample. The campaign was strongly affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Farkas et al., 2024).

In Lithuania, parliamentary elections took place over two rounds on October 11 and 25, 2020. Most Seimas members (71 seats) were elected in single-member constituencies through a two-round system. In comparison, the remaining 70 seats are allocated based on proportional representation derived from the results of the initial round. These elections occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing to the second-lowest turnout (47% in the first round and 39% in the second round) in modern Lithuanian history. Following the election, the winner Homeland Union formed a coalition with two other center-right political forces: the Freedom Party and the Liberal Movements (The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020).

In the Republic of Moldova, an early election for the national parliament took place on July 11, 2021 (turnout 48%). The Party of Action and Solidarity gained an absolute majority of 52% and subsequently built the new government. The coalition between the Party of the Socialists of the Republic of Moldova and the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova won 27% of the votes and the SOR party 5.8% (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2021).

Parliamentary elections were held in Romania on December 6, 2020, amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, voter absenteeism was noted as the turnout (33%) was among the lowest in the country's recent history (Gherghina et al., 2023). The Social Democratic Party gained most of the votes (29%), followed by the National Liberal Party (25%), the Union Save Romania Plus (15%), the new far-right party Alliance for the Union of

Romanians (9%), and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (6%). A coalition led by the National Liberal Party, including the Union Save Romania Plus and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, built the government (Biroul Electoral Central, 2020). Additional information about political parties and their Facebook posts included in our sample is shown in the Supplementary Material.

3. Method

We applied manual content analysis of the Facebook posts ($N = 4,095$) of the political parties that are represented in the national Parliaments in Czechia ($n = 695$), Hungary ($n = 1,107$), Lithuania ($n = 401$), the Republic of Moldova ($n = 700$), and Romania ($n = 1,191$). Posts published on the official Facebook pages of the parties ($n = 31$) four weeks before the national election were considered for the analysis. We opt for Facebook, considering it is the prevalent social media platform in the analyzed countries (Newman et al., 2023). We used CrowdTangle to extract the links of the posts considered analysis units and automatically collect the number of reactions and comments for each post considered dependent variables in our study.

We recruited 15 coders (two Czechs, four Hungarians, two Lithuanians, three Moldavians, and four Romanians). To ensure the same understanding of the coding instructions for variables across countries, all coders participated in similar training sessions regarding our coding scheme. Given that the posts were in the official languages of each country and, in some cases, in the language of ethnic minorities (in Hungarian all posts of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania and in Russian some of the posts of political parties in Lithuania and the Republic of Moldova), interrater reliability was performed for each country individually. Like previous research investigating several countries (Tønnesen et al., 2023), we calculated Brennan and Prediger's kappa for our interrater reliability test, suitable for robust binary and sparse categories (Quarfoot & Levine, 2016). Values suggest good reliability (Brennan and Prediger's kappa ≥ 0.8). Reliability scores per item for each country are shown in the Supplementary Material.

Considering that negativity was the focus of our research, similar to the research of Bene et al. (2022), we coded the *presence* (1) or the *absence* (0) of negative statements, disapproval, criticism, and attack messages (Klinger et al., 2022) in the text but also negative emotions (faces, gestures) in images and videos which are hostile or of a hating nature (Baranowski et al., 2022). Apart from the number of reactions and posts that were automatically collected, all variables were binary-coded. During the coding process, we considered the overall impression of the statements and images given that we looked at both text and the corresponding picture or video of the Facebook post. Hence, facial expressions and gestures reflecting hostility were coded as negative statements. We also coded the topics of the posts (economy and finance, health, policy for families and children, labor and social issues, criminality, political radicalism/religious fanaticism, corruption, domestic policy, immigration and integration, transport and infrastructure policy, environmental policy, energy policy, cultural policy, defense, war and military conflicts between countries, foreign policy, international relations, media policy and digitalization, agriculture, development, gender policy, and LGBTQ+ policy). The coding instructions for variables are shown in the Supplementary Material.

