

Populism in the pre-election period: Analysis of the social discourse on the topic of migration in Slovak parliamentary election campaign 2020

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ABSTRACT: The topic of migration is often used by populist and non-populist politicians in order to arouse emotions, polarise social attitudes and thus mobilise voters. The present study aims to identify themes (a cognitive aspect of attitudes) and discrete emotions (an emotional aspect of attitudes) in online social discourse as a reaction to the media posts of the main Slovak political parties on the topic of migration in the pre-election period (January–February 2020). Methodological triangulation of discourse analysis and Text mining was used to analyse the data. Analysis of the discourse revealed that articles with pro-migrant rhetoric provoked more discussion about the security and identity threat, while articles by populists provoked more discussion about the morality of elites and the economic threat of migration. The evoked sentiment throughout the discourse leaned more towards negative emotions (fear, anger) but pro-migrant articles and articles by non-populist politicians evoked also positive emotions (joy). Results indicate that rather than fear of migration, the anticipation of a change in the morale of the elites was the key element of the pre-election period in Slovakia. Limitations and implications of the study are further discussed. The value of this paper lies in focusing on both emotional and cognitive aspects of attitudes towards migration.

KEYWORDS: populism, migration, social discourse, polarization, pre-election period, Slovakia

BACKGROUND

Rise of populist parties across Europe is quite evident in recent years. Their success is frequently attributed not just to populists' ideological content but mainly to the emotionally charged communication (Bonansinga, 2020; Nai, 2021; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Widmann, 2021). In line with Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as an ideology, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) defined populism as a communication style, which politicians across the political spectrum (Ernst et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2019) adopt to gain voters' support, while the frequency and intensity of its use may vary (Gultasli, 2021). There is evidence that both populists and non-populists use emotional communication but differ in their tone and emotional appeals (Nai, 2021; Widmann, 2021) and also in emotions evoked among people (Wirz, 2018). In order to gain voters' support, not just populists point out potential threats, arouse emotions and openly express their negative attitudes towards "the others"—often immigrants and refugees or social and political elites. To do so, political parties prefer to use social media (Ernst et al., 2019), which offer easy access to target groups, an impression of closeness and community feelings and increase the chance of social polarisation (Ernst et al., 2017). The fact that the topic of migration has polarising potential is well known, but less attention is paid to the effects of open emotional and populist anti-immigrant rhetoric of politicians on different aspects of public attitudes towards immigrants (Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Hameleers et al., 2016; Wirz et al., 2018). To improve the understanding of such effects, we have focused on cognitive and emotional reactions of people to the topic of migration in the online media (mainstream newspapers, tabloids, Facebook posts or YouTube video) in the pre-election period, which are overloaded by emotional and populist appeals to voters.

With regard to the success of populist and emotional communication in politics, the main aim of this paper is to shed light on migration as a tool for social polarisation and also the effects of open and emotional presentation of the migration topic by politicians in the media on emotional and cognitive aspects of public attitudes toward migration. The paper outlines the theoretical concept of populism as a political communication style. Following, the information on emotional appeals in political (populist) discourse and evoked emotions often studied in the context of social media are presented. The last theoretical part describes migration topics in the context of Slovak politics and cognitive and emotional aspects of attitudes toward migration in Slovakia. This is followed by the method section, then the results are described and discussed, contributions and limitations of the study are summarized in the discussion, followed by the conclusion.

POPULISM AS POLITICAL COMMUNICATION STYLE OR STRATEGY

Many scholars understand populism not as an ideology (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) but as a communication style (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2020; Moffitt, 2016) that politicians across the political spectrum (Ernst et al., 2019) use more (full-blown populists) or less (light populists) in order to gain the necessary electoral support (Gultasli, 2021). So, populism is also understood as a political strategy, while popu-

list discourse is just one of the resources that politicians use to achieve their goal. In this respect, de la Torre (2010) defines populism as “political mobilisation based on strong rhetorical appeals to the people and crowd action on behalf of a leader” (p. 4). In order for such communication to be described as populist, it must include certain aspects of populist ideology, e.g. demanding the sovereignty of the people, blaming the elite or “others.” Such populist messages and elements of communication seem to be mostly used by new and extreme parties at both margins of the spectrum (Ernst et al., 2019). Although, populist communication is not just about the content that helps to persuade (Wirz, 2018) or mobilise people (Bos et al., 2020) but also about the form of presenting information that affects people’s emotions (Wirth et al., 2016). Negative emotional appeals were even proved to be a better strategy to increase interactions of social media users than populist statements (Martella & Bracciale, 2021).

