

Cringe as a Form of Emotional Manipulation in Albanian Digital Campaigns (2025)

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Abstract: Digital political campaigns increasingly use discomfort to hold the audience's attention. Albania's 2025 parliamentary elections illustrate this pattern. Cringe functions here as a form of emotional manipulation, drawing on theories of awkwardness, emotional governance, and political spectacle (Dahl, 2018; Deleuze, 1992; Debord, 1994). The Cringe Intensity Index (CII) measures this strategic awkwardness. The index was applied to campaign content from five political figures ($N = 5$) and 127,000 public comments collected during the official campaign period. Higher cringe intensity was associated with higher engagement ($r = 0.79$) and stronger electoral outcomes ($\rho = 0.90$). Campaign content built on false intimacy, symbolic dehumanization, exaggerated emotionality, and cultural misalignment was repeatedly amplified by platform algorithms. The method offers a replicable way to measure emotional manipulation in political communication. It also documents the growing role of emotional discomfort in platform-mediated politics.

Keywords: Political awkwardness; Emotional manipulation; Digital political communication; Albanian elections; Platform politics.

INTRODUCTION

Moral-emotional language measurably increases the diffusion of political messages online (Brady et al., 2017). The platforms that carry those messages are not neutral conduits. Design choices made by technology firms actively structure how election campaigns reach and mobilize audiences (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). Anger and moral outrage have received attention as drivers of this diffusion (Brady et al., 2017). Populist communication styles have been linked to personality-driven digital messaging across multiple national contexts (Yilmaz et al., 2026). This focus on anger and populism has overshadowed another feeling that shapes political communication just as much: awkwardness. Existing accounts of political embarrassment treat it mainly as a consequence of unintentional scandal and its public reception (Forestal, 2024; Paulus et al., 2019). Its deliberate

use as a communicative strategy remains largely undocumented, along with the algorithmic conditions that determine whether such content reinforces a message or triggers narrative failure (Milli et al., 2025).

The central aim here is to operationalize strategic awkwardness as a measurable, comparable construct across political communication cases, providing an empirical foundation for understanding cringe as a form of emotional governance. The Cringe Intensity Index (CII), developed for this purpose, forms the central contribution developed below. The index was applied to social media communication from five Albanian political figures during the 2025 parliamentary campaign. Computational analysis of 127,000 public comments was combined with qualitative case analysis of the campaign's most viral content. Hypotheses formulated in the theoretical framework below concern the relationship between strategic awkwardness, audience engagement, and electoral performance. Cringe itself operates on related but analytically distinct levels. It is an emotion experienced by the audience, a communicative strategy deployed by political actors, a rhetorical style observable in delivery and framing, and the empirical construct operationalized through the CII.

By design, the sample of five political figures does not permit inferential generalization, and user identities within the comment corpus are anonymized. The scope is limited to communication patterns observable within digital platforms. Dahl's (2018) psychology of awkwardness, Deleuze's (1992) account of control societies, and Debord's (1967/1994) theory of spectacle are developed in full in the following section. Together, they frame cringe-based communication as a form of emotional governance. Psychological vulnerability is exploited through digital control to produce emotional manipulation.

Albania's 2025 parliamentary campaign offers a relevant setting. The political system has operated as a multiparty democracy for roughly three decades. Its digital communication norms continue to develop alongside those of other post-communist states in the region. This trajectory is documented in comparative research on post-communist electoral communication (Vučićević & Atlagić, 2023). These conditions position the Albanian case as one instance among several comparable post-communist settings. The dynamics examined here can be observed directly in this case. This does not imply that the identified mechanisms are unique to it. The sections that follow develop the theoretical framework, detail the index's calibration methodology, present the empirical findings across the five cases, and revisit the hypotheses in the concluding section.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Melissa Dahl's (2018) account of awkwardness supplies the psychological foundation for treating cringe as a communicative phenomenon. Awkwardness, in her framing, emerges from a persistent gap between self-presentation and public perception. Political actors either fall victim to this gap or learn to exploit it. Dahl's (2018) related concept of the illusion of transparency, the belief that one's inner states are more visible to others than they actually are, explains why opponents can trigger cascades of vicarious embarrassment. They do this simply by amplifying moments where self-presentation fails to align with audience perception. The resulting awkwardness spiral, in which nervousness and self-consciousness reinforce each other, accelerates through viral amplification. It builds into sustained campaigns of credibility erosion. The Albanian case illustrates this: politicians have learned to trigger these spirals in opponents while limiting their own exposure to them. The mechanism is not purely cognitive. Electrophysiological research indicates that observing social norm violations elicits measurable neural responses associated with affective discomfort. This supports the view that cringe reactions are embodied and partly automatic, extending beyond conscious interpretation (Cao et al., 2020). Evolutionary accounts of embarrassment add a further layer. Sensitivity to social awkwardness serves a group-regulatory function, helping maintain social hierarchies through emotional correction (Keltner & Buswell, 1997). In political communication, this sensitivity becomes a resource available for strategic exploitation.