4. Findings

Our first research question focused on negative statements at the country level. Negative statements posts represented 36% ($n = 1,492$) of the overall sample. There are significant differences between countries in

terms of the prevalence of negative statements ($\chi^2(4) = 238.64$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.24$). With 52% ($n = 358$ posts) of negative posts, Czechia is the country with the most significant percentage, followed by Hungary with 47% ($n = 515$ posts), Romania with 32% ($n = 383$ posts), the Republic of Moldova with 24% ($n = 168$ posts), and Lithuania with 17% ($n = 68$ posts). Several parties from Czechia, Hungary, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania had posts containing negative statements representing over half of their content (see Supplementary Material).

Our second research question focused on the relationship between topics and negative statements in the analyzed CEE countries. The first step was to see the prevalent topics in the national election campaigns on Facebook and present an overall picture of the foci of each national campaign. The next step was to look at the prevalence of negative statements within posts addressing each topic. Hence, the prevalence of topics differed in the national campaigns. Economy and finance are among the salient topics across the analyzed CEE countries. The context of the elections was reflected in the prevalence of some of the topics. Thus, health was a salient topic in Romania (26%) and Lithuania (8%), where national elections were held in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. Foreign policy was among the first topics in Czechia (8%) and Hungary (8%).

Given that the national election took place in Hungary several weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, war and military conflicts with other countries (19%) and defense (5%) were among the prevalent topics. Prevalent topics in each country are also prevalent topics of negative communication. Figure 1 shows the prevalent topics in the negative posts for each country.

We observed a significant relation between negativity and economy and finance ($\chi^2(1) = 43.14$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.10$), health ($\chi^2(1) = 43.14$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.10$), corruption ($\chi^2(4) = 161.7$, $p < 0.001$,
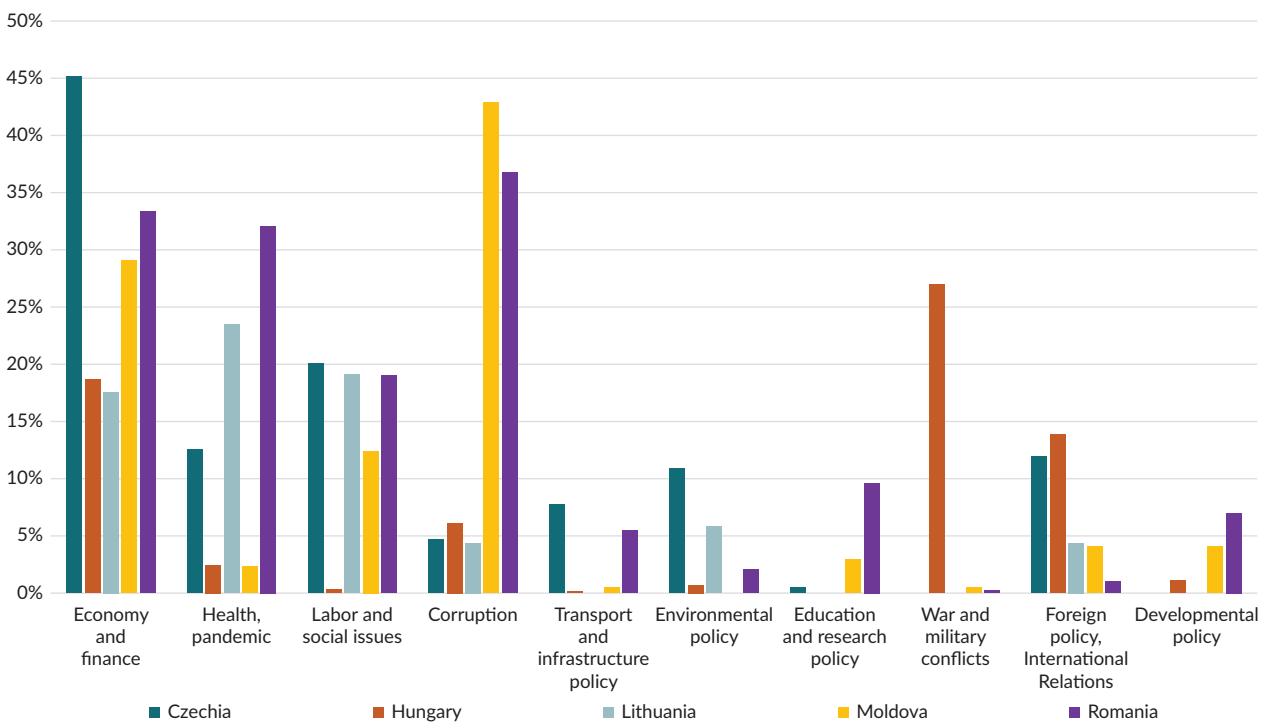
Figure 1. Prevalent topics in negative campaign posts per country. Note: $N = 1,492$ posts containing negativity.