The main idea of populism, defined as a communication style, is providing a framework for constructing social identity by emphasising the division of society into two opposing groups (Aslanidis, 2016). Leftist politicians (populists) in their rhetoric contrast socially and economically privileged groups (elites), which represent a threat to non-privileged social groups (ordinary people) - vertical division. The horizontal division of society into “us” and “them” distinguishes cultural, ethnic and religious minorities from the national majority and is often used by right-wing (populist) politicians (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Therefore, the success of populist parties lies in their capabilities to categorise society to capture existing groups, to unite them according to a common identity in order to resolve conflict and eliminate the potential threat (Obradović et al., 2020). Emotional processes affecting people’s identities are a further explanation (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Attitudes towards one’s own group may become even stronger while attitudes towards other groups become more polarised (Hameleers et al., 2019). Such a polarised society makes it easier for people to identify with their own group and may increase support for the political party they share a common goal with.

EMOTIONAL APPEALS IN A POLITICAL (POPULIST) DISCOURSE

At the time of the upcoming election, the emotional appeal to voters is intensified. During this period, even parties or politicians that do not identify as populist often use populist rhetoric, which is conditioned by the very nature of electoral democracy. Both populist rhetoric and emotional campaigning use strong appeals to elicit emotions. Populist rhetoric, however, uses the framing of society, in which ordinary people are endangered, underprivileged or misunderstood while elites, “the system” or “the others” are or should be blamed for it. Such a discursive framework does not have to be used only by politicians, it can also be used by journalists in various media or ordinary people in internet discussions (Aslanidis, 2016). Politicians tend to use various emotions depending on their intention (Windmann, 2021) thus the study of discrete emotions has become popular in recent years. Emotional campaigning is widely used by populist and non-populist politicians. However, populist, compared to non-populist, use more negative, not just fear-arousing messages (Nai, 2021) but also appeals to

anger, disgust, and sadness (Widmann, 2021) and as a result, they arouse more intense emotions of hope, pride, anger, and fear among people (Wirz, 2018). Although fear and anger seem to stand out, just hope and anger proved to increase the persuasiveness of the appeals to the electorate, while the latter also predicted support for populist parties (Marcus, 2021; Wirz, 2018). Appeals to enthusiasm and fear also proved to catch the attention of the public and lead to electoral success (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019). Populist messages can also evoke positive emotions, however, joy but also enthusiasm, pride, and hope were highlighted in the discourse of non-populist parties (Widmann, 2021).

THE TOPIC OF MIGRATION IN THE EYES OF THE SLOVAK PUBLIC AND POLITICIANS

Since the so-called European migration crisis of 2015, Slovak politicians across the ideological spectrum have openly started presenting migration as a personal (risk to health, life of society, security risk), political (threat to state sovereignty), economic (labour market, social assistance system) and cultural (traditions, religions, cultures) threat (Štefančík & Kiner, 2021). With the aim of dehumanisation of the “others”, some right-wing extremists, but also politicians from the democratic centre use the metaphor of war in their communication strategy (Štefančík & Kiner, 2021). Security discourse is dominant and institutionalised in Slovakia. However, cultural threat dominates among conservative and nationalist politicians (Andovičová, 2015). To point out the problem which exists not only in the pre-election period, in February 2020, twelve human rights organisations wrote an open letter to the Slovak politicians with an appeal not to use migration as a topic of the election campaign, not spread the fear of migration, avoid false and misleading information, not interchange the concepts - migrant and refugee, and speak about them with respect to the human rights (Anon, 2020). A similar message also came from the representatives of minorities, the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia (INS), indicating the 2020 election campaign to be marked by the spread of fear of Islam and Muslims (Lenč, 2019). Public presentation of anti-immigrant statements leads to more negative attitudes toward immigrants, while populist content evokes more negative emotions (Wirz et al., 2018). Populist discourse thus increases intergroup anxiety, strengthens stereotyping of minorities and immigrants (Matthes & Schmuck, 2017) and also strengthens positive ingroup identity by evoking positive emotions such as pride and joy to be part of the group (nation) or towards the leader (Widmann, 2021). Moreover, social media helps to reduce barriers to entry of political parties into the consciousness of the people and are able to evoke emotions, strengthen stereotypes, distort beliefs or mobilise people (Bos et al., 2020). The outcome is not just increased support of populist parties but also the polarization of society. Thus, it is not surprising that Slovak respondents in the conducted research expressed their concerns about various aspects of migration. It is not only the fear of economic losses and drawing on the social system, but it is also the fear of increased crime level (security threat), the spread of diseases (health threats) and concerns about cultural and religious influences (cultural threat) (CEORG 2015 in Slosiarik and Agentúra Focus, 2019; Gallo Kriglerová et al., 2021). Research

in Slovakia shows that not all categories of immigrants are equally rejected. Mostly, culturally distant and less educated foreigners are not welcomed. Foreign students or highly qualified workers in multinational companies from the European Union evoke very positive emotions in people in Slovakia. In contrast, refugees, Serbian workers or Muslim families evoke very negative emotions (Gallo Kriglerová et al., 2021, p. 9). Also, refugees are perceived more negatively by Slovak citizens as economic migrants or foreigners (Findor et al., 2021).

