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Cringe Communication in Hungarian Politics: Insult Humor as a Campaign Tool in 2024

Gabriella Szabó 0000-0002-5336-0179

ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, Hungary

István Benedek 0000-0003-4977-5774ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, Hungary,
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract: This article examines cringe communication as an emerging form of affective political communication that combines mockery, moral judgement, and partisan mobilization. Drawing on a qualitative multimodal analysis of seven videos produced by the pro-government YouTube channel *Patrióta–Trombi Roast* during Hungary's 2024 European Parliament and municipal election campaigns, the study investigates how verbal, visual, and performative cues construct political opponents as cringeworthy. The analysis conceptualizes cringe as a composite emotional configuration blending vicarious embarrassment, contempt, and amusement, and develops a coding framework linking expressive cues, emotional responses, rhetorical devices, and political functions. The findings reveal that cringe communication systematically transforms political opponents into morally inferior, socially embarrassing, and politically illegitimate figures through insult comedy, exaggerated identity markers, and multimodal ridicule. Beyond entertainment, these videos reinforce in-group solidarity, align with governing-party narratives, and contribute to symbolic exclusion.

Keywords: Cringe communication; Election campaigning; Hungary; Insult humor; Moral emotions

INTRODUCTION

Cringe is emerging as a distinct mode of affective political communication that blends mockery, moral judgment, and political mobilization. In digitally networked environments, platforms have fundamentally reshaped communication by creating new venues for persuasion, mobilization, and community building (Yılmaz & Topsümer, 2023; Klinger et al., 2023; Papathanassopoulos

& Giannouli, 2025). Within this ecosystem, influencers increasingly operate as hybrid actors who combine entertainment with political messaging, shaping public opinion through relatable, personalized, and emotionally charged content (Fischer et al., 2022; Gibson et al., 2023; Naderer, 2023; Brassett & Browning, 2025; Pandey, 2025). In Hungary, a context characterized by extreme political polarization, pervasive politicization, and a highly centralized media landscape (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013; Stępińska et al., 2024), political communication unfolds within a hybrid political–media system where state-aligned legacy outlets, party-organized infrastructures, and platform-based digital content mutually reinforce one another (Benedek, 2024). This configuration enables the coordinated amplification of partisan narratives and creates space for influencer-style political communicators who combine irony, meme-based aesthetics, and confrontational humor with partisan mobilization.

Within this environment, Trombi—the social media persona of Kristóf Trombitás and host of the Patrióta–Trombi Roast YouTube channel—represents a salient case. Operating within the pro-government Megafon network, the channel deploys cringe-based insult comedy as a political tool, drawing on stylistic elements associated with Hungary’s domestically adapted alt-right online communication milieu (Mikecz & Szabó, 2019). This study examines how Trombi’s content mobilizes cringe humor to ridicule opposition figures, reinforce in-group superiority, and promote pro-government narratives. Beyond entertainment, these videos combine insult, humor, and campaign messaging to leverage emotions such as contempt and vicarious embarrassment, framing political opponents as incompetent, morally unworthy, and culturally out of touch. In so doing, cringe communication functions as an instrument of emotional distancing and symbolic delegitimation. The analysis draws on superiority theory (Beck & Spencer, 2025; Carroll, 2014; Lintott, 2016), which conceptualizes humor as an expression of hierarchical dominance used to belittle those perceived as inferior. This framework helps explain how cringe-based ridicule intersects with emotionalized populist communication and contributes to the moralization of political discourse, while also blurring the boundaries between entertainment and politics.

The following core research question guides this inquiry: How are multimodal verbal, visual, and performative cues used to express cringing and construct political opponents as cringeworthy, thereby enabling cringe communication to function as a tool of political legitimation in support of the Fidesz government during the 2024 campaign? To address this question, the analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions: (1) the targets of ridicule and their political or identity markers, (2) the thematic frames through which adversaries are portrayed, and (3) the emotional repertoire structuring the affective dynamics of cringe communication.

This exploratory study makes a threefold contribution: it conceptualizes cringe communication as a composite emotional strategy that fuses abjection, vicarious embarrassment, and amusement; it develops a qualitative coding framework to capture its rhetorical and affective structure; and it empirically illustrates these dynamics through the 2024 Hungarian campaign, where insult-based humor functions as a mode of political legitimization.

CONCEPTUALIZING CRINGE COMMUNICATION

Cringe gained prominence with the rise of “cringe comedy,” from early 2000s shows to contemporary formats, which elicits both laughter and discomfort by staging social mishaps (Spiegel, 2025). Conceptually, cringe can be distinguished from “awkwardness” (Plakias, 2024). While awkwardness refers to a breakdown of shared social scripts, cringe adds a spectatorial and evaluative dimension: observers respond to others’ missteps with discomfort infused with moral or aesthetic judgment. Rather than exposing the fragility of social coordination, cringe reinforces norms by positioning the observer as superior. It thus combines second-hand embarrassment with amusement, creating the distinctive experience of pleasurable discomfort: a painful yet almost irresistible desire to keep watching, typically triggered by overconfidence, failed self-presentation, or a lack of social self-awareness (Hye-Knudsen, 2018).

In digital media environments, cringe has become a dominant aesthetic across memes, roasts, and short-form video content that mock behavior and self-presentation (Verma, 2021). Far from marginal, it operates as a form of judgmental commentary that produces a “moral shiver” rather than purely cathartic laughter (Douglas, 1975; Morreall, 2009; Scheff & Scheele, 1982). Simultaneously, cringe is paradoxical: it is both celebrated and problematized as a marker of authenticity, vulnerability, and ironic detachment. Content creators may deliberately produce cringe to signal self-awareness or resist polished influencer norms (Edelmann, 1981; Crozier, 1998; Harris, 2006; Wegner, 2021). Despite its playful framing, cringe can easily slide into digital humiliation, transforming awkward moments into viral spectacles that police authenticity and competence (Schwanebeck, 2021; Spiegel, 2025). Unlike conventional humor, it foregrounds failed performances and asymmetrical interactions, positioning the “cringer” as a judge who asserts superiority over the “cringee.” In this sense, cringe operates as a cultural mechanism of boundary enforcement, aligning audiences against perceived norm violators.