Cramer's V = 0.20), war and military conflict between countries (χ^2(1) = 88.65, p < 0.001, Cramer's V = 0.15), energy policy (χ^2(1) = 27.26, p < 0.001, Cramer's V = 0.08), and foreign policy and international relations (χ^2(1) = 45.75, p < 0.001, Cramer's V = 0.11). However, labor and social issues showed only a tendency toward significance (χ^2(1) = 3.7, p = 0.054, Cramer's V = 0.03), transportation and infrastructure policy (χ^2(1) = 1.36, p = 0.24, Cramer's V = 0.02), education policy (χ^2(1) = 0.57, p = 0.45, Cramer's V = 0.01), and environmental policy (χ^2(1) = 1.27, p = 0.26, Cramer's V = 0.02) were not significant.

Further, we looked at the frequency of posts containing negative statements within the posts addressing specific topics. Thus, we observed that negative statements were prevalent in posts addressing development policy (83%), cultural policy (73%), gender policy (68%), transportation and infrastructure policy (68%), education and research policy (67%), labor and social issues policy (59%), and domestic policy (50%). Table 1 shows the frequency of negative statements among posts addressing specific topics.

Table 1. Frequency of negative statements among posts addressing specific topics.

Topic	Number of posts	Number of posts containing negative statements	Percentage of posts containing negative statements
Developmental policy	238	198	83%
Cultural policy	45	33	73%
Transportation and infrastructure	159	108	68%
Gender policy	38	26	68%
Education and research policy	132	88	67%
Agricultural policy	117	76	65%
Environmental policy	134	79	59%
Labor and social issues	446	265	59%
Media policy and digitalization	74	38	51%
Domestic policy in general	102	51	50%
Economy and finance	989	447	45%
Health	448	201	45%
Foreign policy and international relations	224	95	42%
Immigration and integration policy	50	21	42%
Policies for families with children	153	65	42%
Energy policy	114	46	40%
Corruption	406	141	35%
War and military conflicts between countries	211	70	33%
Defense policy	63	21	33%
Criminality/crime rates in general	39	11	28%
LGBTQ+ policy	18	3	17%
Political radicalization and religious fanaticism	45	2	4%

Note: N = 1,492 posts containing negativity.

The analysis showed that there are topics significantly addressed with negative statements across most of the five CEE countries, such as economy and finance, labor and social issues, corruption, and foreign policy. However, the distribution of posts containing negative statements addressing specific topics differed among countries. Regarding the posts addressing economy and finance, Romania had a significant ($\chi^2(1) = 7.12$, $p = 0.007$, Cramer's $V = 0.08$) number of negative posts within the posts addressing economy and finance (60%, 106 out of 176 posts). The other countries in the sample had approximately half of their posts on economy and finance containing negative statements. However, only in the case of Czechia, with 14 out of 43 posts on economy and finance containing negative statements ($\chi^2(1) = 0.04$, $p = 0.04$, Cramer's $V = 0.08$), and the Republic of Moldova, with 24 out of 51 posts ($\chi^2(1) = 16.04$, $p = 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.15$), the association between polity and negative statements was statistically significant. Hence, economy and finance are topics associated with negative statements during the national election campaigns in the analyzed CEE countries.

