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The Politics of Golden Fries: Cringe Culture and Its Rise in Czech Political Discourse

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Abstract: This study examines cringe political communication on Czech TikTok, asking how and why politicians fail to meet the platform's demands for authenticity and cultural literacy. Combining digital ethnography with qualitative interpretive analysis, it applies a two-stage case selection procedure – purposive sampling validated against audience-response markers such as comments, ridicule, and derivative content – to 280 videos from 75 accounts of candidates in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections. The analysis yields a five-category typology: Platform Tourism, Try-Hard Authenticity, Gen Z Wannabe, Awkward Trend Attempts, and Performative Cringe Spectacle. Cringe is conceptualized not merely as communicative failure but as an analytical lens exposing structural tensions between platform-native cultural codes and institutional political authority, while transgressive performance can also work strategically as a source of visibility and relatability. Grounded in affect theory, the entertaining citizen paradigm, the personalization of politics, and platform studies, the study offers a systematic framework for analyzing political cringe.

Keywords: Cringe culture; Political communication; TikTok; Authenticity; Affective publics

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become vital spaces for political engagement and public debate through which the digital transformation of political communication reshapes democratic discourse in contemporary societies. TikTok, in particular, functions as a crucial political communication platform because it enables political actors to reach younger users, who constitute its primary audience base. Nevertheless, the platform's distinctive cultural environment with its own visual rules and authenticity requirements makes it difficult for political figures to establish meaningful connections with its users. The study of „cringe” political communication which includes awkward, laughable, or deplorable content (Dahl, 2018; Brody, 2022) represents a vital point where digital culture meets

political discourse although it has not received sufficient academic study despite its increasing occurrence and its potential effects on democratic participation.

The failure of political figures to understand platform-specific cultural codes leads to content that produces negative emotional reactions, which extend beyond visual criticism to evaluate political abilities, cultural understanding, and democratic representation. The research examines how political actors who already exist in the political sphere adapt their communication strategies to match the cultural characteristics of TikTok within Czech political discourse. The Czech political environment offers an excellent research opportunity to study these developments because its political system includes various actors who now use TikTok to connect with young voters ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections.

Direct evidence that any single platform changes vote choice remains limited. TikTok-specific research, however, is accumulating rapidly. A recent systematic review shows that the platform's algorithms tend to amplify sensational content and may increase youth exposure to political messaging, although data-access barriers still complicate causal inference (Giuranno & Manni, 2026). Algorithmic audit studies of the 2024 U.S. presidential election further demonstrate that TikTok's recommendation system distributed political content in systematically skewed ways that cannot be explained by user engagement alone (Ibrahim et al., 2026), and emerging survey research links young adults' TikTok use to their civic and participatory behavior (Moffett & Rice, 2024). In the European context, studies of the 2024 European Parliament elections show that political actors – particularly, though not exclusively, populist and radical-right parties – have made TikTok a central campaign arena, with engagement rewarding emotionally resonant, platform-native „politainment” formats over traditional broadcast-style messaging (Cervi et al., 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). TikTok now functions as a significant arena of political self-presentation and reputation formation for the young cohorts who dominate its user base, one in which affective and cultural competence increasingly operate as political capital.

Against this background, the research analyzes a range of TikTok accounts from multiple Czech political actors to create a comprehensive typology of cringe political communication, which shows political actors' difficulties in digital spaces where cultural authenticity and platform literacy function as new political resources. To guide this investigation, the study addresses two research questions: RQ1: What typological patterns characterize cringe content in Czech political TikTok communication? RQ2: Which platform-specific and performative factors contribute to the emergence of these patterns?

The contemporary study of digital political discourse cannot be separated from the emotional responses it generates, particularly when examining phenomena like cringe, because cringe operates as a social phenomenon that produces affective discomfort, embarrassment and social judgment. Therefore, understanding

these emotional reactions and their political implications requires a theoretical framework that takes affect seriously as a constitutive element of political communication.

THE AFFECTIVE TURN AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS

The study of affect and emotion remained peripheral to media theory until the 1990s, when it began emerging as part of the dominant paradigm, which challenged basic views about emotional responses as irrational or uncontrollable (Nelson, 2016). The „affective turn” (Massumi, 1995; Clough & Halley, 2007) fundamentally reconceptualized the interconnections between material and emotional dimensions, establishing emotions as legitimate objects of scholarly inquiry within media studies.

Zizi Papacharissi’s theory of affective publics provides a crucial framework for understanding contemporary digital political communication. Papacharissi (2015) defines affective publics as „networked spaces that enable and are driven by expressions of sentiment,” arguing that these spaces „collapse the public and private through storytelling, by employing technologies that form feedback loops of affective expression” (p. 125). This conceptualization proves particularly relevant for understanding platforms like TikTok, where algorithm-driven content distribution creates powerful feedback loops that amplify emotionally resonant content, regardless of whether responses are positive or negative.