CONTEXT OF SLOVAKIA

To study these effects in the context of Slovakia is ideal for several reasons: 1) Slovakia, among the other Central and Eastern European countries, is often identified as an area with the ascendance of populist parties (Ernst et al., 2019; Suteu, 2019), especially “right-wing populists”, with the common vision - rejecting the minority groups, mainly migrants (Pejchal, 2018). However, Kazharski and Makarychev (2020) identified several cases of the populist style performed by Slovak politicians from far-right to social liberal, which proves the transideological nature of populism. Moreover, populist leaders and parties have ruled this country for several years, but also many of them are in opposition. 2) The word migrant has come to carry negative connotations and tends to evoke various emotions in Slovakia (Žúborová & Borárosová, 2016; Štefančík & Kiner, 2021). Although there are only minimum asylum seekers in Slovakia (Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, 2022), or about 150,000 foreigners (around 2,8 percent of the population), live in Slovakia, looking for their temporary or permanent residence here (Bureau of Border and Foreign Police, 2021). 3) Parliamentary elections that were held in Slovakia on 29 February 2020 were accompanied by emotions and demonstrations of people who longed for change. The dissatisfaction of the public with the long-standing rule of the Direction–Social Democracy (SMER-SD), which faces many corruption cases and suspicions of collaborating with the mafia, culminated after the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée. The desire for change was expressed by the increased turnout – 65.8% of eligible voters (Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky 2020). Based on the election results, it seems that the populist communication (anti-corruption and anti-elites’ statements) helped the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) movement to gain the highest percentage of support. However, the combination of populist rhetoric with anti-immigrant statements has been repeatedly and frequently used by politicians across the ideological spectrum since 2015 (Štefančík & Kiner, 2021), and the parliamentary elections in 2020 were no exception.

Aims and Research Questions

The first aim of this paper is to identify themes in social discourse as a reaction to the topic of migration in the social media posts of the main Slovak political parties during the pre-election period. Our first research question is focused on the cognitive aspect of attitudes towards migration:

RQ1: What different topics does the public use to respond to the migration issue presented by main political parties in the media in the pre-election period?

The second aim of the paper is to identify evoked emotions and their prevalence within the analysed social discourse and in individual media posts. Our second research question is focused on the emotional aspect of attitudes towards migration:

RQ2: What different emotions are elicited by social media posts on migration issues in the pre-election period?

The third aim of the paper is to compare the cognitive and emotional responses of the public to articles of populist and non-populist parties, and also to articles with pro- and anti-immigration attitudes presented.

RQ3: Are there differences in cognitive and emotional responses of the public to articles of populist and non-populist parties?

RQ4: Are there differences in cognitive and emotional responses of the public to articles with pro- and anti-immigration attitudes presented?

METHODS

DATA COLLECTION

To find the answers to our research questions, we chose the last two months of campaign mobilisation (January-February 2020) as a reference period. We have chosen the pre-election period for the purpose of this research because it is specific in terms of political communication and crucial in terms of electoral results. We conclude that the discourse during this period is a suitable opportunity to study populism. Migration-related public online news and social media posts of the Slovak political parties with more than 5 % of votes (Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky, 2020) (political parties listed in the next section) published in January/February 2020, were content analysed. Political party Homeland was added to the list as their Facebook pages were spreading fake news or disinformation in the pre-election period, with the aim to increase the electoral success of the party, as also pointed out in (Sawiris & Kuchta, 2019). The discussion on migration in Slovakia is dominated by online news and social media platforms. To capture the diversity of reading material on the Internet, we accessed posts from various online websites, leading social media platforms in Slovakia and video-sharing site. See Table 1 for detailed information.

Čas	Major online news site
Magazin 1	News site led far-right political party
Postoj	Conservative-Christian news site
Hlavne správy	Misinformation website
Facebook	Leading social media
Youtube	Video sharing site

Table 1. Top online sites in the overall conversations

Source: authors' own elaboration

The analysed texts were selected on the basis of several criteria - 1) they had to contain statements by representatives of the relevant political party 2) they had to respond to the migration issue 3) they had to be published in the specified pre-election period 4) they had to have comments allowed and contain discussion (posts to which very few people responded were excluded) 5) they could not contain more than 600 comments in order to allow a qualitative assessment of the text. Public comments related to social media posts (n=1375) representing the social discourse on migration were used as the data source for the analyses.