Labor and social issues are also topics predominantly associated with negative statements in the CEE countries except for Hungary (with two out of three posts). Hence, in Czechia ($\chi^2(1) = 28.86$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.20$) with 77% (72 out of 93 posts addressing labor and social issues), Romania ($\chi^2(1) = 18.23$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.12$) with 47% (73 out of 155 posts), Lithuania ($\chi^2(1) = 4.33$, $p = 0.04$, Cramer's $V = 0.10$) with 28% (13 out of 47 posts), and Republic of Moldova ($\chi^2(1) = 9.9$, $p = 0.002$, Cramer's $V = 0.20$) with 14% (21 out of 148 posts) our findings showed significant association between the topic and negative statements.

Corruption is a topic significantly associated with negative statements across all countries. Czechia ($\chi^2(1) = 6.66$, $p = 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.13$) with 89% (17 out of 19 posts), Hungary ($\chi^2(1) = 24.57$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.15$) with 86% (32 out of 37 posts), Romania ($\chi^2(1) = 131.02$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.33$) with 64% (141 out of 217 posts), Lithuania ($\chi^2(1) = 6.66$, $p = 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.13$) with 60% (three out of five posts), and Republic of Moldova ($\chi^2(1) = 89.32$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.08$) with 56% (72 out of 128 posts).

Foreign policy was significantly associated with negative statements in Hungary ($\chi^2(1) = 42.35$, $p = 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.20$) with 79% (72 out of 91 posts), Czechia ($\chi^2(1) = 12.97$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.14$) with 74% (17 out of 19 posts), and Romania ($\chi^2(1) = 5.83$, $p = 0.03$, Cramer's $V = 0.07$) with 13% (four out of 32 posts).

The LGBTQ+ topic was not central to the election campaigns in the CEE countries we analyzed; therefore, the overall number of posts was very low. However, in Czechia, Lithuania, Republic of Moldova, and Romania, all posts addressed the topic, and in Hungary, 57% of the posts (four out of seven) contained negative statements.

Our findings suggest that disruptive events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine determined a focus of the national election campaigns toward addressing health, defense, war, and military conflicts between countries and energy policy.

The association between health and negative statements is significant in Czechia ($\chi^2(1) = 15.83$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.15$) with 76% of the posts on health having a negative statement (45 out of 59 posts), and Lithuania ($\chi^2(1) = 25.38$, $p = 0.007$, Cramer's $V = 0.25$) with 48% (16 out of 33 posts), and Romania

($\chi^2(1) = 9.19$, $p = 0.002$, Cramer's $V = 0.09$) with 39%(123 out of 313 posts). Our findings suggest that health was associated with negative statements in the CEE countries where national elections occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, such as Czechia, Lithuania, and Romania. In Hungary, where national elections took place in 2022, health was a marginal topic covered by 17 posts. Among them, 13 were posts containing negative messages. However, the association between the topic and negative statements was significant ($\chi^2(1) = 6.22$, $p = 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.08$). Surprisingly, in Moldova, where elections took place in 2021, health was barely addressed, and the topic is not significantly associated with negative statements.

Within our sample, Hungary was the only country where elections took place soon after Russia invaded Ukraine. Therefore, defense, war, and military conflicts between countries and energy policy were substantially addressed during the election campaign. In contrast, in all other CEE countries, those topics were marginal or not addressed at all. Moreover, the defense was significantly associated with negative statements only in Hungary ($\chi^2(1) = 14.56$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.12$), the country where 73% of the posts (37 out of 51 posts) addressing the topic contained negative statements. On the same note, war and military conflicts between countries was a crucial topic in the Hungarian national elections and significantly associated with negative statements($\chi^2(1) = 42.24$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.20$) in 67% of the posts addressing the topic (139 out of 208). Moreover, regarding energy policy, our findings suggest that only in Hungary, 75% of the posts (46 out of 61) addressing the topic were significantly associated with negative statements ($\chi^2(1) = 21.65$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.14$). The association between negativity and energy policy in the Hungarian national election was probably related to the issue of energy supply in the region caused by the war in Ukraine.