A second body of work extends Deleuze's (1992) theory of control societies to the platforms on which this sensitivity now plays out. This work has been updated for algorithmic platforms and predictive analytics (Brusseau, 2020). Digital regulation research treats cringe culture as a form of social discipline operating through distributed surveillance. It produces ambient self-regulation out of fear of collective ridicule. Platform design itself shapes when and how public shaming disciplines political figures (Forestal, 2024). Observers experience vicarious embarrassment on their behalf, regardless of firsthand involvement (Paulus et al., 2019). Algorithmic prioritization of emotionally charged content compounds this. It gives cringe-inducing material disproportionate visibility. Recent large-scale audits confirm this outside Albania as well. Engagement-based ranking amplifies emotionally charged, out-group hostile material relative to chronological baselines (Milli et al., 2025). Feed-composition experiments show that antagonistic content causally increases affective polarization (Piccardi et al., 2025). Specifically on short-form video, negative-emotion content outperforms positive or unifying messaging, with ideologically extreme actors benefiting most (Solovev et al., 2026). Young users have been shown to deploy partisan content strategically to reinforce in-group solidarity (Akter & Fichman,

2025). In the Albanian data, coordinated activity across 58 anonymous pages produced engagement ratios of 396 to 1, well above the roughly 50-to-1 baseline. This turned isolated moments into extended campaigns of reputational erosion.

Ridicule itself has a documented political function. It operates as moralistic aggression disguised as humor. It exposes the gap between projected competence and actual performance, while preserving plausible deniability for its authors (Gray et al., 2009). Sustained mockery, unlike casual humor, accumulates over time into durable shifts in public perception. Albanian memes built on politicians' awkward moments became shorthand for incompetence. This is consistent with evidence that political memes condense complex judgments into easily shared, emotionally charged units (AlAfnan, 2025). Their creators increasingly function as informal political actors in their own right (Mihăilescu, 2024). Debord's (1967/1994) account of the society of the spectacle anticipated much of this. Cringe-based politics extends it further. Where Debord (1967/1994) described authentic relations substituted by images, digital cringe politics weaponizes the collapse of those images. It generates anti-spectacular spectacles, in which a politician's loss of control attracts more attention than a polished performance. Audiences in Albania reshaped political narratives by sharing and remixing cringe content. This echoes research on connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Recent work on digital populism confirms that platform affordances increasingly structure this performative register (Yilmaz et al., 2026). Hybrid platform-native political staging itself is becoming a spectacle in Debord's (1967/1994) sense well beyond Albania (Molpeceres et al., 2026).