Characterization of analysed political parties and posts

In the following section, we introduce and characterise the political parties whose media outputs were analysed in the research.

LSNS

People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS—Ľudová Strana Naše Slovensko) is a far-right, neo-nazi political party in Slovakia. Its leader, Marian Kotleba, became known for his right-wing populism, xenophobic rhetoric and anti-establishment sentiment. The analysed discourse was retrieved from the youtube blog series called Politicky nekorektné (Politically incorrect) on 4.1.2020. Milan Mazurek, a member of LSNS in that time period (now ex-member), discussed in said episode alleged migrant's attack in Germany and other parts of Europe. Mazurek's arguments aligned with his (and his party's) anti-immigration ideology.

OLaNO

Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO—Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti) is a populist and anti-elite political movement in Slovakia. Igor Matovič, leader of OLaNO, presents the party as an anti-corruption movement. The examined discourse was retrieved from the article "Pročko promotes help for migrants and Muslims in Slovakia: Let's help those who need it." which was published on a scandal-oriented online platform called Magazin1. Magazin1 is speculated to be financed by political party LSNS, thus sharing its anti-established sentiment. In the article, OLaNO's member Jozef Pročko expresses his pro-migration attitude but also the need for more regulated migration in Slovakia.

PS-SPOLU

Progressive Slovakia and Together—Civic Democracy (PS-SPOLU—Progresívne Slovensko a SPOLU—Občianska demokracia) was a non-parliamentary coalition of two political parties. The coalition presented itself as a progressive and pro-Europe movement. After the 2020 parliamentary elections, the coalition disbanded. The analysed discourse was retrieved from the post published on the PS-SPOLU Facebook page on 22.2.2020. The post was produced by Zuzana Številová, a member of PS-SPOLU, and describes a personal story of an Afghan migrant living in Slovakia for 25 years, being respected and well-liked in the community.

SAS

Freedom and Solidarity (SAS - Sloboda a Solidarita) is a right-wing and liberal party in Slovakia. The party is known for supporting both cultural and economic liberalism in its policies. The studied discourse was retrieved from the article “We have solutions, progressives and Kiska only goals” published in the conservative journal *Postoj* on 15.1.2020. In the article, the leader of SAS Richard Sulík presents his many liberal stances but also a somewhat sceptical perspective on pro-migration policies.

SME RODINA

WE ARE FAMILY (SME RODINA) is a populist political party in Slovakia that is known for its opposition to mass migration and conservative stances. Its leader Boris Kollár does not consider a party to be either right-wing or left-wing. The discourse was retrieved from the article “I don’t want to be associated with liberals” which was published in the conservative journal *Postoj* on 14.1.2020. In this article, the leader of SME RODINA Boris Kollár proclaimed many pre-election populist promises and expressed his anti-LGBT and anti-migration attitudes.

SMER-SD

Direction—Social Democracy (SMER - sociálna demokracia) is a social-democratic political party in Slovakia. The party claims to have a social-democratic orientation with Slovak national characteristics. SMER was part of the government at the time material was collected. In 2020, SMER became one of the opposition parties. The discourse was retrieved from the Facebook feed of Robert Fico, leader of SMER. The media post was called: “Thanks to great work of our security forces and uncompromising anti-migration policies of SMER, Slovakia belongs to the safest countries in the world. If Kiska wants to welcome migrants here, the safety of women, children and families will be at risk, as it is already happening in countries of western Europe.” Andrej Kiska was at a time leader of one of the most significant opposing political parties with pro-migration policies.

VLASTĚ

Homeland (VLASTĚ) is a non-parliamentary national political party in Slovakia. Its political leader Štefan Harabin often uses anti-establishment, populist and anti-mi-

gration rhetoric. The analysed discourse was retrieved from the article “Leader of party VLASTĚ Štefan Harabin: Pellegrini and Danko play the fake game.” Pellegrini and Danko were members of other prominent Slovak political parties. In the article, Harabin proclaims Slovakia should not accept any migrants and doubts official migration statistics for the past year.

ZA ĽUDÍ

For the People (ZA ĽUDÍ) is a centrist political party in Slovakia. Party expressed a conservative perspective on registered partnership but also a pro-migration ideology. At the time of discourse collection for the research, the party was led by Andrej Kiska. After the election, Andrej Kiska retired from politics. The studied discourse was retrieved from an article “Kiska again confirms his words: It is our moral obligation, as a successful country, to accept a few thousand migrants.” The article was published on the website Hlavné správy (Main News) and criticised Kiska’s statements. Hlavné správy profiles itself as a conservative journal; however, it has a history of publishing conspiratory news and is speculated to be financed by opposing political parties.