Some of the topics such as criminality and crime rate in general (Czechia: $\chi^2(1) = 11.49$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.13$, with 12 out of 12 posts), domestic policy in general (Hungary: $\chi^2(1) = 12.24$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.11$, with 13 out of 14 posts), immigration (Czechia: $\chi^2(1) = 13.16$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.14$, with 19 out of 21 posts), environmental policy (Czechia: $\chi^2(1) = 5.6$, $p = 0.02$, Cramer's $V = 0.10$, with 39 out of 58 posts; Hungary: $\chi^2(1) = 5.76$, $p = 0.02$, Cramer's $V = 0.07$, with four out of 20 posts), developmental policy (Republic of Moldova: $\chi^2(1) = 11.19$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.13$, with seven out of 79 posts), political radicalism, and religious fanaticism (Czechia: $\chi^2(1) = 9.26$, $p = 0.002$, Cramer's $V = 0.09$, with 33 out of 33 posts; Republic of Moldova: $\chi^2(1) = 32.61$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.22$, with four out of five posts).

Furthermore, several topics are not significantly associated with negative statements in any of the countries, such as cultural, agricultural, gender, family, and children policies, as well as education and research policies. Moreover, the overall number of posts addressing those topics was low. Figure 2 shows the frequency of posts containing negative statements within topics the topics that are related to negativity in most of the countries regardless of disruptive events (economy and finance, labor and social issues, corruption, foreign policy, and international relations) and those related to disruptive events (e.g., health, energy policy, defense policy, war, and military conflicts between countries). Figure 2 shows the frequency of negative posts addressing specific topics related or not to exceptional events.

We posited that posts containing negativity elicit more engagement in reactions (H1a) and comments (H1b) than posts without negativity. To test our hypotheses, we run a multi-level random intercept negative
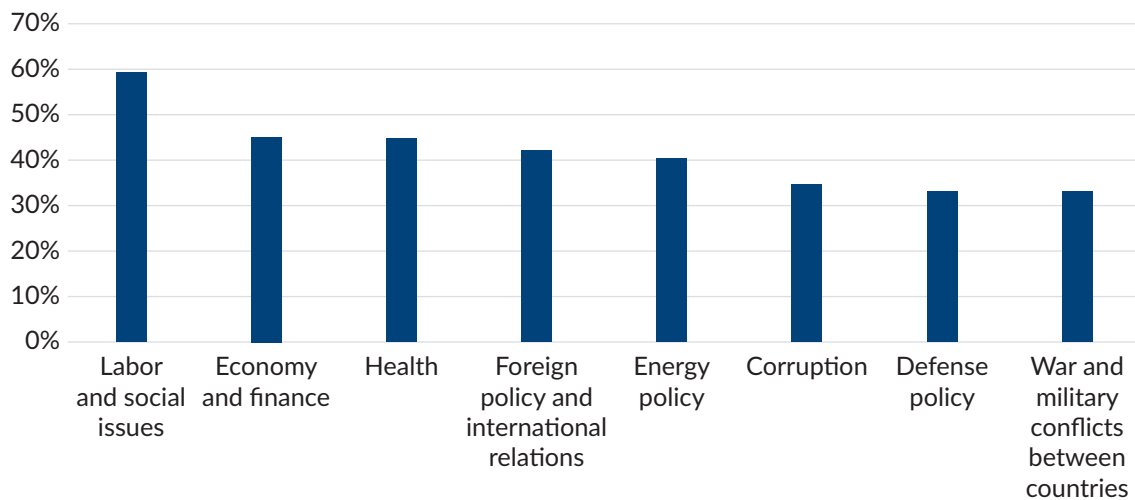
Figure 2. The frequency of negative posts addressing specific topics related or not to exceptional events. Note: *N* = 2,901 posts.