Political cringe emerges when attempts at persuasion or relatability backfire, producing embarrassment rather than credibility (Wöhrle, 2021; Middleton, 2014). In digital campaigning, poorly executed memes, influencer collaborations,

or exaggerated performances amplify such reactions (Escoe et al., 2025). More broadly, cringe reflects a perceived mismatch between intended political messaging and its reception. Cringeworthiness is also highly shareable, making it a powerful communicative resource in social media environments (Escoe et al., 2025). When mobilized strategically, cringe becomes a performative device that not only entertains but also generates moral judgment and partisan alignment. It typically involves mocking public figures for violating cultural or behavioral norms, reframing opponents as ridiculous or morally deficient. Unlike satire, cringe communication lies in the affective experience it manifests and possibly seeks to generate. Whereas satire primarily invites critical reflection through humor, cringe communication encourages audiences to experience vicarious embarrassment, bodily discomfort, and pleasurable pain (Iché & Schneebeli, 2026) while positioning the target as morally and socially inferior via humor (Lintott, 2016; Szabó, 2024).

Humor has long been understood as a mechanism of social hierarchy. From Aristotle's early observations that laughter often arises from the perceived inferiority of others (Gottlieb, 2013) to Bitterly's (2022) account of ridicule as a form of power exercise, superiority theories emphasize that humor reinforces social norms through downward comparison and symbolic domination. Cringe communication operates as an inherently evaluative form of humor: by attributing cringeworthiness to political opponents, it legitimizes their public ridicule, reinforces in-group superiority, and signals shared normative standards (Smilges, 2024). In so doing, it functions as a mechanism of distinction and boundary-making, rendering its targets morally and culturally inferior while blurring the boundary between entertainment and character assassination.

More broadly, cringe communication occupies a hybrid space between popular culture and moral politics. By transforming political conflict into consumable entertainment, it enables actors to perform simultaneously as entertainers, commentators, and advocates. However, by framing hostility as humor, it also provides a shield of irony ("it's just a joke"), allowing communicators to evade moral and political accountability.

EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS OF CRINGE

Wöhrle (2021) argues that cringe is primarily fueled by embarrassment, an emotion triggered by perceived violations of implicit social or moral display norms (Fussi & Rodogno, 2023). While embarrassment has often been linked to laughter at awkwardness (Hacker, 2017; Zahavi, 2020; Mayer et al., 2021), such accounts tend to overlook the hostile dimension of cringing. As Spiegel (2025, p. 230) emphasizes, cringe is an "essentially hostile emotion" whose function is to produce

social distinction. This is particularly salient in political communication, where cringe is strategically mobilized to devalue opponents. Building on this insight, we conceptualize cringe not as a single emotion but as a dynamic interplay between embarrassment and contempt, jointly reinforcing moral hierarchies and socio-political distancing.

Cringe involves vicarious embarrassment: a discomfort experienced in response to others' social failures (Krach et al., 2011; Stocks et al., 2011). Such vicarious emotions are politically relevant, as they allow individuals to share in collective successes and humiliations, strengthening group cohesion (McIlwain et al., 2012). Simultaneously, they enable distancing: audiences affirm their own competence while deriving in-group amusement from the cringe. In digital contexts, this response is amplified through visual and verbal cues that transform individual discomfort into collective moral judgment. Although often conflated with shame, cringe is more complex. Shame is a deeply social, self-conscious emotion tied to norm violation and exposure (Gilbert, 1998; Fussi & Rodogno, 2023; Deonna et al., 2012), whereas embarrassment is more situational and can serve appeasement functions (Keltner & Buswell, 1997). Cringe, by contrast, is hetero-induced: it arises not from empathy but from witnessing others' awkward or norm-violating behavior (Plakias, 2024). This discomfort, often accompanied by laughter, reinforces a sense of superiority and opens the way for social distancing emotions.

Although cringe shares features with embarrassment, its core is better understood through rejection and symbolic disgust. Contempt signals superiority and exclusion (Fischer & Roseman, 2007), reflecting stable judgments of inferiority expressed through sarcasm, ridicule, and belittlement (Bell, 2013). Cringe also entails a bodily sense of recoil, a reaction to perceived aesthetic or moral deficiency (Smilges, 2024). This aversion is symbolic rather than sensory and aligns with contempt as a judgment of taste, decorum, or competence (Kolnai, 2003).

Drawing on Bourdieu, Spiegel (2025) frames cringe as boundary-making through contempt, where distinction operates via rejection as much as preference (Swartz, 2024). Cringe thus enacts moral and aesthetic exclusion, positioning the observer as culturally superior. In political communication, this is expressed through insults, sarcasm, condescension, and belittling comparisons, which transform discomfort into symbolic domination and reinforce in-group cohesion.

Cringe is not purely aversive, as it also involves amusement, creating a "guilty pleasure" dynamic (Hye-Knudsen, 2018; Roost, 2025). Audiences willingly engage with cringeworthy content, oscillating between discomfort and enjoyment. This laughter is rarely neutral: it carries moral judgment and often reinforces aggression. In political contexts, this pleasurable dimension enhances persuasive power. Shared ridicule becomes an entertaining ritual of exclusion and belonging, turning opponents' failures into affective spectacle. Amusement thus sustains engagement, allowing contempt and embarrassment to circulate

in socially acceptable forms while reinforcing partisan alignment. The ambivalence of cringe—simultaneous discomfort and fascination—explains its appeal and its role in reaffirming hierarchies (Seebold, 2025).

Cringe combines self-directed discomfort with other-directed hostility. By reacting to perceived social missteps, the cringer signals norm awareness and claims moral or cultural superiority. When shared collectively, cringe fosters in-group formation and boundary-making. Joy functions as a release mechanism, making ridicule more engaging and accessible.