All discourse and induced emotion analyses of individual posts can be found in the supplementary material.

TRIANGULATION

This research utilises qualitative discourse analysis to analyse retrieved comments. The triangulation method was used to identify dominant themes. Specifically, investigator triangulation was applied, in which the involvement of multiple observers was used to secure as many differing views as possible on the behaviour in question (Denzin, 1978). In the process of data analysis, we relied on a mutual exchange by having three researchers analyse the data and engage in consensus building. We were aware of our personal responsibility and reflect on our interpretations and decisions in every research step.

Each observer identified several themes, which appeared most frequently in the discourse. In the next step, themes were compared and results were synthesised. Four themes emerged and were chosen as crucial for discourse: 1) *Questioning the morals of government elites* 2) *Economic issues* 3) *Security and identity threats* 4) *Conflict of liberals and conservatives*. In the first topic, people pointed to the immoral character of the behaviour of politicians or other elites, so the opposition between pure people and corrupt elites was identified. In the second topic, the negative impact of immigration on Slovak people, mostly elderly people, people in need, so the “US” and “THEM” narrative was highlighted, while immigrants were described as enemies and threats. In the third topic, people pointed to the risk of violence and aggression after immigration and the cultural impact of Islam on live in Slovakia. The last theme also implied the polarisation between groups, as liberals and conservatives were criticised for their attitudes towards migration. So in each topic, polarisation or antagonistic logic was reflected in the articulation of gaps between “US” and “THEM”: people and elites, people and immigrants, conservatives and liberals.

To better understand how each of the themes was framed, a description of the theme and examples are provided in Table 2.

Theme	Description of theme	Theme example
Questioning the morals of government elites	Comments pointing to corruption and immoral behaviour of politicians and other government elites	<i>His life story, his contacts, relationships and partnerships are proof that he will be capable of everything, he is a person completely without principles, character, morality. He does not want migrants; he has a child with one. Hypocrite!</i>
Economic issues	Statements suggesting an adverse economic impact of migration and already existing cases of poverty in Slovakia	<i>Only 5% of migrants really run away from the war. The rest simply wants to get better - at the expense of a naive host. And don't we happen to have enough of our own people at home who need help - and unlike those migrants - who really deserve it? How many of our old people (who have worked here all their lives !!!) can't pay for retirement homes for 800-900 euros per month out of their 300 euros pension ???</i>
Security and identity threats	Statements emphasising security threats (risk of violence) or identity threats (Islamization) of migration on Slovak society	<i>And again only young men. Do women, children and the elderly not suffer from war, oppression and poverty in their countries? What are they trying to tell us? Should we impose this on Slovakia? And then to endure their violence and aggression, as Sweden or Germany have already tried?</i>
Conflict of liberals and conservatives	Comments assaulting or ridiculing liberal or conservative ideologies and views on migration	<i>He is not dangerous, but remaining liberals on the Soros agenda in his party are. The ideological-cultural questions are important in a divided society. Because the stolen can be taken back quite quickly, but you won't fix the societal moral devastation in 100 years.</i>

Table 2. Description and examples of themes identified in discourse

Source: authors' own elaboration

Proportional percentages of themes and percentage of comments themes appeared in were calculated for individual articles. The percentages of comments for posts with a pro- and anti-immigration stance and posts by populist and non-populist parties in which the topic appeared were then counted.

TEXT MINING

For emotion analysis of discourse, the R programming software, specifically the *Syuzhet* package (Jockers, 2020) was utilised. *Syuzhet* package is a freely available library of the R program. Since this package requires text in the English language, all the text was translated from Slovak to English before analysis. Then word-level sentiment analysis was performed. Using the function `get_nrc_sentiment`, a number of words

that, according to the built-in lexicon, express one of Plutchik's eight basic emotions (Plutchik, 1982) were identified for each section of comments of posts. This process resulted in frequencies of eight basic emotions for every of eight individual posts and by summing the data, frequencies of elicited emotions for all discourse.

However, the frequency of one of the emotions, trust, was greatly overestimated by the program (double frequency compared to other emotions), which is a case for other studies using the Syuzhet package (Hoffman, 2018; Dubey, 2020). It can be speculated that the Syuzhet package method could not appropriately classify language associated with trust, failing to take into account the context of discourse. To avoid possible misinterpretation of data, we decided to discard emotion *trust* from analyses.

The resulting frequencies of emotions were understandably proportional to the number of comments and overall length of texts. For more meaningful between posts comparison and interpretation, frequencies of emotions were converted to proportional percentages.