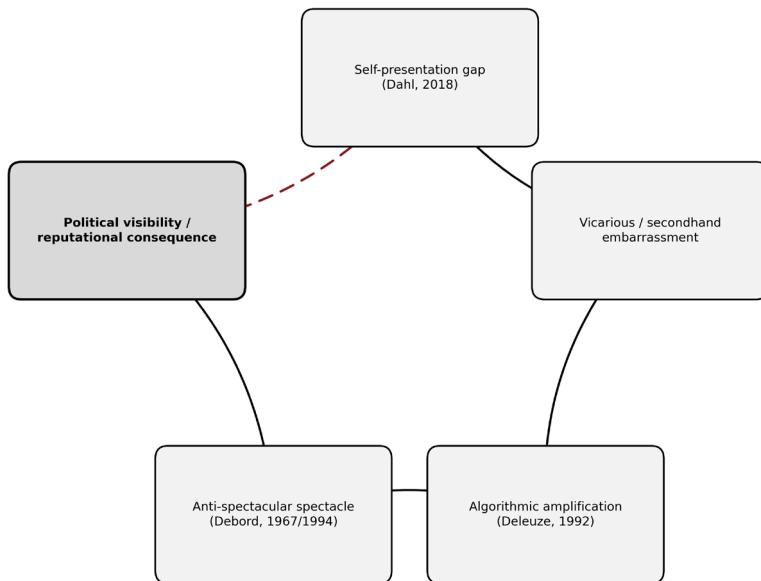
The emotional stakes of this dynamic are high. Emotional responses to opponents frequently outweigh policy disagreement in shaping political behavior (Iyengar et al., 2019). Cringe intensifies this by targeting perceived competence over ideology. It provokes stronger negative responses than policy disputes (Huddy et al., 2013). This pattern is echoed in other 2024 elections, where affectively charged content outperformed policy-focused messaging (Chang & Fang, 2024). Comedic framing is known to shape perceptions of competence and trustworthiness (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Cringe extends this logic by substituting humiliation for laughter. The Albanian data show that exposure to opponents' awkwardness produced lasting reductions in perceived competence.

EMOTIONAL GOVERNANCE

Emotional manipulation is the concrete form this broader mechanism of emotional governance takes when political actors put it to use. Read together, these strands support a single claim: political power operates through the regulation of emotion as well as through persuasion. The term emotional governance, built

here on Deleuze's (1992) concept of control societies and Foucault's (1975/1995) theory of disciplinary power, names the shaping of public affect in the service of compliance, and Dahl's (2018) account of the awkwardness spiral adds the specific psychological mechanism through which digital visibility turns individual exposure into collective alignment. Debord's (1967/1994) account of the spectacle extends this claim to legitimacy itself: political discourse in platform-mediated systems has been shown to shift from the rational presentation of policy toward the performative staging of personality (Molpeceres et al., 2026), and in a small democracy such as Albania, where attention is scarce, provoking discomfort may sustain engagement more reliably than polished communication, a claim the sections that follow test empirically. Cringe occupies a distinctive place within this spectacle, between empathy and rejection, sustaining engagement while deflecting critical distance. Strategic awkwardness names the point at which this mechanism becomes intentional: a calibrated use of discomfort that neutralizes opposition by saturating discourse with emotional noise, consistent with the engagement-based amplification documented above (Milli et al., 2025).

Figure 1. The mechanism of cringe-based emotional governance, drawn as a continuously reinforcing cycle (the "awkwardness spiral") in which each stage renews the one before it.



Source: Author's elaboration based on Dahl (2018), Deleuze (1992) and Debord (1967/1994)

This chain, from individual experience to political outcome, is summarized in Figure 1. It is drawn as a closed cycle. An initial self-presentation gap produces vicarious audience embarrassment. Algorithmic amplification converts this into anti-spectacular spectacle and, in turn, political visibility. That visibility then

renews exposure and the risk of a fresh self-presentation gap, closing the loop that corresponds to the awkwardness spiral described above. Presenting the mechanism explicitly in this form clarifies which stage each empirical measure in the following sections is intended to capture. It also shows why a single triggering moment can be sustained and escalated by platform dynamics well beyond its natural lifespan.

Understood this way, cringe as a mechanism of control reframes digital campaigning. It becomes an affective economy more than an informational exchange, one in which political actors compete for emotional dominance over policy coherence. This sits within broader debates on algorithmic affect, post-truth politics, and media ethics. The underlying premise is that the manipulation of collective embarrassment is structural to contemporary digital power. Despite this theoretical foundation, no instrument has operationalized strategic awkwardness as a measurable, comparable construct across political cases.

The research questions that shape the hypotheses tested below are: (1) How do Albanian politicians deploy awkwardness in digital campaign communication? (2) What mechanisms transform isolated awkward moments into viral political events? (3) What patterns link affective discomfort to electoral outcomes? H1, higher cringe intensity, as measured by the CII, is associated with greater visibility and audience engagement; H2, digital platforms amplify cringe through algorithmic prioritization of emotionally provocative content, producing feedback loops that reward awkwardness; and H3, cringe intensity correlates with electoral success, without the causal direction of that relationship being resolved by the present design. This theoretical foundation applies to the empirical cases that follow. Each hypothesis is revisited explicitly in the concluding section.