The theory of affective publics explains how cringe political content spreads through what Papacharissi (2015) terms „affective contagion” – the rapid dissemination of emotional responses through networked publics. Political actors who fail to meet platform conventions trigger negative emotional responses that lead to viral spread through mockery, parody, and critical commentary. These affective responses create shared emotional orientations that bind networked publics together around common feelings and reactions to political content.

Within this framework, emotions assume crucial roles in political communication contexts, as online social networks function as environments that actively generate and disseminate emotions as fundamental communicative mechanisms (Dean, 2015). While affective charges, particularly on TikTok, may not determine electoral outcomes, they have become integral to constructing politicians’ public images, creating affective publics whose members congregate around platforms that encourage affective attunement (Papacharissi, 2015). Digital platforms consequently create new forms of political engagement that emphasize emotional communication and affective connection rather than traditional rational political discourse.

Contemporary emotion studies in online environments lead to more complex understandings of digital political communication, specifically examining „what is and what is not politically possible on social media” (Carlson & Frazer, 2020: 3). In TikTok’s specific context, political communication success depends primarily on generating appropriate affective responses within the platform’s cultural ecosystem. Contemporary research increasingly examines visual content’s role in political communication, with visual elements possessing enormous significance in politician-voter interactions (Veneti et al., 2019; Farkas & Bene, 2021). Authentic content that creates emotional connections between political actors and audiences leads to strong affective bonds, while content that appears forced or inauthentic – often labeled as cringe – generates negative affective responses that damage political actors’ credibility and effectiveness.

A complementary economic perspective comes from Gerlitz and Helmond’s (2013) analysis of the „like economy,” which argues that social media platforms generate revenue through emotional response monetization by selecting content based on user engagement. Their research reveals how platforms like TikTok create economic systems to encourage content creators to produce emotional responses, which can be either positive or negative. This algorithmic system enables cringe political content to gain widespread visibility even when failing to achieve intended political objectives.

A related contribution comes from Sampson (2012), who examined relationships between affect and viral content, arguing that affective intensity rather than semantic content often determines which messages spread through digital networks. His research suggests that cringe political content may achieve viral spread precisely through its capacity to generate intense negative emotional responses, creating „affective viral vectors” that disseminate content through networks of shared emotional reaction rather than political agreement or support. Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit (2015) expanded these findings by studying „networked affect” on social media platforms which shows how emotional reactions spread across user networks to form collective meanings and impact digital content. Their research shows that individual emotional responses to political content grow stronger through network effects until they produce collective affective responses that can significantly exceed the original content’s impact. In Czech scholarly contexts, the affective dimensions of political communication on social media platforms have been explored by Andrea Průchová Hřůzová and the author of this study (2022), focusing specifically on the extent to which fear-based and hatred-oriented emotional appeals characterize Czech political anti-immigrant discourse.

THE ENTERTAINING CITIZEN PARADIGM AND POLITICAL PERFORMANCE

The study of cringe political communication on TikTok can be traced to Liesbet van Zoonen's groundbreaking work on entertaining citizenship, which challenged traditional academic assumptions about the relationship between entertainment and serious political discourse. According to van Zoonen (2005), the contemporary media landscape has eliminated the traditional distinction between entertainment and politics. Entertainment formats now function as legitimate and often preferred political engagement spaces, particularly among younger audiences who had grown up with interactive entertainment media. Van Zoonen explains that the crowded media environment requires politicians to present themselves as entertaining personalities (2005). This theoretical framework helps explain why political actors use TikTok despite facing major risks from producing content that might be labeled as cringe.

Further theoretical development is offered, for example, by Corner and Pels (2003), who studied the „media culture” of contemporary politics which argued that political communication had become fundamentally performative, requiring political actors to develop sophisticated media literacy and performance skills. Their research highlighted the challenges politicians face when attempting to adapt their communication strategies to new media formats, which often leads to performance failures that TikTok users would identify as cringe content. Such failures to master new media environments are, however, neither new nor unique to TikTok. The televisual turn produced its own canonical embarrassments: from Nixon's visibly uncomfortable appearance in the 1960 televised debate to a long lineage of awkward late-night and morning-television interviews in which politicians misjudged the register of an entertainment format (Corner & Pels, 2003). What TikTok changes is the dynamics of failure – Platform affordances allow a misjudged performance to be duetted, stitched, and memed into circulation within hours, embedding it in networked affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015). Driessens (2013) extended these theoretical concepts by studying how politics adopted celebrity-style communication methods. His research demonstrates political actors adopting celebrity communication methods while he identifies three essential elements for political communication success which include authenticity, relatability, and cultural competence. The absence of these factors, Driessens argues, can result in political communication that appears forced or inauthentic.