In sum, cringe is best understood as a complex, hetero-induced emotional configuration that blends discomfort, laughter, and moral judgment. It operates as a mechanism of socio-political differentiation and collective bonding, distinguishing itself from both shame and embarrassment while serving as a powerful affective tool in contemporary political communication.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

To translate the conceptual insights into analytical practice, we model cringe communication as a sequential process linking expressive cues, emotional responses, rhetorical devices, and political functions. A cringe cue, such as overconfidence, failed humor, or an awkward display, elicits distinct but interconnected emotions: vicarious embarrassment, contempt, and joy. These emotions are expressed through rhetorical devices including verbal insult, sarcasm, visual exaggeration, and auditory distortion that direct the audience's interpretation and affective alignment. Together, they perform identifiable political functions: (1) delegitimation of opponents through humiliation, (2) in-group bonding via shared amusement and moral differentiation, and (3) alignment with government frames that recast partisan narratives as entertainment. This operational chain guides the coding framework and the qualitative content analysis to explore patterns of meaning, framing, and emotional expression (Schreier, 2012).

CASE SELECTION AND DATA COLLECTION

The dataset consists of all seven videos produced by Trombi's Patrióta-Trombi Roast YouTube channel between April and June 2024, coinciding with the European Parliamentary and municipal election campaigns (summary table is in Appendix A). The case was selected because Trombi explicitly presents his channel as an exercise in exposing government-critical cultural figures and opposition politicians as "cringe." In the opening video, he states that his aim

is to take these public figures “off their pedestal” and reveal how “cringeworthy” they are by manifesting his feeling of cringe. Rather than merely ridiculing political opponents, the videos invite audiences to adopt cringing as a shared affective stance toward the targets.

Each video is 15–16 min long and directly engages with political figures and events relevant to the campaign. This small-N corpus is treated as a critical case of governing-party-aligned cringe communication in a high-stakes political period.

CODING FRAMEWORK

The content was analyzed through three analytical dimensions, each corresponding to the study’s sub-questions:

1. Target: Identifying the individuals or groups subjected to ridicule and coding their associated political, ideological, and identity markers (e.g., party affiliation, gender, profession).
2. Object: Examining the thematic content of the mockery, including recurring frames (e.g., incompetence, corruption, moral decay).
3. Emotionality: Capturing the use of emotions—particularly contempt and vicarious embarrassment—as rhetorical devices.

The unit of analysis is the whole video.

OPERATIONALIZATION

To systematically analyze Trombi’s 2024 campaign videos, a structured coding scheme was developed to capture the rhetorical, emotional, and thematic features of the content. The scheme served as a practical guide for coders to produce comprehensive and comparable notes, enabling a detailed qualitative content analysis.

The coding process was performed by the authors of the paper. To ensure analytic rigor and minimize individual bias, we conducted the coding independently by watching and analyzing each of the seven videos separately in their entirety. This procedure allowed both explicit and nuanced elements of the content to be identified, including verbal, visual, and emotional features.

We followed an iterative, multi-step process typical of qualitative content analysis. First, we familiarized ourselves with the material through immersive viewing, making preliminary notes and identifying emergent patterns. In the second phase, we applied the predefined coding framework derived from the study’s conceptual and analytical dimensions, while remaining open to inductive codes that emerged from the data.

Coding included categorical tagging (e.g., labeling specific rhetorical strategies or emotional expressions), narrative descriptions, contextual insights, and

supporting evidence in the form of verbatim quotations and timestamps based on the following instructions:

1. Identify the targets of insult or mockery (e.g., opposition politicians, activists, journalists, public intellectuals, social media influencers, foreign actors, or citizens). Coders also noted salient identity markers, such as political affiliation, gender, profession, appearance, age, lifestyle, and moral character.
2. Describe recurring themes in the portrayal of these targets, including whether they were depicted as unprofessional, foolish, deceptive, dangerous, or out of touch.
3. Document emotional expressions present in the videos, particularly those associated with cringe communication, such as contempt, vicarious embarrassment, and ridicule. Coders identified verbal strategies (e.g., sarcasm, mockery, name-calling, belittling comparisons) and visual/auditory techniques (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, editing styles, sound effects, use of emojis).
4. Capture the emotional strategies embedded in the videos, focusing on how emotions were expressed, oriented toward targets, and framed for the audiences.
5. Evaluate the use of cringe-based discomfort, noting instances of overconfidence, lack of self-awareness, failed attempts at humor or authority, sexualized portrayals, or exaggerated efforts to appear relatable.
6. Identify the political functions of the videos, focusing on whether the content aimed to reinforce in-group identity, delegitimize political opponents, distract from substantive political issues through personal mockery, or discourage dissent and norm transgressions.
7. Discover any informed connections between the content and government-affiliated campaign messages or ideological positions, such as alignment with Fidesz narratives about opposition incompetence, corruption, or moral deficiency.

Except for one question, multiple answers were permitted, allowing for the coding of overlapping categories and multi-layered emotional expressions.

After completing the independent coding, a consensus-building process followed. All coded segments were reviewed collaboratively, and discrepancies were discussed in detail to reach an agreement on the final coding. This negotiated coding approach ensured that the evaluation reflected a shared interpretation of the material, increasing the reliability of the findings. Importantly, no coding decision was finalized unless both coders explicitly agreed on its validity. If necessary, the coding segment was revisited using the original data context to reach agreement.

This combination of independent coding, detailed documentation, and consensus-oriented discussion aligns with established best practices in qualitative content analysis to ensure that the study's findings are methodologically transparent.