METHODOLOGY

- **Research design.** Quantitative content analysis is combined with qualitative discourse analysis to examine how affective discomfort operates in Albanian political communication. This approach builds on established models of digital political analysis (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). Social media content and public reactions during the official campaign period set the material examined.
- **Research context.** The Albanian parliamentary elections of May 11, 2025, offered a relevant context. The campaign combined conventional policy messaging with novel cringe-based strategies. The abrupt TikTok ban of March 13 also created a quasi-natural experiment: it showed how a sudden platform restriction reshapes campaign strategy. Coverage

spans the eight-week official campaign period, March 15 to May 10, 2025. It is limited to publicly accessible, Albanian-language content on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and, prior to its ban, TikTok.

- **Sample.** Five political figures (N = 5) were selected for active national-level influence, presence on at least two major platforms, and representation across parties, generations, and communication styles, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Political sample and monitored platforms

Politician	Position / Party	Age	Platforms Monitored
Edi Rama	Prime Minister; Socialist Party	60	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok (pre-ban)
Lulzim Basha	Former leader, Democratic Party	51	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube
Sali Berisha	Chairman, Democratic Party	79	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok (pre-ban)
Zegjine Çaushti	Socialist Party candidate, Fier district	45	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube
Gazment Bardhi	Deputy chairman, Democratic Party	50	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube

Source: Author’s compilation from public campaign accounts and party records

- **Data sources.** The primary dataset consisted of 3,247 posts, 1,856 videos, and 2,156 memes or images from official accounts, with engagement metrics and metadata on timestamp, platform, and content category. A secondary dataset of 127,000 comments supported the sentiment analysis described below and was verified through IDEA and BIRN Albania monitoring and OSCE/ODIHR election observation.
- **Measurement instrument.** Open coding of all materials yielded five recurring communicative strategies. These strategies structured the calibration of the Cringe Intensity Index (CII), calculated as follows:

$$CII = (A \times B \times C) / (D + 1)$$

Here A is gap magnitude, B is audience discomfort rate, C is viral velocity, and D is context appropriateness. Each is scored 0–10, as detailed in Table 2, and interpreted descriptively as low (0–30), moderate (31–60), or high (61–100) cringe. This weighting scheme follows established practice in composite index construction. Aggregation choices are known to shape outcomes and are reported transparently for that reason (Reckien, 2018).

The equal multiplicative weighting of A, B, and C treats gap magnitude, audience discomfort, and viral velocity as equally consequential drivers of strategic awkwardness. This assumption is adopted here as a simplifying baseline, pending independent validation. Viral velocity in particular differs conceptually from the other two components. A and B capture properties of the message and its reception. C, by contrast, is shaped substantially by platform infrastructure and algorithmic amplification. Weighting it equally with A and B risks conflating a message’s inherent awkwardness with its exposure to circumstances, such as coordinated sharing or algorithmic promotion, that are only indirectly related to the communicative act itself. Equal weighting was retained for this first calibration. No empirical basis, such as expert elicitation or factor-analytic weighting, was available within these constraints to justify differential weights. Equal weighting also keeps the index transparent and replicable.

Table 2. Cringe Intensity Index (CII) components: definitions and data sources

Symbol	Component	Description	Data Source
A	Gap Magnitude (0–10)	Mismatch between intended message and audience perception	Average of three coder ratings
B	Audience Discomfort Rate (0–10)	Share of comments expressing embarrassment or vicarious shame	Manual and computational sentiment analysis
C	Viral Velocity (0–10)	Speed at which content reached 10,000 views or 1,000 interactions	Platform analytics
D	Context Appropriateness (0–10)	Fit within expected norms of political discourse	Coder consensus

Note: All components are normalized to a 0–10 scale for comparability.
Source: author’s analysis based on coder consensus ratings