One of the key forms of this entertainment-oriented, performative politics is humour – and it is precisely here that the line between successful performance and cringe becomes most visible. Humour has long been theorised as a double-edged instrument of political communication, able to create a connection with audiences and puncture opponents, but also to trivialise the speaker (Tsakona

& Popa, 2011). Research on political satire shows measurable effects on candidate evaluation and attention (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), suggesting the entertainment–politics convergence charted by van Zoonen (2005) is consequential rather than merely stylistic. The figure of the clown is especially instructive. Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1984) account of the carnivalesque and the grotesque body, the political clown converts breaches of dignity into a source of licence and visibility. Boris Johnson stuck on a zip-line, or knocking a child over during a PR rugby game, and Donald Trump’s norm-violating performances illustrate how ostensibly cringe-worthy moments can increase name recognition and media salience while appearing to leave — or even enhance — the politician’s standing with core supporters.

THE ALGORITHM OF AUTHENTICITY

The personalization of political communication also provides a fundamental theoretical framework to study cringe political content that appears on TikTok and other social media platforms. According to Bennett (2012) contemporary political communication has shifted its focus from institutional positions and policy platforms to political actors as personalities. The transformation toward personalization reflects broader social developments regarding human interactions with political institutions and authority since traditional institutional loyalties have evolved into individualized political identification and engagement. A related strand of research examines the „presidentialization” of political communication (McAllister, 2007), demonstrating how political systems now focus most attention on individual political leaders instead of political parties or institutions. His research identifies multiple factors that drive this personalization trend, including changes in media consumption patterns, declining party identification among voters, and the rise of social media platforms that facilitate direct communication between political actors and citizens.

The personalization of political communication on TikTok and other social media platforms develops distinctive characteristics because the platform focuses on individual creators and personal storytelling. Political actors must present themselves as authentic individuals rather than institutional representatives by sharing personal stories, behind-the-scenes content, and informal communication which would have been considered inappropriate in traditional political communication contexts. Through personalization the political content becomes more relatable and accessible to younger audiences who prefer authentic and personal communication over institutional authority. However, the requirement for social media personalization presents major risks to political actors. Enli (2015) explains that social media platforms generate „authenticity paradoxes”

which require political actors to display authentic spontaneous behavior while they need to preserve strategic message control and communication objectives. The conflict between genuine self-expression and image management becomes most challenging on TikTok because its platform culture requires unfiltered authenticity which opposes traditional political communication's requirement for strategic control.

Van Aelst et al. (2012) contributed to this theoretical framework by studying how political personalization affects polarization through its ability to boost emotional support for political actors at the expense of reducing focus on substantive policy issues. The study indicates that personalization leads to increased political engagement, yet it may also contribute to political fragmentation because citizens can form strong emotional connections with individual political figures. Kruikemeier (2014) studied personalization specifically in social media contexts, demonstrating how these platforms enable new forms of personalized political communication that boost voter engagement and political participation. Her research revealed that personalized political communication succeeds when political figures maintain consistent personal branding while presenting themselves authentically and actively engaging with audience feedback. The research indicates that personalized political communication appears forced or inauthentic when these essential factors are absent.

Jerslev (2016) extends this theoretical framework by examining „celebrification” processes on social media platforms, which demonstrate how regular users can become celebrities through platform-specific performances while risking public embarrassment through performance failures. Her research provides valuable insights into political actors on TikTok who need to balance their existing public profiles and platform-specific requirements of creating authentic content.

WHEN POLITICS GETS CRINGE

As discussed above, understanding cringe political communication on TikTok requires studying how platform culture affects user expectations about authentic content. For the purposes of this study, cringe is defined as a communicative category that emphasizes the disconnect between platform-native cultural codes and political authority, producing affective discomfort in audiences. For systematic analysis, this study conceptualizes cringe through three interconnected dimensions: (1) the trigger, encompassing performative breaches including inappropriate slang usage, violations of platform conventions, or cultural missteps; (2) the mechanism, wherein perceived inauthenticity generates embarrassment and social judgment; and (3) the outcome, manifesting as ridicule, memeification, and competence erosion. The proposed typology is structured according

to these analytical dimensions. It must be acknowledged that cringe remains inherently subjective and context-dependent; interpretations may vary across generations, political affiliations, and cultural contexts. To mitigate this subjectivity, the case selection procedure described in the method section validates the researcher's initial reading against audience-response markers. Furthermore, cringe should be distinguished from adjacent concepts: unlike satire or parody, cringe is unintentional; unlike gaffes, cringe involves sustained performance failure rather than momentary slips; and unlike general awkwardness, cringe specifically violates platform-specific cultural expectations.

Abidin (2021) provides one of the most comprehensive studies of cringe content on social media platforms through her definition of cringe as material that causes „vicarious embarrassment” because it shows inauthenticity, cultural insensitivity, or failure to platform-specific communication norms. The research by Abidin identifies several key characteristics that contribute to content being labeled as cringe, including obvious attempts to appeal to younger audiences through superficial adoption of youth culture aesthetics, misuse of platform-specific features or formats, and demonstration of cultural incompetence within platform-specific contexts. The research of Abidin expands Goffman's (1956) work on social embarrassment and face-work by applying these concepts to digital environments where social interactions occur through platform algorithms and cultural conventions. Her research shows that cringe content violates implicit social rules of platform-specific communities, which leads to social penalties that range from mockery to social ostracism and online negative publicity.