FINDINGS

The analysis identified two main clusters of videos within the corpus, which can be interpreted as delineations of the *cultural* and *political opposition*. The first group centres on cultural figures and media personalities associated with government-critical positions: publicist and social critic *Róbert Puzsér*, renowned singer-songwriter *János Bródy*, media personality *Sándor Friderikusz*, and a cluster of younger artists and opinion leaders whom Trombi frames as “*influencers*,” including Zsolt Osváth, Whisper Ton, Azahriah, Carson Coma, and Márton Gulyás. The second group consists of active political targets: left-leaning and liberal *Members of the European Parliament* (MEPs), Budapest Mayor *Gergely Karácsony*, and the then-rising opposition figure *Péter Magyar*. Across these cases, Trombi does not move from one isolated target to another. Instead, the roasts assemble heterogeneous figures into a single oppositional field and make that field appear cringeworthy, morally compromised, and politically unfit.

In these videos, Trombi blends insult comedy, cringe aesthetics, and partisan framing to construct a moralized hierarchy between “real” and “inauthentic” Hungarians. His targets are portrayed not simply as mistaken in their views but as personally ridiculous, socially detached from ordinary citizens, and morally unworthy of political trust. Through exaggerated mockery and humiliation, the videos recast criticism as elitism and turn symbolic exclusion into shared amusement and partisan belonging. The findings therefore focus less on an inventory of targets than on a recurring mechanism: personal ridicule makes political opposition embarrassing, enabling its delegitimation. Cringing works as boundary enforcement, converting failed performances into pleasurable discomfort and downward comparison while embedding pro-government narratives in contemptuous laughter.

TARGETS, POLITICAL AND HIERARCHICAL POSITIONING

Among government-critical *cultural figures*, *Puzsér* is presented as a political opportunist and “pseudo-intellectual” whose public persona is empty and self-serving. Although he has positioned himself as a critic of both the government and the opposition, the video situates him among the so-called “fake independents” who ultimately amplify the newest “opposition messiah,” in this case, *Péter Magyar*. *Bródy*’s singer-songwriter legacy is recast as evidence of long-term

affiliation with the post-communist “Nagykörút elite,” a pejorative reference to Budapest’s inner-boulevard liberal intelligentsia. *Friderikusz* is personalized through biography and elite networks: a “Gyurcsány-loving Kádár-fan” whose media authority rests on left-liberal patronage rooted in the communist regime and later continued under socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. The *influencer* cluster is similarly linked to opposition politics through support for Magyar, criticism of the Orbán government, and endorsement of liberal cultural causes. They are described as a “sect,” a “close-knit urban clique,” and “dollar media” mouthpieces: agents, whether conscious or unwitting, of American soft power, able to carry political messages to social groups otherwise distant from politics.

The common move across these cultural cases is to turn public visibility into hidden partisanship. Cultural authority becomes political contamination: figures who might lend credibility to opposition politics are redefined as compromised actors. Artistic prestige, media visibility, and influencer reach are thus recoded as signs of anti-government alignment rather than autonomous public speech.

The videos apply a more directly electoral version of the same logic to *opposition politicians*. Progressive *MEPs* are portrayed as incompetent, hypocritical, and ideologically dangerous “libtards” aligned with Brussels, the “gender lobby,” and globalist agendas, posing a moral and cultural threat to “ordinary” Hungarians. *Karácsony* is framed as the personification of liberal and “Gyurcsányist” municipal politics: an academic-turned-politician lost in theory, unable to manage a city, and dependent on former left-liberal networks. *Magyar*’s portrayal focuses on his rapid, and therefore suspicious, rise as the “newcomer messiah” of the opposition. Secondary ridicule extends to sympathetic media, celebrities, and former opposition leaders such as Péter Jakab and Péter Márki-Zay, all folded into a recurring “left-wing circus.” Trombi says that “Magyar is a bit like one half of a teenage relationship ... you can almost believe that it’s something exceptional, something special” (video timestamp: 12:03). At stake here is electoral viability: the roasts socially ridicule emerging or established opposition figures before they can secure political credibility, enacting an emotional repositioning of these actors as ridiculous, morally compromised, and politically unserious.

In every roast, the target is placed low on the competence–morality scale and gradually turned into a cringe: unprofessional, foolish, deceptive, culturally alien, or unable to read basic social and political situations. However, the targets are not harmless. They are portrayed as figures who shape public opinion and lend symbolic legitimacy to opposition causes: *Puzsér* as irrelevant yet harmful for promoting Magyar’s campaign, *Bródy* as a hypocrite whose moral authority could mislead, *Friderikusz* as a cultural gatekeeper of “deceptive” liberal values, influencers as manipulable or complicit agents of foreign propaganda, *MEPs* as producers of harmful “cringe trends” on migration, war, and gender politics,

and *Karácsony* and *Magyar* as inferior but politically consequential figures whose visibility must be neutralized.

This double positioning is central to the hierarchy. The cringee must be ridiculous enough to enable downward comparison but dangerous enough to justify exposure. If the target were only presented negatively, the roast would remain ordinary hostile communication. If it were only threatening, the comic register would lose its function. Political cringe communication holds the two together: the opponent becomes laughable yet harmful, socially embarrassing yet capable of misleading others.

The recurring “clown” label condenses this logic: it marks the target as unserious, incompetent, and morally deficient while also signaling that this figure should be publicly unmasked. Similar unmasking appears when Trombi describes *Bródy* as a “turncoat who betrayed his younger colleagues in order to advance himself and remain in the spotlight” (12:36), and dismisses his criticism of “today’s suffocating atmosphere, unbearable conditions, and other nonsense” (13:04). *Friderikusz* is likewise framed as “not a legend, but an ungrateful, histrionic commie loser” who “from the top of his entire trash heap shouts about how pathetic Hungary is” (14:10). Danger is tied to deception: claiming independence while serving partisan ends, appearing apolitical while advancing ideological agendas, or cloaking propaganda in entertainment. This “wolf in sheep’s clothing” framing turns embarrassment into symbolic domination: the audience laughs from above, and the target becomes a cringee whose political claims can be dismissed because the person has already been made ridiculous.