FINDINGS

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

In this section, an integrative analysis of all eight media posts combined is described. 426 occurrences of four identified themes appeared in the discourse. In Table 3, we provide three statistical indicators. Frequency in discourse/per post informs us which themes were dominant in discourse. The proportion of theme appearance in discourse/post provides this information in proportional percentage. Lastly, the percentage of comments themes appeared in gives us a better idea of how saturated comments were with themes. In overall discourse, *questioning the morals of government elites* was the most prevalent theme as its frequency is bigger than the sum of the frequencies of all other themes. More detailed results of the analysis are presented in Table 3.

Theme	Frequency in discourse	The proportion of theme appearance in discourse	% of comments theme appeared in
Questioning the morals of government elites	216	49.7 %	15.1 %
Economic issues	69	15.9 %	4.8 %
Security and identity threats	89	20.5 %	6.2 %
Conflict of liberals and conservatives	52	13.9 %	3.6 %

Table 3. Analysis of themes in all discourse

Source: authors' own elaboration

Following the second aim of this paper we examined elicited sentiment by the discourse. Figure 1 displays the occurrence of emotions in proportional percentages.



Figure 1. Occurrence of elicited emotions in all discourse

Source: authors' own elaboration

The results show that the percentages of the evoked emotions of fear, anticipation and anger seem to be greater than the percentages of the other evoked emotions. These results suggest that the mentioned emotions are induced more frequently by the discourse. However, we remain cautious in further conclusions, as the expected percentage distribution of emotions ($100\%/7 = 14.3\%$) does not differ greatly from our results. We lack statistical tools that can test for statistically significant differences between the occurrence of elicited emotions. However, the frequency of the most abundant emotion is almost double that of the least abundant emotion, and thus the results serve as an indication of the overall trend of the distribution of emotions elicited by discourse.

COMPARISON OF PUBLIC RESPONSES TO PRO- AND ANTI-MIGRATION ARTICLES

Articles were categorised according to presented pro- or anti-migration attitudes. Anti-migration attitudes were states in articles of We are family, Homeland, People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS), SMER-SD, and Freedom and Solidarity (SAS). Pro-migration attitudes were presented in articles of Ordinary people and independent personalities (OĽaNO), For people (Za ľuďi); Progressive Slovakia and Together - Civic Democracy (PS Spolu). Percentages of comments in which the themes appeared (Table 4) suggest that pro-migration articles evoked more discussion about security and identity threats, but the rest of themes were represented to a similar extent.

Percentages of emotions elicited by articles with pro- and anti-migration attitudes (Figure 2 and Figure 3) indicate that the articles evoked similar emotional reactions—mostly fear and anticipation, but also anger, and in case of pro-immigration attitude also joy. So people were polarised not only in their cognitive reactions (themes) but also in their emotional ones.

	Comments on pro-migration posts (5)	Comments on anti-migration posts (3)
Theme	% of comments theme appeared in	% of comments theme appeared in
Questioning the morals of government elites	15.6 %	14.4 %
Economic issues	8.3 %	5.28 %
Security and identity threats	11.73 %	4.6 %
Conflict of liberals and conservatives	5.34 %	4.8 %

Table 4. Comparison of themes frequency between comments on pro-migration posts and comments on anti-migration posts

Source: authors' own elaboration

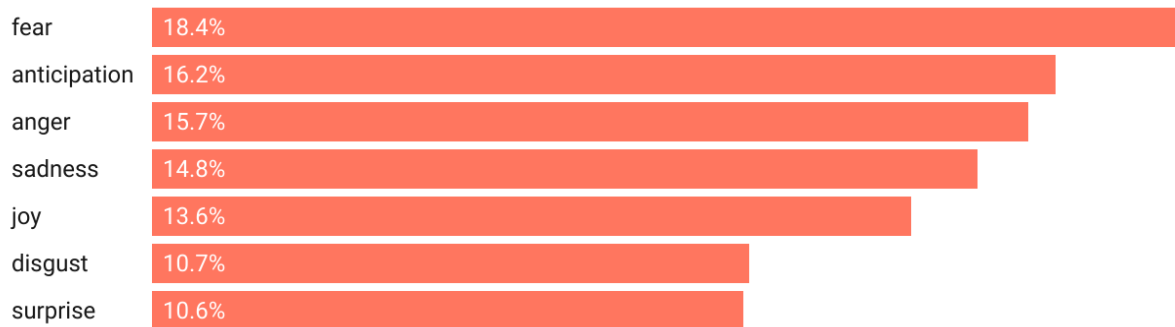


Figure 2. Emotional response distribution in posts with anti-migration politics

Source: authors' own elaboration



Figure 3. Emotional response distribution in posts with pro-migration politics

Source: authors' own elaboration

COMPARISON OF PUBLIC REACTIONS TO ARTICLES OF POPULIST AND NON-POPULIST PARTIES

Political parties were categorised into populist and non-populist according to POP-PA (Meijers et al. 2018), PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2019) and the study of Školckay et al. (2021). There were purely populist parties (OLaNO, We are family), parties with populist rhetoric mostly in the pre-election period (Homeland, SMER-SD, ĽSNS) and non-populist parties (SAS, PS-Together, For People). According to results in Table 5, when comparing populist and non-populist parties, it seems that articles of populist parties evoked a lot more discussion on economic issues but also about the im/moral character/behavior of politicians.