The concept of cringe is closely related to Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, which helps explain how cringe content maintains and reproduces cultural hierarchies. TikTok users demonstrate their cultural capital and platform literacy through their ability to understand platform rules, creative skills, and authentic engagement with platform culture. Political actors who lack this cultural capital tend to produce content that is perceived as cringe, reinforcing their position as outsiders to cultural trends despite their formal political authority. Banet-Weiser (2012) studied how digital platforms generate new forms of authenticity and cultural capital, arguing that social media platforms create new forms of „authenticity labor” where users must continuously perform genuineness to maintain their cultural credibility. According to her research, authenticity becomes a form of cultural capital that can be accumulated, displayed, and contested within platform-specific contexts.

At the same time, locating cringe within political communication requires distinguishing cringe as communicative failure from cringe as communicative strategy. In the failure reading, which the dimensions outlined above primarily capture, cringe weakens voters' trust in a politician's competence, so that a poorly executed TikTok signals broader unfitness for office. Yet cringe can also function

strategically within an attention economy where visibility is itself a resource (Marwick, 2013). Transgressive, „bad-mannered” performance is a recognised feature of populist political style (Moffitt, 2016), where breaking the rules of political decorum is not accidental but serves as a deliberate way to signal authenticity and outsider status. What platform-literate publics code as cringe may, for a candidate’s own base, register as relatability or defiance of elite norms — an ambivalence that further underscores the subjective and context-dependent nature of cringe attributions noted above.

This theoretical foundation provides essential context for understanding how emotional dynamics shape political engagement in digital spaces, particularly in the emergence of cringe political communication as a distinct phenomenon.

METHOD

The methodological approach employs a mixed-methods design centered on the development and application of a comprehensive typology for analyzing cringe content in political communication. The methodology combines digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2019) with qualitative interpretive analysis to create a systematic framework for identifying, categorizing, and analyzing cringe political content across different contexts and platforms. Building upon established qualitative research traditions (Bailey, 1994; Kluge, 2000), the digital ethnographic analysis enabled the construction of a theoretically informed content typology designed to systematically identify and categorize materials manifesting cringe-related features in political digital communication contexts.

Specifically, the research is based on long-term observation of TikTok activities of prominent Czech politicians (e.g., Petr Fiala, Alena Schillerová, Marian Jurečka, Zdeněk Hřib, and others). The analytical sample comprised 75 TikTok accounts belonging to political candidates representing the following political entities: ANO, ODS, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09, Pirate Party, Starostové, SPD, Motoristé, Stačilo Movement, and Pro Movement. This study excluded institutional TikTok accounts of political parties and movements, concentrating solely on individual political actors seeking election to the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament in 2025. The analysis considered videos published over the past 12 months.

To avoid grounding the analysis solely in the researcher’s own reading of what constitutes cringe, case selection proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, candidate videos were identified through purposive sampling, a methodological approach particularly suited for examining specific phenomena within defined populations (Patton, 2015). As Krippendorff (2018) notes, purposive sampling allows researchers to select cases that are „information-rich” and relevant to the

research questions. This sampling strategy enabled the identification of content that best exemplified the characteristics of cringe political communication, rather than attempting to analyze all available content indiscriminately.

In the second stage, each candidate was validated against audience-response markers to ensure that the cringe attribution was intersubjectively shared rather than based solely on the researcher's individual judgment. A video was retained only where audience reactions displayed at least one of the following markers:

1. Explicit use of cringe-related vocabulary in the comments (e.g. *cringe*) and expressions of vicarious embarrassment;
2. Ridicule, mockery, or ironic praise directed at the performance rather than the policy;
3. Derivative content — duets, stitches, reaction videos, memes, or cross-platform parodies that recontextualise the original as an object of embarrassment;
4. Cross-media uptake in which journalistic or entertainment media framed the content as awkward or embarrassing.

For each political actor, approximately 3–5 videos demonstrating potential cringe characteristics and meeting at least one of the markers listed above were selected, yielding a final analytical corpus of 280 videos. Selection criteria prioritized content exhibiting visible platform norm violations, audience engagement patterns indicating negative reception, and videos that had generated secondary content or media attention. This approach aligns with established qualitative sampling principles emphasizing information richness over statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015), while ensuring that the resulting typology reflects patterns observable across the Czech political spectrum rather than isolated cases. Contemporary campaigning is professionalised and staff-mediated (Kreiss, 2016), so a cringe video may originate with the candidate, a communications team, or an under-resourced external agency. The question of authorship and intentionality is nonetheless analytically secondary, because cringe is constituted at the point of reception rather than production. In this context, several limitations of the research design should be acknowledged. TikTok does not publicly display a dislike count, and comment sections on political accounts are frequently moderated or disabled, which constrains the completeness of comment-based markers. Measuring cringe effects in an audience remains methodologically challenging, as cringe is a relational attribution rather than a fixed property of a text. Future work could operationalise cringe effects through systematic analysis of comment sentiment and emoji use, duet and stitch analysis, or experimental reception designs measuring self-reported vicarious embarrassment.