IDENTITY MARKERS AND PERSONAL RIDICULE

Each roast relies on exaggerated identity markers to render the target ridiculous. *Political affiliation* is usually foregrounded through the “exposure” of alleged partisan ties: *Puzsér* is linked to failed opposition formations, *Bródy*—the “red beat musician”—to the socialist cultural apparatus, *Friderikusz* to the left-liberal cultural elite, and the *influencers* to Pride activism, urban celebrity aesthetics, and foreign-backed opposition networks. Independence is treated as a mask, and the videos claim to reveal the partisan loyalty behind cultural autonomy.

Professional identity is also devalued. The pattern is consistent: *Puzsér* becomes a “fake intellectual” and shallow celebrity, *Bródy* an irrelevant “worn-out rock-daddy,” *Friderikusz* an undeserving showman dependent on political patrons, and *influencers* derivative performers or reality-TV figures symbolizing mass-cultural decline. *Karácsony*’s infrastructure projects are ridiculed as “low-budget concrete patches,” whereas *Magyar*’s technical mistakes, such as “failing to launch a Facebook Live stream” or “confusing a police radio with an internet blocker,” are treated as proof of amateurism. The point is not only to mock competence

but to strip the targets of the symbolic authority that could make their criticism politically meaningful.

Moral character is attacked through accusations of hypocrisy, deceit, opportunism, betrayal, vanity, and manipulation. *Puzsér* is mocked for “becoming what he once criticized,” *Bródy* for allegedly submitting to the Kádár regime while posturing as a dissident, influencers for “selling out” to foreign interests, and *MEPs* for deceit, arrogance, provocation, fund misuse, and an elitist lifestyle framed as morally contagious. *Karácsony* is portrayed as feigning concern for Budapest while enabling its “robbery by Gyurcsány’s allies” (15:09), whereas *Magyar* is depicted as deceitful, emotionally unstable, and willing to harm his own family for political gain. Moral ridicule turns disagreement into a question of trustworthiness: the target’s political claim is discredited through an alleged defect of character.

Gendered and sexualized framings intensify humiliation. *Puzsér* is mocked through sentimental emojis beside clips of his admiration for male politicians, *Friderikusz* through romantic iconography referencing Gyurcsány, and *influencers* through insinuations about appearance, fashion, lifestyle, and political patronage. Masculinity is questioned through gendered slurs such as “bitch” and portrayals of male figures as submissive or vain. *MEPs* are described as “progressive, world-saving feminists” or “men completely past their prime” (02:41). *Karácsony* is likened to “a rescue dog obediently serving its master” (15:07), whereas *Magyar*’s gendered portrayal features allegations of domestic violence and insinuations that question his manhood.

Appearance and expression are also ridiculed. Trombi mocks the *MEPs*’ “sad faces while carrying a mock coffin” (07:09) and dismisses their professional legitimacy through phrases such as “they shirk work” and “intellectual swamp” (01:10; 01:20). *Magyar* is mocked for “virtual Botox,” a “baby-faced rebel” persona, and being a “city boy” unfamiliar with rural Hungary. Ageist tropes are prominent as well: *Bródy* is labelled “rickety,” a “codger pensioner,” and a “leftist mummy,” whereas *Friderikusz*’s attempts to appear youthful are framed as pathetic. These bodily and aesthetic cues turn political difference into a visible norm violation: the cringe becomes not only politically wrong but embarrassing to watch.

EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

Cringe operates as the affective mechanism that connects targeting, identity marking, and hierarchical positioning. It emerges from portrayals of overconfidence, lack of self-awareness, failed attempts at humor or authority, sexualized mockery, and exaggerated attempts to appear relatable. However, these elements do not become cringeworthy automatically. They become cringe cues only when Trombi frames them through contempt, abjection, vicarious embarrassment,

or bodily recoil, thereby placing viewers in the position of the cringer and instructing them on how to feel about the target.

The video on *Bródy* illustrates this mechanism. The cringee's overconfidence is framed through comments about his continued self-importance: he is described as "bursting with confidence" and as believing that people do not merely applaud but celebrate him (04:46). Trombi makes this presentation cringeworthy by explicitly framing it as discomfort-inducing. Trombi labels him "totally cringe," calls him "Bródy, the cringefather" (03:06), and frames his late-career performances as a fall into a "cringe swamp" (03:43). The crucial point is not Bródy's age or confidence alone: the effect appears when overconfidence is paired with visible and verbalized second-hand embarrassment, as Trombi says "I also feel a little ashamed" (03:22), lowers his head during the failed duet scene (04:30), and marks the moment as one of those "awkward situations" (04:40).

Friderikusz is constructed through a similar but more sexualized and abject pattern. His alleged overconfidence appears in the claim that he sees everyone else as "stupid proles" (03:20), whereas his lack of self-critique is marked by the sarcastic line, "It's a good thing he actually has some self-criticism—oh wait, never mind" (06:19). Trombi frames his public performance as a complete loss of dignity: "He even sings in public, which is the absolute rock bottom—there are no limits" (06:39). Failed authority becomes cringe because it is joined to contempt, abjection, and explicit second-hand embarrassment: references to "second-hand shame" (05:14), the refusal to show more because the scene is "so embarrassing" (08:20), and the description of the performance as "fucking embarrassing grovelling" (09:15).

The *Karácsony* roast follows the same logic in a municipal–political register. His claim that no one could develop Budapest better than him is undercut by absurd analogies, including "Snoop Dogg leading an anti-drug campaign" and "Madonna lecturing on natural facial skin" (00:23). Failed authority is made visible through ridicule of small urban projects, dog toilets, and mini parks. Karácsony's overconfidence becomes cringeworthy in Trombi's presentation as the video turns it into a public spectacle of incompetence and failed self-awareness: he "voluntarily exposes his own incompetence to the public" (15:13). The roast then translates political subservience into bodily humiliation, mocking his loyalty through the crude double-entendre that his only real skill is "getting a hard-on for Gyurcsány—I mean, always standing up for Gyurcsány" (15:01).