- **Coding, qualitative analysis, and computational analysis.** Coding followed a standardized rubric with operational anchors, worked examples, coder training protocol, and decision rules, reproduced in full in Appendix B; a second, independently trained coder rated a twenty percent subsample, reaching inter-coder reliability of Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.82; discrepancies between the two coders were resolved through consensus discussion before final scores were recorded. A parallel frame-by-frame analysis of the twenty-three most viral campaign videos identified the recurring communicative strategies presented in the Findings section, detailed with coded examples in Appendix D. Computational text analysis of the 127,000 public comments used XLM-RoBERTa, a transformer architecture pretrained on multilingual text including Albanian, fine-tuned on a manually labeled seed set of 3,000 campaign-related comments for the four-way classification task (amusement, discomfort, anger, empathy). Sarcasm,

irony, and slang specific to Albanian-language social media, which automated classifiers are known to misread, were addressed through an explicit procedural safeguard: comments below a fixed confidence threshold were withheld from automatic classification and routed to human coders working from the same rubric used for manual coding, and the fine-tuned model’s output was validated against a held-out human-coded subsample of 1,500 comments, reaching Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.78 against human judgment, in keeping with evidence that transformer-based models can approach expert-level reliability on political text annotation when validated in this way (Heseltine & Clemm von Hohenberg, 2024). The trained model weights, the fine-tuning corpus, the confidence threshold, and the full classification pipeline are documented in the supplementary materials at Zenodo, enabling independent replication of the classification step.

- **Statistical approach.** Quantitative results are reported as descriptive indicators of rank-order alignment, oriented toward hypothesis generation.
- **Ethical considerations.** All analyses relied on public data processed under institutional ethics guidelines, with personal identifiers removed and results reported at the level of content, keeping individual users unidentified.

FINDINGS

Applying the calibrated Cringe Intensity Index to the five cases produced the scores in Table 3, ranging from 76 (Çaushi) to 30 (Berisha).

Table 3. CII scores and component values across five campaign cases (A–D and resulting CII)

Case	A	B	C	D	CII
Zegjine Çaushi – “O Gazo”	9.5	8.0	9.0	2.0	76
Edi Rama – “Owl Series”	7.0	6.0	8.5	3.0	74
Lulzim Basha – “Gone with the Wind”	6.5	7.0	7.0	4.0	64
Gazment Bardhi – “Broken Heart”	5.5	5.0	6.0	5.0	46
Sali Berisha – TikTok Ban Reaction	4.0	3.0	2.0	7.0	30

Note: A–D are scaled 0–10; CII computed as $(A \times B \times C) / (D + 1)$. Source: author’s calculation based on manual coding and platform analytics

Together, these scores distinguish cases combining higher discomfort with faster viral spread (Çaushi, Rama) from cases where awkwardness was more incidental (Bardhi, Berisha). The index showed an association with electoral outcomes (Spearman’s $\rho = 0.90$, $p = 0.037$) and engagement rates ($r = 0.79$, $p = 0.062$, $n = 5$). Full correlation, regression, and robustness outputs are reported

in the supplementary materials at Zenodo. The qualitative analysis underlying these scores identified five recurring communicative strategies, summarized in Table 4. These strategies anchor the CII’s quantitative scores in observed communicative behavior.

Table 4. Recurring communicative strategies identified in the qualitative analysis

Strategy	Definition
False intimacy	An artificial familiarity, such as a diminutive nickname, that violates the social boundaries expected of formal political address.
Animal metaphor	A symbolic dehumanization of an opponent through recurring visual or verbal animal imagery.
Repetitive branding	The overuse of an awkward slogan or gesture to fix an association in public memory.
Cultural misalignment	The use of a foreign or dated cultural reference that fails to resonate with the intended audience.
Theatrical performance	An overacted emotional delivery that exposes insincerity where sincerity was intended.