The typological development incorporates multiple analytical dimensions designed to capture the multifaceted complexity of cringe political communication phenomena:

- Technical Cringe: Improper use of platform features, poor editing, technological incompetence
- Visual Cringe: Poor production quality, inappropriate visual choices, awkward physical performance
- Linguistic Cringe: Inappropriate slang usage, forced adoption of youth language patterns, cultural tone-deafness
- Temporal Cringe: Outdated memes, expired trends, old sounds, dated emoji
- Conceptual Cringe: Fundamental misunderstanding of platform-specific cultural norms or inappropriate contextualization of political messaging

Table 1 provides a summary of the typology developed through this analysis, mapping each cringe type to its characteristic norm violation, norm awareness, cringe dimension, and prototypical manifestation:

Table 1. Typology of Cringe Political Communication on TikTok

Cringe Type	Norm Violated	Norm Awareness	Cringe dimension	Prototypical Manifestation
Platform Tourism	Platform-specific format and technical production standards	Unaware of norm existence	Technical cringe, Visual cringe	Static electoral visuals, horizontal video, poor audio, improper subtitles, excessive text density
Try-Hard Authenticity	Authenticity expectations	Aware but misapplies	Visual cringe, Conceptual cringe	Staged spontaneity, forced relatability
Gen Z Wannabe	Cultural fluency norms	Aware but lacks competence	Linguistic cringe, Conceptual cringe	Misused slang, forced linguistic adoptions
Awkward Trend Attempts	Timing and execution standards	Partially aware, delayed recognition	Temporal cringe, Conceptual cringe	Outdated memes, inappropriate trends
Performative Cringe Spectacle	Political dignity expectations	Aware but deliberately transgresses	Conceptual cringe	Costumes, props, theatrical elements

Source: Own elaboration

TYPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Based on the dimensional analysis, the typology consists of five fundamental categories of cringe political communication present within social media discourse, including: Platform tourism, Try-hard authenticity, Gen Z Wannabe, Awkward trend attempts, and Performative cringe spectacle. The constructed framework constitutes a content-based typology rather than a user classification system.

Political actors demonstrate variability in their communicative approaches, precluding categorization according to singular content strategies. Individual posts may manifest cringe characteristics while others within the same politician's content portfolio do not, indicating that cringe assessment operates at the post level rather than the user level. Overall content strategy and communicative continuity serve as significant contextual factors in this analytical framework. The same trend may constitute cringe content for one politician while not for another.

PLATFORM TOURISM

Platform tourism cringe emerges when political actors use social media platforms to distribute traditional content without understanding the unique cultural elements and communication norms of each platform. Platform tourists deploy their established communication methods directly into new platforms leading to immediate detection of their outsider status in platform-specific communities.

The fundamental misunderstanding becomes most evident through the selection of content formats. Political actors upload formal podium speeches to TikTok without considering the platform's requirement for short visually engaging content. They treat the platform as a television broadcast medium rather than an interactive, culturally specific environment with its own aesthetic and communicative expectations. These static presentations that exceed typical platform durations break fundamental rules of the platform by neglecting the core requirements for entertainment-focused content and fast-paced visual storytelling. The cultural ignorance runs deeper than platform format choices, including fundamental misunderstanding of platform etiquette and user expectations. Political actors often fail to comprehend that effective platform engagement requires taking part in active cultural dialogues rather than simply broadcasting information. The content displays no spontaneous or creative elements that match genuine platform culture so it appears unnatural when traditional political messages are forced into spaces meant for different communicative purposes.

Misuse of platform features involves inappropriately using hashtags as keywords rather than cultural participation tools, or failing to understand the difference between platform-specific content formats. Platform tourists frequently publish on TikTok static electoral visuals originally designed for traditional media without understanding the platform requires dynamic video content. They might create carousel posts with dense text blocks, or post LinkedIn-style professional updates on TikTok, which shows their complete ignorance of platform communication norms. They maintain their content style from Facebook and Instagram and billboard advertising while neglecting to transform their materials for TikTok's distinctive