binominal regression on the level of party fixed effects. Considering the results of previous research (Nai, 2020) showing that opposition parties engage more in negative campaigning and, therefore, use more negative statements than governmental parties, we looked at opposition versus governmental parties at the party level. At the post level, we considered posts containing negative statements and topics significantly associated with negative statements, as the results of our first research question showed. We controlled the number of posts for each party. Results showed that negative statements in the posts elicited significant reactions ($b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$) and comments ($b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, H1a and H1b were supported. Some topics have fewer reactions and comments (e.g., economy, finance, and health). Other topics elicited significantly more reactions and comments (e.g., labor and social issues and corruption). However, only posts containing negative statements addressing foreign policy generated significantly more reactions ($b = 0.42$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$) and comments ($b = 0.78$, $SE = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$), while the interaction between other topics, reactions, and comments was not significant. The number of posts per party has no significant impact on the number of reactions but a significant positive impact on the number of comments. Table 2 shows the results of the negative binomial regression. To analyze predictors of reactions and comments as dependent variables, we added the type of party (opposition versus governmental) to the second model.

5. Discussion

Our research shows that, like Western countries (e.g., Rossini et al., 2023; Xenos et al., 2017), negativity in the five CEE countries we investigate is a common strategy in political parties' election campaigns on Facebook. However, we identified significant differences in the prevalence of negativity in Czechia, where the ruling populist party and two opposition coalitions run a negative campaign against each other, with Lithuania having the highest percentage and Lithuania the lowest. The results show that negativity makes up significant political communication on Facebook during national elections, like findings from previous studies on negative campaigning during previous national and European Parliament elections (Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene, 2016, 2021).

Table 2. Results of the negative binomial regression.

	Reactions		Comments	
	Model 1 Coeff. (*SE*)	Model 2 Coeff. (*SE*)	Model 1 Coeff. (*SE*)	Model 2 Coeff. (*SE*)
Intercept	5.46 (1.09)**	5.82 (0.36)***	2.87 (1.27)*	3.19 (0.40)***
Negative statements	0.20 (0.05)***	0.19 (0.06)***	0.33 (0.07)***	0.31 (0.07)***
Economy and finance	−0.13 (0.05)*	−0.19 (0.07)*	−0.15 (0.09)#	−0.15 (0.09)#
Labor and social issues	0.22 (0.09)*	0.20 (0.09)*	0.31 (0.11)**	0.31 (0.11)**
Corruption	0.28 (0.12)*	0.29 (0.12)*	0.27 (0.15)#	0.27 (0.15)#
Health	−0.28 (0.09)**	−0.29 (0.09)**	−0.16 (0.12)	−0.16 (0.12)
Foreign policy	−0.27 (0.14)*	−0.31 (0.14)*	−0.50 (0.18)**	−0.50 (0.18)**
Negative tendency + Economy and finance	0.10 (0.10)	0.13 (0.10)	0.21 (0.13)	0.21 (0.13)
Negative tendency + Labor and social issues	0.05 (0.14)	0.08 (0.14)	−0.19 (0.17)	−0.19 (0.17)
Negative tendency + Corruption	−0.21 (0.14)	−0.22 (0.15)	−0.25 (0.18)	−0.25 (0.18)
Negative tendency + Health	−0.002 (0.13)	−0.002 (0.13)	0.02 (0.18)	0.02 (0.18)
Negative tendency + Foreign policy	0.45 (0.18)*	0.42 (0.18)*	0.78 (0.23)***	0.78 (0.23)***
Opposition party		1.07 (0.34)*		1.34 (0.36)***
Number of posts	0.003 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)	0.007 (0.003)*	0.005 (0.00026)#
N Level 1/Level 2	4,094/31	4,094/31	4,094/31	4,094/31
R^2 marginal/R^2 conditional	0.043/0.427	0.02/0.334	0.049/0.317	0.020/0.208
ICCs Adj.	0.40	0.32	0.28	0.19
−2loglikelihood	15,344.12	15,319.06	18,822.37	18,836.4
Negative binominal (disp. parameter)	1.64	1.64	2.67	2.67