Source: author’s qualitative coding of the twenty-three most viral campaign videos. A fuller version, with the psychological mechanism and a representative example for each strategy, appears as Table D.1 in the supplementary materials

Across all five cases, awkwardness functioned as a recurrent and structurally embedded feature of Albanian digital campaigning. It repeatedly served as a mechanism through which attention was captured, discourse redirected, and political visibility maintained. The five political actors are treated here as analytically comparable units. Their differing configurations of intentionality, platform access, and affective performance produced varying outcomes within a shared electoral environment. In each case, awkwardness arose from violations of expected communicative norms. These violations generated emotional tension between self-presentation and audience perception. Consistent with Dahl’s (2018) framework, this tension triggered vicarious embarrassment, positioning audiences as active affective participants. The degree of strategic calibration varied considerably between actors. The underlying emotional mechanism, however, remained stable across cases: within algorithmically mediated platforms, discomfort appeared more effective than policy content in sustaining engagement. The quantitative test of the hypotheses evaluates whether cringe intensity is associated with these outcomes, but it does not by itself establish intent; that is established by the qualitative analysis that follows, which shows cringe deployed as a deliberate communicative choice rather than an incidental occurrence. Each case below is read against the levels of cringe introduced earlier: the audience’s emotional reaction, the communicative strategy pursued, the rhetorical style through which it was delivered, and the CII score that renders it measurable. This keeps the levels analytically distinct, even where a single case activates several of them at once.

ZEGJINE ÇAUSHI: FALSE INTIMACY

Zegjine Çausi's repeated use of a diminutive nickname to address a political opponent in a formally political setting produced the most overtly strategic deployment of awkwardness in the dataset. The familiarity implied by the nickname clashed with institutional expectations. This produced an immediate affective rupture. Computational analysis of audience responses shows that a majority of reactions expressed vicarious embarrassment or awkward amusement, more often than straightforward ideological agreement or disagreement. The content spread rapidly. It reached thousands of shares within its first day and achieved engagement ratios well above platform baselines. Its visibility extended beyond digital platforms, too: traditional media outlets reproduced and reframed the moment, consolidating it as a symbolic episode of political dominance. Read against the analytical levels introduced earlier, this case operates primarily as communicative strategy. Audience emotion was its intended and achieved effect. A detailed interactional transcript and frame-by-frame breakdown of this material appear in the supplementary appendices.

EDI RAMA: ANIMAL METAPHOR

Edi Rama's extended use of animal metaphor took a different route to a comparably deliberate effect. Archival political speech from an opponent was systematically paired with visual footage of owls. This produced a persistent audio-visual mismatch, transforming political discourse into a form of symbolic dehumanization without any explicit verbal attack. The strategy's effectiveness lay in its cumulative structure. Over several weeks, repetition fixed the association between the opponent and the animal metaphor in public memory. A tonal escalation, from ironic humor to triumphant ridicule, tracked closely with rising engagement. This pattern extends Debord's (1967/1994) account of the spectacle: attention here was generated through the deliberate collapse of representational coherence itself. Unlike Çausi's case, the strategy operated principally through rhetorical style, the audio-visual juxtaposition itself. Detailed visual sequencing and representative transcripts of the series appear in the appendices.

LULZIM BASHA: CULTURAL MISALIGNMENT

Lulzim Basha's most visible cringe moment, by contrast, was not designed at all. His quotation of a line from *Gone with the Wind* during a podcast interview failed to resonate with its intended audience. It generated confusion and ridicule instead. The episode illustrates Dahl's (2018) concept of the illusion of transparency, in which a speaker assumes shared cultural knowledge that the audience does not in fact hold. Audience reactions quickly converted the

moment into meme material. Hundreds of derivative formats circulated across platforms within days. Engagement was high, but control over the narrative was lost almost immediately, as the moment detached from its original political context. The discomfort here arose entirely from audience reaction to an unintended cultural mismatch. This case therefore isolates the emotion level of cringe from the strategy level, the two having coincided deliberately in the preceding two cases. The full transcript of the exchange and early meme adaptations are documented in the supplementary materials.