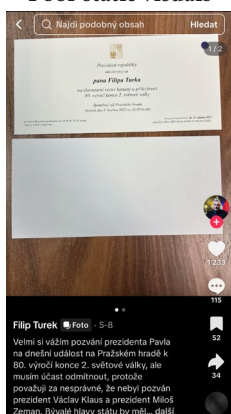
visual standards, as Prime Minister Petr Fiala (ODS) demonstrated in his TikTok post featuring a carousel format with electoral visuals and the campaign slogan „Teď je čas na silnou armádu“ (Now is the time for a strong army). This approach treats TikTok as merely another distribution channel for existing campaign materials rather than recognizing its requirement for native, platform-specific content creation. Additional examples include Member of European Parliament Filip Turek (Motoristé), who published photos of an invitation to a ceremonial evening commemorating the 80th anniversary of World War II's end, and Member of Parliament Lucie Šafránková (SPD), who uploaded an audio recording of her radio interview accompanied solely by static visuals. The examples show a basic misunderstanding of TikTok's main focus on making interactive video content that uses the platform's unique audiovisual features. Moreover, the cringe of platform tourism is in many cases deepened by technical incompetencies, which reveal deeper cultural illiteracy regarding how different platforms facilitate distinct types of social interaction and community formation.

Figure 1. Static electoral visuals



Source: www.tiktok.com/@p_fiala

Figure 2. Poor static visuals



Source: www.tiktok.com/@filipturekpresident

Figure 3. Static visuals combined with audio



Source: <https://www.tiktok.com/@politickalucie>

Closely related to platform tourism is the phenomenon of technical production failures. This type of cringe occurs when political actors demonstrate basic technical incompetence, resulting in poor audiovisual execution that undermines their intended messaging. Technical production failures encompass various shortcomings characteristic of amateur content production, including inadequate video resolution, poor audio quality, and improper formatting. This phenomenon represents a particularly damaging form of cringe political communication on TikTok because it hinders audience comprehension while simultaneously raising broader questions about the communicator's competence.

Audiences will tolerate visual imperfections more readily than incomprehensible sound but political figures commonly focus on visual aspects at the expense of audio fundamentals. Political figures regularly upload content without subtitles which makes it difficult for viewers who watch in sound-sensitive areas or with their volume off. Conversely, when subtitles are included, they often appear inappropriately positioned which blocks essential visual elements such as facial expressions and lip movements from speakers. This technical incompetence of politicians extends to subtitle timing errors which display text before or after speech thus causing confusion instead of clarity.

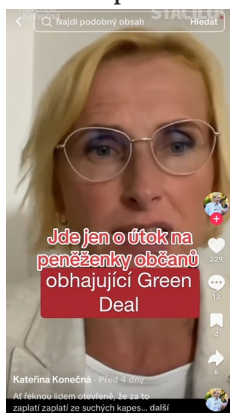
Additional technical failures include overwhelming text density that exceeds platform readability standards, with politicians cramming excessive information into single frames without considering mobile device viewing limitations. The poor lighting in content makes it hard to see political actors' faces while creating unflattering shadows and overexposed backgrounds that divert attention from the message. The problems become more severe when using old mobile devices with poor cameras because they generate pixelated unstable footage that appears unprofessional compared to standard social media content quality. Politicians often demonstrate fundamental misunderstanding of platform-specific technical requirements, most notably recording horizontal videos for vertical-oriented platforms like TikTok. Similarly, they may use inappropriate video lengths and uploading content that exceeds platform optimal durations.

Figure 4. Excessive text density



Source: www.tiktok.com/@balamarga67

Figure 5. Improper subtitle positions



Source: www.tiktok.com/@katkakonecna

Figure 6. Excessive text density



Source: www.tiktok.com/@zdenekkettnerspd

Illustrative examples include TikTok posts by Member of Parliament Margita Balašítková (ANO), who predominantly publishes clips from television discussions or news broadcasts accompanied by excessively large text that frequently

exceeds screen boundaries and becomes obscured by platform interface elements. Similarly amateur text handling is evident in content from Member of European Parliament Kateřina Konečná (Stačilo) and Member of Parliament Zdeněk Kettner (SPD), whose videos additionally suffer from unprofessional filming techniques, underexposure, and poor audio quality. These examples demonstrate multiple layers of platform incompetence, where politicians not only fail to understand TikTok's visual design principles but also neglect basic technical production standards.

TRY-HARD AUTHENTICITY

The previous categories encompassed cringe content that was based primarily on technical incompetence and inappropriately chosen formats. However, when political actors work appropriately with TikTok through high-quality vertical video formats, these cases often result in a different type of cringe: 'try-hard authenticity.' This category represents a particularly sophisticated form of political communication characterized by strategic yet inauthentic attempts to appear accessible, or genuinely spontaneous. This phenomenon emerges from the contemporary expectation that political actors need to demonstrate authentic and relatable qualities because social media users choose authentic appearances over formal professional presentation.

The main cringe element of this behavior involves politicians orchestrating seemingly spontaneous moments or personal revelations that appear obviously staged upon closer examination. The staged content reveals itself as artificial because politicians use overly produced „behind-the-scenes“ materials that demonstrate their artificial attempts to seem unscripted. The staging becomes so apparent that it undermines the intended effect of creating authentic connection with audiences.