Notes: $N = 4,095$ posts; # $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Furthermore, our research sheds light on the interplay of topics and negative posts. Analyzing election campaigns in different contexts, including disrupting events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, allowed us to identify topics that are addressed with negative statements. Some topics, such as economy and finance, labor and social issues, corruption, foreign policy, and LGBTQ+ policy, were significantly associated with negativity. However, health was addressed in negative posts in Czechia, Lithuania, and Romania, where national elections occurred in 2020 and 2021 (surprisingly, not in the case of the Republic of Moldova). War and conflicts with other countries, defense, and energy policy were prevalent topics of the negative posts in Hungary, where national elections were held in 2022, weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine.

The national election campaign in Hungary was shaped by the exceptional event of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and therefore, in this case, negative statements were found in posts addressing war and conflicts with other

countries and defense policy. We also found that the economy remained an important topic due to current economic issues, such as high inflation, which are often discussed negatively. Meanwhile, topics previously associated with opposition parties, such as health (Dobos et al., 2018) or corruption (Bene, 2021), became less relevant than war and foreign policy in negative posts. Energy policy has been a pivotal topic for years as the governing parties were campaigning with utility cost reduction (Böcskei, 2016); however, in this campaign, it was discussed in a different, more negative context given the implication of the military conflict having Russia involved which was at that time a relevant energy supplier in the region.

Our findings differ from studies on negativity in Western European countries. Hence, economy and finance are relevant topics for negative campaigning in the five CEE countries. However, they are not the focus of negative communication in Western European countries, as previous studies suggested (Blassnig et al., 2021; Eberl et al., 2020). Furthermore, we observed a minor emphasis on immigration policy, environmental policy, political radicalism, and religious fanaticism during the election campaigns we analyzed in the CEE countries. However, patterns of negativity in certain CEE countries, particularly in Czechia, and to some extent in Hungary and the Republic of Moldova, resemble those of Western countries regarding issues such as immigration (Czechia), environmental policy (Czechia and Hungary), political radicalism, and religious fanaticism (Czechia, Republic of Moldova).

Conversely, corruption emerged as a central theme in negative statements across all analyzed countries, reflecting the region's fragility. Notably, addressing foreign policy in negative posts is a distinct characteristic of CEE countries compared to Western European nations. The salience of negativity in posts addressing foreign policy highlighted the topic's sensitivity for the region, which is still divided between the European Union and Russia's influence.

Aligning previous research on negativity and users' engagement on social media (e.g., Baranowski et al., 2022; Bene, 2016; Blassnig et al., 2021; Klinger et al., 2022), we found evidence that even in CEE countries, negativity in Facebook communication generates more reactions and comments. At the same time, this finding follows a common pattern across countries and contexts (e.g., election type). However, our results showed that only foreign policy as a topic, in combination with negativity, stands out as particularly impactful in generating both reactions and comments. Therefore, in addition to the salience of this issue negatively addressed in the CEE countries, it reflects that foreign policy based on pro-Western (pro-EU) as opposed to anti-Western is polarizing.

6. Conclusion

While negativity in election campaigning has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, the current changes in society, such as the decline in trust and growth of polarization, as well as the widespread adoption of social media, reshaped the context of election campaigning. Moreover, exceptional events such as Covid-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine influenced the way negativity associated with specific campaign topics in the CEE countries we investigated.

Our study has limitations. We omitted the frontrunners in our sample and considered only one national election campaign on Facebook for each country. Furthermore, the negativity of the posts was measured with a single item. Due to the personal nature of social media platforms, individual politicians are relevant

actors for social media communication in many countries. Future research on negativity during the national elections must look at additional platforms (e.g., Instagram and TikTok) with different affordances.

Furthermore, even though we consistently trained all coders across the CEE countries involved in our sample, differences in understanding of negativity, primarily based on non-verbal cues, might have occurred. The results of integrated reliability tests conducted in each country do not reflect such differences. Moreover, future studies could expand upon these findings, exploring the longitudinal effects of negativity and tracking campaign strategies over multiple election cycles.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

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

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