SALI BERISHA: TECHNOLOGICAL DISRUPTION

Sali Berisha's case illustrates a form of vulnerability that does not arise from the political actor's communicative choices, but from an infrastructure disruption. On March 13, 2025, the Albanian government imposed a one-year suspension of TikTok, citing child-safety concerns following the killing of a 14-year-old student in Tirana on November 18, 2024 (NPR, 2024). The suspension affected all users in Albania, regardless of political affiliation, though systematic analysis of Albanian media discourse found that challenger and opposition voices overwhelmingly framed the measure as disproportionate and rights-threatening, compared to a government discourse that remained supportive or neutral (Licenji, 2026). According to platform data, before the ban Berisha's account (Table 1) had 66,000 followers, while Rama's had more than double that number (BIRN, 2025); once the ban took effect, both accounts became inaccessible within Albanian territory. Shortly after the ban, Berisha posted a brief protest video through VPN access; the content reached a limited audience and was not repeated in the following months. Platform data show that his account lost its entire follower base overnight. Subsequent recovery efforts, through VPN-based access and Instagram migration, restored only 23 percent of the prior follower base. This case shows that the effectiveness of cringe-based strategies depends not only on a political actor's performative skill, but also on infrastructural access to the platforms on which those strategies are exercised. Infrastructure disruption can limit participation in the attention economy regardless of the intensity of strategic awkwardness an actor might otherwise produce.

GAZMENT BARDHI: EMOTIONAL THEATRICALITY

The final case, Gazment Bardhi's campaign, sits on the boundary between rhetorical style and failed strategy. Repetitive use of emotionally charged phrasing, delivered with heightened dramatic emphasis, prompted rapid audience reinterpretation. An intended moral appeal was reframed through humor and parody. It produced widespread meme adaptation. Engagement was substantial, yet the

emotional framing shifted from seriousness toward comedic ridicule, undermining the original communicative intent. Alongside the four cases above, Bardhi's illustrates how narrow the margin runs between calibrated emotional provocation and an outright loss of narrative control.

Comparative analysis across the five cases reveals a consistent pattern linking cringe intensity to increased engagement, measured through shares, comments, and cross-platform diffusion. A similar link appears to electoral performance indicators. These patterns fall short of evidence for a causal relationship between online engagement and voter behavior. Coordinated networks of anonymous pages accelerated the circulation of awkward content. Algorithmic prioritization favored emotionally provocative material over policy-oriented messaging. Cross-platform replication extended the lifespan of viral moments. Together, these dynamics turned isolated communicative incidents into sustained political narratives.

Across 270 coded reactions to high- and low-cringe posts, mockery accounted for 89 of 124 reactions to high-cringe content ($CII \geq 61$). It accounted for only 34 of 146 reactions to low-cringe content ($CII \leq 30$). This difference did not reach conventional statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 1.875$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.171$). The large effect size (Cramér's $V = 0.612$), though, suggests the association is more likely underpowered than genuinely weak, given the small underlying case count. Sentiment analysis of the full 127,000-comment corpus shows amusement (30.0 percent) and discomfort (26.6 percent) as the two largest categories, together outweighing anger (18.0 percent) and empathy (12.0 percent) combined. The remaining 13.4 percent expressed mixed or neutral sentiment, falling outside these four categories. Negative affect rises to 78 percent of comments on high-cringe posts specifically. Viral velocity varied just as systematically by cringe category. High-cringe posts reached 10,000 views in an average of 4.2 hours, against 38.5 hours for low-cringe posts, a roughly ninefold difference confirmed by one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 27) = 18.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.577$). Over the course of the campaign, policy-oriented communication declined while cringe intensity and performative sophistication increased. This trend mirrors progressive adaptation to platform incentives. Full statistical outputs, including regression models and robustness checks, are reported in the supplementary materials at Zenodo.

CONCLUSIONS

The 2025 Albanian parliamentary elections offer evidence of a shift in digital political communication. Politicians who consistently produced cringe-based content, whether by design or by accident, achieved higher engagement and, in several cases, stronger electoral outcomes. High-cringe content reached

roughly nine times the viral velocity of low-cringe content, while cringe intensity was associated with stronger engagement ($r = 0.79$) and electoral outcomes ($\rho = 0.90$) across the five cases. This marks a measurable displacement of policy discourse by affective spectacle within Albania's digital campaign ecosystem.

H1 finds support in the pattern observed across the five cases: higher cringe intensity was associated with greater visibility and engagement ($r = 0.79$), in line with the CII–engagement correlation reported in the findings. H2 also finds support, in both the Albanian evidence of coordinated amplification and the recent international audits cited in the literature review. H3 is supported at the correlational level. The CII correlated with electoral outcomes across the five cases ($\rho = 0.90$, $p = 0.037$), above the conventional significance threshold. This is unlike the engagement-rate correlation ($r = 0.79$, $p = 0.062$), which falls short of it. The direction of the relationship is not settled by a correlational design of this kind: cringe may drive electoral success, or already-successful candidates may simply draw more attention to their missteps.