Try-hard authenticity intensifies during electoral campaigns when politicians produce TikTok videos presenting visits to music festivals, folkloric celebrations, and local pubs, attempting to demonstrate close connections with the electorate. However, the obvious staging becomes immediately apparent through professional filming equipment, strategic camera angles, and politicians' uncomfortable body language. The authenticity performance fails because politicians maintain their formal behavioral patterns while attempting to engage casually which creates jarring contrasts between their natural institutional personas and forced relatability attempts. The TikTok productions show politicians having unnatural interactions with real festival-goers and pub patrons which makes these encounters appear artificial and deepens the distance between political elites and ordinary citizens.

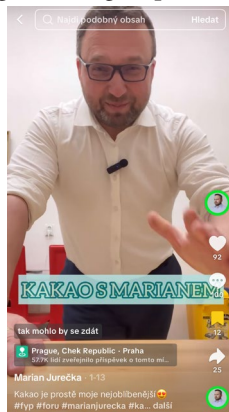
A typical example of try-hard authenticity is former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (ANO), who traditionally tours various festivals, celebrations, and similar events during his campaigns, attempting to appear natural and spontaneous. Also, politicians commonly employ various authentic serials featuring consumption of beloved beverages, such as „Coffee with Ivan Bartoš“ (Piráti) or „Cocoa with Marian Jurečka,“ (KDU-ČSL) designed to create intimate, relatable personas through seemingly casual interactions. The pinnacle of try-hard authenticity is exemplified by Member of Parliament Tomio Okamura (SPD), who appears in a market invitation video scraping potatoes, juggling onions, and biting into carrots, all while wearing a formal suit and maintaining highly formal diction.

Figure 7. Forced relatability



Source: www.tiktok.com/@andrejbabis

Figure 8. Staged spontaneity



Source: www.tiktok.com/@marian.jurecka

Figure 9. Forced relatability



Source: www.tiktok.com/@tomiospd

These examples demonstrate how try-hard authenticity fails when politicians maintain their formal behavioral patterns while attempting to engage in casual activities. The obvious staging and incongruent presentation styles immediately signal the artificial nature of these encounters, ultimately reinforcing rather than bridging the gap between political elites and ordinary citizens. In many cases, politicians also artificially employ the informal language of younger generations to appear more authentic, or try to awkwardly merge formal political content with current TikTok trends.

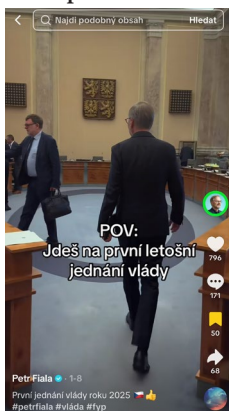
GEN Z WANNABE

This category of cringe content occurs when political figures from older generations attempt to connect with younger audiences through superficial youth culture adoption without actual understanding or participation. The political actor's established persona directly opposes their youth-oriented behaviors which creates immediate inauthenticity that typically results in ridicule instead of connection. The forced adoption of contemporary slang represents the most prevalent form of this cringe category. Politicians who use gen-z terms or youth language in their speeches often display their lack of understanding about how language naturally develops in digital youth spaces through their awkward and inappropriate usage.

Politicians frequently attempt to incorporate Generation Z vernacular into their TikTok content, awkwardly employing terms like „POV (point of view),“ „vibe,“ „slay,“ „low key“, „sigma“, or „ten pocit když... (The feeling when...)“ and making these forced linguistic adoptions often appear stilted and inauthentic. Political actors fail to grasp the subtle cultural elements and timing required for natural slang usage which forces them to display obvious youth culture instead of achieving authentic platform-specific communication engagement.

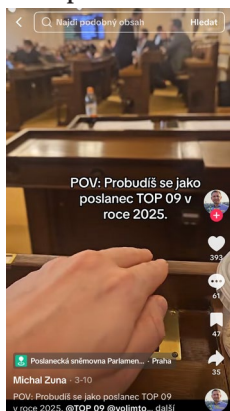
This phenomenon is strongly exemplified through the appropriation of the „POV“ trend by prominent Czech political figures including Prime Minister Petr Fiala (ODS), Member of Parliament Michal Zuna (TOP 09), and Minister of Agriculture Marian Jurečka (KDU-ČSL). All these politicians employed it as a tool for boasting, whether about government meetings, the fact that one became a member of parliament, or campaign launches. The misappropriation shows a basic failure to comprehend the cultural origins of POV format and its proper application in TikTok's environment. The POV trend typically functions as a self-deprecating or ironic commentary mechanism which enables users to present scenarios through humorous or critical perspectives that acknowledge inherent absurdity or contradiction. The use of POV format by politicians to celebrate institutional achievements or political events stands out as particularly jarring because these occasions usually require formal and respectful presentation instead of internet cultural irony. This misuse reveals an evident contradiction between youth-oriented digital language and the documentation of institutional political events, including cabinet meetings and electoral campaign inaugurations.