In *Magyar's* case, ridicule is formalized into a "cringe tier list" that turns perceived blunders into a ranked spectacle of failed seriousness. The clown frame appears from the opening, "the new season's new clown" (00:03), and is intensified through "red-nosed psycho clown" (01:49). Trombi also reads comments claiming that Magyar has "made a fool of himself" (05:04) and that even his own side is laughing at him (07:50). The tier-list culminates in the explicit

conclusion: “when I look through my list, this is a clown” (12:29). Cringe does not rest on awkwardness alone: the format converts mistakes into evidence of political unfitness, whereas the clown motif links embarrassment to danger, deception, and failed opposition hope.

The MEPs video makes failed trendiness cringeworthy through an unusually dense chain of discomfort markers. Trombi introduces the clips as “truly embarrassing,” “awful,” and “horrific” (00:14), calls the montage a “freak fest” (00:24), and describes Brussels as the peak of “cringe content production” (10:55). Failed humor and failed authority are fused with ideological contamination when progressive messages become “globalist nonsense poured into cringe trends” (13:11). The cringing response is also performed bodily: Trombi buries his face in his hands, scratches his head with a pained expression, and says the clips are almost impossible to watch, returning to them only for the audience’s sake (11:22). The result is a guided experience of second-hand embarrassment and contempt, not simply disagreement with the MEPs’ positions.

Verbal contempt strategies, including explicit disdain (“extremely ridiculous”), sarcasm, and dismissive name-calling, reduce targets to caricatures while allowing Trombi and his viewers to ridicule and moralize at the same time. The videos are saturated with insults and mocking nicknames (“commie,” “Uncle Janó,” “cutie-faces,” “clown”), and with belittling comparisons such as *Bródy* as the “Hungarian Bob Dylan” or *Magyar* as “as much of a legend as Pablo Escobar is an honest man” (02:11).

Visual and auditory design amplifies these verbal cues by turning awkward or hostile moments into shareable scenes of discomfort. Freeze-frames, zoom-ins, jump cuts, sarcastic captions, emojis, ideological symbols (rainbow flags, red stars, hearts), mismatched background music, canned laughter, cymbal crashes, and ironic reuse of the targets’ own clips add layers of derision. Trombi’s physical performance serves as visual commentary: through facepalming, grimacing, sighing, and bodily recoil, he performs *vicarious embarrassment* and guides the viewer’s emotional response. These gestures turn viewing into moralized mockery, where discomfort becomes pleasurable, and contempt circulates as entertainment rather than argument.

POLITICAL FUNCTIONS AND ALIGNMENT WITH GOVERNMENT-AFFILIATED MESSAGING

Although Trombi’s roasts vary in their targets, their political functions converge. Entertainment-driven ridicule delegitimizes political rivals, reinforces in-group identity, and aligns with government campaign narratives. First, the roasts weaken cultural figures who lend symbolic or explicit support to opposition forces, especially *Péter Magyar*. By ridiculing and morally discrediting endorsers,

they reduce the credibility of cultural opposition. Targeting high-profile figures may also serve self-promotion, as provoking reactions from the addressee can support the virality of cringe content.

Second, the roasts undermine opposition politicians by framing them as incompetent, corrupt, and unfit for office. By linking European progressive parties with domestic actors, this discourse constructs a single, transnational “globalist” network. In the *MEPs* video, this framing discredits the ideological opposition ahead of the European elections by mirroring Fidesz themes on Brussels, gender, migration, and war, culminating in a direct appeal to reject “cringe TikTok videos” in favor of government-backed “reality.” Similarly, *Karácsony* and *Magyar* are folded into familiar narratives: the former as a Gyurcsány-linked municipal puppet, the latter as a manufactured messiah of the left-liberal media elite.

Third, the videos reinforce in-group solidarity among pro-government audiences. Informal and often vulgar language creates a shared space for “ordinary people” to laugh at urban elites, celebrities, intellectuals, and opposition politicians. In the *influencer* episode, viewers are invited to see through manipulation by “dollar media,” “useful idiots,” or “clean-faced” public figures who allegedly smuggle American ideological influence into apolitical spaces. Laughter becomes boundary-making: it lets viewers perform social norm savviness by showing that they see through manipulation while others remain trapped in the cringe performance.

Finally, the roasts carry a plausible deterrent signal. By showing that public endorsement of opposition causes can provoke aggressive, highly visible ridicule, they signal the social costs of dissent for cultural or media figures. This normalization of personal attacks encourages self-censorship, deflects attention from substantive policy debate, and replaces political disagreement with an emotional response built around contempt, vicarious embarrassment, and shared amusement.

The timing and structure of the videos indicate that the roasts were not detached comic commentary. In early 2024, the presidential pardon scandal forced the resignation of President Katalin Novák and former justice minister Judit Varga, Péter Magyar’s ex-wife and Fidesz’s intended lead candidate for the European elections (Baranyai et al., 2025). As cracks appeared in the Orbán regime’s agenda-setting monopoly, the government faced mass demonstrations, cultural figures endorsing Magyar, and the rapid rise of his new movement, which soon eclipsed the traditional opposition and destabilized government communication (Benedek, 2026).

Trombi’s roast videos reflect this turbulent moment. Their most explicit political messaging and electoral cues usually appear in the final minute, marked by a serious voice, altered background music, and direct appeals. These closings move beyond satire and answer “what we want and what we reject.” In the *MEPs*

video, Orbán is presented as the sole representative of peace, while voters are urged to reject migration, war, gender politics, and a federal Europe.