With only five cases, a single outlier could shift the correlation. The finding remains an initial signal, one that calls for replication at a larger scale. The CII itself performed as intended: it produced differentiated scores across the five cases (Table 3), with inter-coder and human-machine agreement of 0.82 and 0.78 respectively (Krippendorff's α). The instrument's function, translating strategic awkwardness into a comparable, reproducible score, held up well. What remains for future work is how that score relates to electoral outcomes at a larger scale.

This picture calls for further qualification. The association between cringe intensity and electoral outcomes is open to several readings that this design cannot distinguish between: affective influence on voting, reverse amplification of already-successful candidates, a shared populist driver behind both variables, or a simple decoupling between online engagement and offline behavior. Adjudicating between them would require voter-focused designs not attempted here. Methodologically, the CII is a first-generation instrument. Its component weights were set as a transparent, simplifying baseline pending empirical derivation. Further psychometric work would strengthen it considerably: principal component analysis or factor analysis on a larger sample would derive empirically grounded weights in place of the equal ones, while a logarithmic transformation of component C would dampen its disproportionate weight from algorithmic amplification within the formula. This would be paired with convergent validation against physiological measures of discomfort and testing for cross-cultural equivalence beyond Albania. The underlying computational analysis likewise reflects a trade-off inherent to automated tools working in a linguistically specific setting, between analytical scale and interpretive nuance. Albania's own environment adds explanatory detail specific to this case: high social media penetration,

alongside comparatively weak institutional norms in a young democracy undergoing rapid platform disruption. Comparative research across countries would show whether the pattern documented here extends beyond it.

Several interconnected contributions follow. Strategic awkwardness is documented systematically as an electoral communication technique. This links Dahl's (2018) psychology of awkwardness with Deleuze's (1992) theory of control within a specific empirical case. The Cringe Intensity Index itself is a first, interpretable instrument for measuring emotional and performative phenomena in political communication. Platform-level evidence, in turn, shows how algorithmic amplification and coordinated networks generate emotional governance, in which engagement metrics increasingly determine visibility ahead of message quality. If the tendencies documented here persist, they raise genuine questions for democratic quality. Performative skill may outweigh policy competence. Normalized discourse may deepen affective polarization among younger voters. Algorithmic prioritization may reward manipulative content in ways that strain content moderation. Confirming how far these implications extend will take replication across larger and cross-national samples, voter-focused designs, and longitudinal tracking of whether cringe strategies persist or normalize over time.

Taken together, politicians in this campaign learned to operationalize awkwardness as a strategic tool. Platforms became its amplifiers. Audiences participated in affective regulation through ridicule and shame. Digital media inherited a long tradition of political theater and industrialized it, rewarding provocation over substance. Many questions remain open, particularly concerning causation and generalizability beyond this case. The evidence presented here, though, marks a step toward understanding how digital architectures and emotional manipulation intersect within contemporary democratic communication.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is based upon work from COST Action OPINION CA21129, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). Special thanks are due to Data Scientist Milaim Delija, who provided valuable guidance on computational analysis during the research development phase. He offered thoughtful advice on the design of the Cringe Intensity Index formula and provided technical assistance in processing and analyzing the computational dataset, including programming support for the natural language processing pipeline, in particular, fine-tuning the XLM-RoBERTa model.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Raw social media data cannot be shared due to privacy considerations and platform terms of service. Aggregated and anonymized data, the complete coding framework, and the supplementary appendices, comprising detailed case transcripts, the CII measurement protocol, full statistical outputs, and research ethics documentation, are deposited at Zenodo under DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21401381>, in accordance with the journal's guidance on supplementary materials. Supplementary materials include: Appendix A (detailed case transcripts), Appendix B (detailed CII measurement protocol), Appendix C (complete statistical analysis outputs), Appendix D (coding framework with examples), and Appendix E (research ethics procedures).

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