Theme	Comments on post of Populist parties (5)	Comments on post of Non-populist parties (3)
	% of comments theme appeared in	% of comments theme appeared in
Questioning the morals of government elites	17.5 %	10.4 %
Economic issues	15.5 %	1.5 %
Security and identity threats	8.9 %	4.4 %
Conflict of liberals and conservatives	5.7 %	3.1%

Table 5. Comparison of themes frequency between comments on populist posts and comments on non-populist posts

Source: authors' own elaboration

As the composition of political parties was almost identical as in case of pro- and anti-migration categorization, the level of emotions that were elicited is very similar. Articles of populist parties evoked a lot of fear, anticipation and anger. On the contrary, articles of non-populist parties elicited mostly anticipation and joy, but also fear was among the most prevalent ones (Figure 4 and Figure 5).



Figure 4. Occurrence of emotional responses in posts of populist parties

Source: authors' own elaboration



Figure 5. Occurrence of emotional responses in posts of non-populist parties

Source: authors' own elaboration

DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper was to increase understanding of how political discourse on the migration topic in the pre-election period is reflected in cognitive and emotional aspects of public attitudes toward migration. Moreover, both cognitive and emotional responses to articles of populist and non-populist parties, and with pro- and anti-migration attitudes were compared.

Discourse analysis revealed that Slovak (online) public cognitively reacted to the “old” migration topic in several themes. The fact that the topic of migration was not the central topic of the 2020 Slovak elections was also reflected in the reactions of people who, slightly more than by migration, responded to the topic with criticism and an appeal to the morale of politicians. Despite the low number of foreigners in Slovakia, some people expressed fear over the negative influence of Muslim culture, worrying about how migration will alter Slovak national identity. Some Slovaks discussed the security implications of the migration, mainly focusing on border protection, while local politicians were blamed for bringing “illegal” migrants to Slovakia. Results are in line with other recent studies on migration attitudes in Slovakia, which proved that migration is perceived as a security and cultural threat. Moreover, research conducted in Slovakia proved that the attitudes toward foreigners become more negative over time (Gallo Kriglerová et al., 2021; Slosiarik and Agentúra Focus, 2019). A noteworthy finding is that if the parties presented their pro-migration attitudes, people responded to a greater extent with the topic of security and identity threat than in case of anti-migration-oriented articles. On the contrary, the topics of the economic threat and the morality of elites were the most frequent reactions of people to the articles of populist parties compared to non-populist parties.

The paper also aimed to identify elicited sentiment by the analysed social migration discourse as well as the prevalence of elicited sentiment by individual media posts. According to our analysis, the most pronounced detected emotions were fear, anticipation and anger, but also joy. It seems that joy was elicited to a greater extent in articles with pro-immigration attitudes and articles of non-populist parties. Our results support previous research (Widmann, 2021) that has equally highlighted the fact that

the discourse of non-populist parties can evoke the emotion of joy to a greater extent. In addition to fear, the posts of populist parties produced an increased incidence of other negative emotions (anger, sadness, disgust), which may be consistent with the findings of previous research (Nai, 2021; Widmann, 2021; Wirz, 2018). However, their increased rates are so minimal compared to non-populist parties that it is not reasonable to draw any conclusions. It can be speculated that detected fear might have been induced by the content of comments connected to *security and identity threats*, which was the second most recurring theme in discourse and also possibly *economic issues*, the third-most dominant theme in discourse. Fear was also the most frequently evoked emotion in the analysis of four of our media post. It is interesting to note, that in most of these posts (with the exception of media post of VLASTĚ) *security and identity threats* was the key theme of the comments. Thus, the topic of migration elicited mostly fear among people. In media posts where anticipation was the most frequently evoked emotion, this was not the case. Anticipation in these posts (We are family, For People, SAS) connected mainly with the topics of *elite morality*.