The target-specific attacks map onto broader pro-government narratives. Because many within the cultural opposition had participated in the post-pardon scandal “influencer protest” or supported Magyar, targeting them undermined their gatekeeping role for politically disengaged citizens and warned others against open criticism. These depictions closely mirror official Fidesz campaigns: *Karácsony*’s municipal-puppet framing echoes Alexandra Szentkirályi’s mayoral rhetoric, whereas *Magyar*’s portrayal as an abuser parallels statements by Judit Varga. The timing also suggests direct political coordination: *Karácsony*’s roast appeared the day before the municipal election and *Magyar*’s at the peak of his early May polling surge, just as he was overtaking the traditional left-wing opposition.

Furthermore, thematic overlaps with earlier Fidesz campaign materials place these roasts within a wider, state-aligned communication ecosystem. Recent analyses suggest that Megafon functions as an outsourced yet centrally coordinated influencer network that responds to political events within 24–48 h, repackaging identical narratives through standardized visuals, ad hominem framing, and fear-based “us-versus-them” cues into short, sponsored videos. Users often do not recognize these as paid political advertising, allowing campaign messages to circulate as viral infotainment (Horváth et al., 2025, pp. 7–8; Juhász, 2025). The campaign period also exposed direct party linkages: Megafon influencers appeared at Fidesz rallies, and 68 Fidesz municipal candidates were trained by them. The same frames dominated pro-government content: anti-EU and “decline of the West” tropes, stigmatizing opponents as “pro-war,” “pro-migration,” or “pro-LGBTQ,” and personalized discrediting of Péter Magyar (Political Capital, 2025a, 2025b).

In sum, Trombi’s roast videos operate as a hybrid genre combining online comedy with targeted political propaganda. Rather than seeking programmatic persuasion or outright conversion, they deploy identity-based ridicule, hierarchical humiliation, and cringe performance to foster doubt, reinforcing political cynicism and disengagement. Aggressive, state-aligned attacks can therefore circulate under the guise of satire while maintaining plausible deniability. By converting political disagreement into personal ridicule and second-hand embarrassment, the roasts shift political discourse from substantive argument to affective boundary-making. Whether targeting media personalities, cultural icons, or influencer-activists, this strategy renders association with the opposition socially untenable, effectively eroding the cultural infrastructure that sustains alternative visibility. Through the multimodal orchestration of moral emotions, audiences are guided beyond mere disagreement to reject the cringe, affirm shared moral superiority, and bond through normalized ridicule at a critical electoral moment.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how cringe communication operates as a political tool in Hungary's 2024 campaign environment. The findings show a consistent emotional choreography: exaggerated displays of discomfort may guide audiences toward shared embarrassment, whereas verbal and visual mockery turns discomfort into laughter and moral judgement. Targets are systematically positioned as incompetent, hypocritical, and culturally alien to voters. The videos' structure consistently culminates in explicit campaign messaging, transforming entertainment into political experience (see comprehensive summary table in Appendix B).

Cringe is therefore not simply entertainment. In Trombi's roast videos, it turns awkwardness and failed self-presentation into a hierarchy of worth that moralizes difference: the audience is invited to judge the target as ridiculous, morally inferior, and politically untrustworthy. In hybrid media politics, cringe thus functions less as comic relief and more as an emotional mechanism of persuasion and polarization.

The study is limited by its small-N corpus of seven videos, single-country and single-campaign focus, and the absence of audience-level data on how audiences actually receive, interpret, or internalize these messages. Its aim is, therefore, not generalization, but concept-building. The article develops an empirically grounded framework for identifying the emotional mechanisms of cringe communication, which future research can expand through cross-national comparison and audience studies.

By exposing how ridicule and humor organize emotion, hierarchy, and legitimacy, the analysis also points to deeper questions of democratic discourse, including the tension between the liberal commitment to free expression and the democratic need for civility and fair competition.

On one hand, humor can *democratize communication*: by lowering entry barriers, it energizes participation and draws attention to otherwise neglected issues. Shared laughter builds community and offers emotional relief, signaling common norms and easing social tension (Coronel et al., 2021; Fraley & Aron, 2004). Research on marginalized groups likewise highlights humor's defensive and identity-rebuilding potential, which includes Venezuelan migrants using satire to resist stigmatization (Pérez & Freier, 2022). From this perspective, ridicule can empower and provide coping strategies for those excluded by social hierarchies. Likewise, humor's resistant capacity appears in diverse contexts. Iranian cartoonists use dissonant imagery to turn discomfort into subtle defiance (Göpfert, 2024), whereas Hungary's Two-Tailed Dog Party (MKKP) employs absurdist satire to expose populist fear-mongering and rehumanize political debate within a hybrid regime (Hyttinen, 2024).

On the other hand, insult-based laughter can serve as a disguised *instrument of repression*. Ridicule legitimizes the public devaluation of opponents and narrows the space for dissent, especially when wielded by actors close to power (Beck & Spencer, 2025, p. 9). Studies of meme cultures have demonstrated how “hatred wrapped in humor” desensitizes audiences and stigmatizes critics as humorless, thereby normalizing exclusionary cues (Kuipers, 2011). Cringe humor thus acts as a form of soft control: it grants creators authority to define what counts as absurd or deviant, shaping opinion through affective conditioning rather than reasoned argument. In this setting, carnivalesque inversion does not necessarily challenge power: it can also serve those already close to it. Moreover, cringe communication raises *dilemmas around freedom of expression and hate speech*. As Zinigrad (2025) argues, humorous speech has an amplification effect: its entertainment value facilitates the diffusion of messages and disarms critical resistance, thereby normalizing the attitudes it conveys. What courts often treat as “just a joke” or “cavalier humor beliefs” can, in fact, shape social norms and shift the boundaries of acceptable speech (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). Disparaging humor provides a “social license” for prejudice (Ferguson & Ford, 2008; Hodson et al., 2010), allowing dehumanizing content to circulate without moral cost. Cognitively, humor simplifies complexity and suspends empathy, granting moral exemption from compassion (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). The logic of hybrid media systems, driven by virality and emotion, rewards the most humiliating expressions and undermines deliberation. Regulators thus face a persistent dilemma: unrestrained ridicule upholds free expression and pluralism, yet—as Zinigrad (2025) notes—it can corrode the mutual respect that sustains democratic contestation, whereas oversight risks chilling satire. Similarly, cringe humor also raises challenges for *fair competition*. In populist and electoral-authoritarian regimes (Benedek, 2025), partisan satire can act as an “organic” third-party campaign, bypassing spending limits and disclosure rules. With new restrictions on paid political advertising in the EU, such tactics may gain greater influence.

Accountability further complicates the picture. Cringe communicators rely on plausible deniability. This “clown-nose on/clown-nose off” strategy allows them to shift between joking and serious registers, repackaging political hostility as popular entertainment. Across Europe and the Americas, far-right actors increasingly weaponize irony and *edgeling* to push boundaries, normalize exclusion, and deflect accountability (Göpfert & N’Guessan, 2025). The result is a communicative gray zone where serious smears masquerade as jokes, eroding truth norms while shielding perpetrators behind irony.

In sum, the central democratic tension lies between humor’s protected space for transgression and the need for responsible speech. Attempts to regulate or “call out” cringe content collide with liberal commitments to free expression, whereas

neglecting its harmful effects undermines deliberative integrity. As Pérez and Freier (2022) argue, scholars and practitioners should better monitor humor as a real-time delegitimization strategy while exploring how its integrative and critical potential can be reclaimed for democratic ends. Future research should examine how different audiences interpret political humor, whether routinized ridicule fosters cynicism or can coexist with institutional trust, and which safeguards can mitigate harms without chilling satire. Possible countermeasures, such as satire literacy or greater transparency about coordination and funding, remain under-studied but essential. However, recognizing the ambivalent nature of cringe communication is crucial: humor is not peripheral to politics but constitutive of how belonging, legitimacy, and hierarchy are negotiated in the hybrid media age, where “jokes” carry serious weight. The practical task is not to banish humor from politics but to understand its complexity and how it governs.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Summary of sources

Date	ID	Views	Title	Source
2024-04-13	1	64137	<i>Why is Róbert Puzsér the most irritating leftist CELEB?</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXHZQV_GYic
2024-04-19	2	99208	<i>Why is János Bródy LYING?</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpTKo45-iBI
2024-05-10	3	51303	<i>Is this man NORMAL?</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sd6wHz-Ks08
2024-05-12	4	42737	<i>Are these influencers getting money from America?</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnLGk81rkpo
2024-05-14	5	222933	<i>You asked for it, I'll show you who Friderikusz sleeps with!</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQdF2iMvzro
2024-06-03	6	42825	<i>Let's watch the craziest liberal TikToks together! WHO VOTES for these people?</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2e-4hiMMugc
2024-06-08	7	22978	<i>This is what Karácsony has done to Budapest!</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsVDf-_bBKw

Appendix B. Summary of the Analysis of Trombi Roast Videos

ID	Target / Cluster	Positioning Labels	Hierarchical Positioning (Competence–Morality)	Identity Markers & Personal Ridicule	Emotional Strategies (Devices & Cues)	Political Functions
1	Róbert Puzsér, public intellectual	Pseudo-intellectual, opportunist, fake	Low–Low: irrelevant yet harmful amplifier	Linked to every left-wing party; shallow celebrity; fake independence	Vicarious embarrassment (host grimaces), contempt, sarcasm, overconfidence mockery; exposure of fake independence	Discredit cultural critics; sever symbolic ties to opposition politics
2	János Bródy, musician	Part of communist elite; legacy re-read as partisan	Low competence / suspect morality; outdated yet influential; misleading moral authority	“Red beat musician,” “worn-out rock-daddy”; ageist tropes (“codger pensioner,” “mummy”)	Contempt via belittling comparisons, amusement via age mockery, VE through awkward dips; explicit second-hand embarrassment	Undermine cultural icons backing opposition; convert legacy into moral disqualification
3	Péter Magyar, leader of an opposition party	“Newcomer messiah”; clown frame; theatrical “left-wing circus”	Clownish yet threatening; deceit and volatility emphasized	Vanity/filters (“virtual Botox”); masculinity questioned; DV allegations	Formalized cringe tier list; VE (“can’t watch this”); clown frame; contempt (epithets), amusement (repetition)	Neutralize surge; sow doubt; polarize audiences via paradox insults
4	Hungarian influencer cluster	“Belpest sect,” “dollar media” mouthpieces; foreign-backed opposition milieu	Low–Low; culturally alien; metaphors of contagion	Pride activism, make- up, celebrity lifestyle; derivative performers	Contempt (slurs), VE (performative activism), amusement (trend mockery), visual irony; foreign-influence cues	Tie youth culture to foreign manipulation; deter influencer activism
5	Sándor Friderikusz, journalist	Elite networker; “Gyurcsány-loving Kádár-fan”	Low–Low; cultural gatekeeper promoting deceptive values	“Ham actor,” undeserving legend; dependency on political patrons and sexualized Gyurcsány framing	Contempt and vicarious embarrassment; emojis and laughter cues; sexualized framing	Delegitimize liberal media; discredit elite networks
6	Progressive MEPs	“Libtards” aligned with Brussels / gender lobby / globalism	Low competence; morally dangerous (migration/gender/war)	“Sad faces,” “intellectual swamp”; cultural alienation	Contempt (labels), amusement (absurd analogies), VE (awkward stunts), editing cues; bodily recoil	Pre-EP election delegitimation; link EU progressives to domestic opposition
7	Gergely Karácsony, Mayor of Budapest	Personification of “Gyurcsányism”; elitist, out of touch	Low competence; suspect morality; elitist detachment	“Sociologist lost in theory”; submissive metaphors (“rescue dog”); sexualized subordination to Gyurcsány	Vicarious embarrassment, sarcasm, analogies (Snoop/ Madonna), contempt indicators; sexualized framing	Undercut mayoral credibility; reinforce Fidesz campaign frames

Note: VE = vicarious embarrassment; DV = domestic violence