Articles with negative attitudes of politicians towards migrants, in addition to a lengthy public discussion, aroused mainly negative emotions (fear, anger). On the contrary, the positively written contribution of non-populist party the PS-SPOLU aroused positive emotions (joy) and did not provoke such a rich discussion as negatively tuned contributions, which underlines the fact that negative emotional appeals are a good strategy to increase social media user interaction (Martella & Bracciale, 2021). Moreover, public presentation of anti-immigrant statements and populist content lead to negative attitudes and emotion toward immigrants (Wirz et al., 2018). A similar study of online comments (Belažiová, 2019) suggests that society is facing the difficult task of shaping a more favourable attitude of the majority population to migrants for their easier integration into society. This is the task where national politicians should lead the role. But the reality is quite the opposite. The way politicians present the issue of migration influences public opinion and with the help of the media, creates space for the polarization of society. In the case of our research, the process starts with populist statements of politicians on the controversial topic of migration. Consequently, articles and other media posts covering these statements are published, creating space and channels (comment sections) for public social discourse. In these discussions, certain currently popular themes (more or less related to migration) arise and through them, tension and friction between individuals or groups are generated. The outcomes of this process are emotions, more often negative than positive.

One of the main contributions of our approach is showcasing that media posts focused more or less on the same topic (in our case, migration) can produce diverse social discourse saturated with many themes. Sometimes more than the article's topic, the commentators were interested in the author of the article or the central figure of the contribution—the politician. Social discourse certainly does not limit itself to the bounds of its source but rather, so to speak, 'has life on its own'.

LIMITATIONS

The present study has several limitations. First, the results are partly limited by the specifics of the Slovak culture/language/political scene, which prevents a wider generalisation of results. Second, it focuses on the pre-election period without comparing it to the routine period, which would allow the comparison of populist communication in different modes of operation. Pre-election period may potentially increase the number of affective and expressive tools used by political parties all over the ideological spectrum. However, research showed that in the case of European parliament elections, surprisingly, some Slovak political parties used less intensive populist rhetoric in times before elections than in non-electoral periods (Marincea & Školkay, 2020). Third, only the main political parties that commented on migration on social media or that the newspapers wrote about were included in the analyses. Forth, the paper considers only one type of communication channel, online posts that limit the findings to the online population. Moreover, it is not taking into account the different user characteristics of selected media (in terms of education, socio-economic status or political interest). Fifth, the Syuzhet package is only capable of word-level analysis. The sentence-level analysis would probably offer more adequate results. Sentiment analysis used in the study is only the first step in identifying sentiment in text. More refined tools need to be developed in the future, addressing the problem of the inability to take into account contextual information. Finally, the article does not provide information on whether the identified themes and emotions are a response to populist content or emotional appeals, or whether it is a response to comments from right-wing, centrist, or left-wing parties.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE

Despite these limitations, the value of this paper lies in focusing on both emotional and cognitive aspects of attitudes towards migration. Furthermore, it provides a description of the mechanism of how certain emotions and polarised views are generated in social discourse. We believe these results should contribute to the field of psychology research. The first coronavirus case in Slovakia was recorded only six days after the 2020 parliamentary elections and very soon—in May 2022, voters will be asked again to turn out in the polling stations for regional and local elections. Following our pilot study, it would be valuable to provide another insight into populist communication and public discourse facing the greatest health crisis in the country. The study also utilises the innovative research methodology—a combination of sentiment analysis based on Plutchik's basic human emotions and discourse analysis based on the triangulation method. Parallel application of these methods in all media posts allows a connection between certain emotions and themes that dominate in posts. All of the analysed data, social discourse and media posts, are also easily available online. We believe this type of methodology is applicable to a variety of online (or offline) materials and numerous areas of psychology research and can expand the toolkit of the modern researcher.

CONCLUSION

The research explored the cognitive and emotional aspects of public attitudes towards migration through an analysis of political discourse in the pre-election period. We discovered 4 recurring themes in the discourse - questioning the morals of government elites (appeared in 15.1% of comments), security and identity threats (appeared in 6.2% of comments), economic issues (4.8% of comments) and conflict of liberals and conservatives (3.6% of comments). We conclude that although the media posts focused mainly on the topic of migration, the emerged discourse nonetheless reflected broader themes and issues that resonated in society at the time. We also found evidence of pro-migration posts evoking more discussion about security and identity threats and posts of populist parties eliciting more responses connected to economic issues and immoral behavior of politicians. Sentiment analysis revealed that fear, anticipation and anger seem to be more often elicited than other emotions in the discourse. This evidence is unfortunately weakened by the lack of statistical tools that would confirm the significance of the difference. Our findings also suggest that the emotion of joy was invoked to a greater degree in posts with pro-migration attitudes and posts of non-populist parties. These findings provide a more profound understanding of how the topic of migration and the presence/absence of a populist agenda in media communication influences the content of political discourse and the emotions that are triggered by it.

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