Figure 10. Forced linguistic adoptions of POV



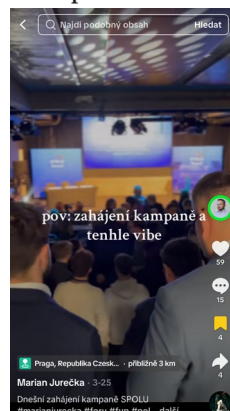
Source: www.tiktok.com/@p_fiala

Figure 11. Forced linguistic adoptions of POV



Source: www.tiktok.com/@michal.zuna

Figure 12. Forced linguistic adoptions of POV



Source: www.tiktok.com/@marian.jurecka

AWKWARD TREND ATTEMPTS

Awkward trend attempts represent a distinct form of cringe political communication where older political figures endeavor to participate in trending challenges, dances, outdated memes or viral content formats without adequately understanding the cultural context or execution standards that make such content authentic within youth-oriented platforms.

TikTok's platform behavior provides a key indicator of this cringe type as these attempts usually lack the spontaneity, creativity, or cultural understanding which makes successful trend participation possible within platform communities. The attempts at using outdated memes and cultural references stand as the most significant indicator of this misunderstanding because they show a fundamental failure to comprehend youth digital culture's fast evolution and the essential role of cultural timing in authentic youth engagement.

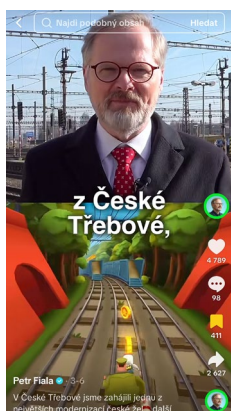
Politicians frequently employ outdated memes, often months or years past their cultural relevance, while inappropriately forcing political messaging onto viral formats. The adoption of memes from specific demographics or subcultures by politicians leads to cultural appropriation because they fail to grasp their internal meaning. Furthermore, political use of memes becomes ineffective when they overexplain them through captions and repeat them excessively which destroys the spontaneous nature and cultural authenticity of meme communication thus creating content that users identify as artificial. Similarly, the appropriation of trending sounds, songs, or dance trends demonstrates

comparable cultural incompetence, as evidenced by recent examples such as the „bombardino crocodilo“ trend or the „anxiety dance.“

Illustrative examples include Prime Minister Petr Fiala's utilization of a meme format based on the mobile game Subway Surfers when announcing railway infrastructure developments, demonstrating inappropriate contextual application of gaming-related content for serious policy communication. Although the meme thematically corresponds with railways, the combination of informal youth digital content and the formal video of the prime minister, who appears in a suit with a perfectly tied tie produces a cringe effect.

Similarly, Tomio Okamura's unsuccessful lip-sync performance to a Kendrick Lamar track exemplifies multiple layers of cringe content creation. Okamura's attempt to paraphrase the original music video through action shots featuring his automobile Škoda creates particularly pronounced cringe effects, given the song's thematic focus on critiquing superficiality and materialistic boasting. The incongruity between the track's critical commentary on ostentatious display and Okamura's showcase of his mass-produced vehicle generates cognitive dissonance that platform users may immediately recognize as cringe. Another example is a TikTok video by Member of Parliament Pavla Pivoňka Vaňková (Starostové), which utilizes the ASMR trend (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response—content designed to trigger relaxing sensory responses through specific sounds). However, the video demonstrates an awkward trend attempt, as participants record mundane sounds during petition signing, including paper rustling, pen clicking, or the act of signing itself.

Figure 13. Subway Surfers trend



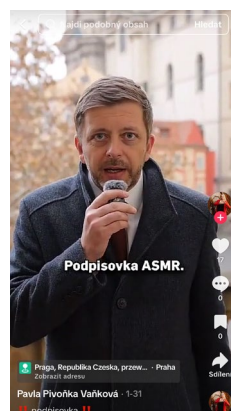
Source: www.tiktok.com/@p_fiala

Figure 14. Lip-sync performance



Source: www.tiktok.com/@tomiospd

Figure 15. ASMR trend

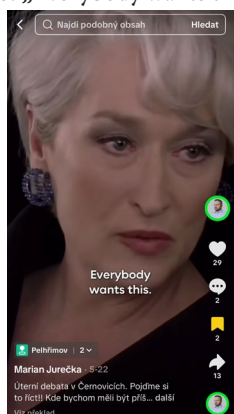


Source: www.tiktok.com/@pivonkavankova

A further illustration involves Minister Jurečka's (KDU-ČSL) awkward appropriation of the Meryl Streep „Everybody wants this“ meme, demonstrating performative spectacle through the juxtaposition of viral internet culture with his traditional political presentation. The professionally produced video contradicts meme authenticity requirements, creating obvious disconnect between formal governmental aesthetics and forced digital culture participation.

The examples demonstrate how politicians approach TikTok trends as mere aesthetic tools to be instrumentalized for political messaging, rather than understanding their embedded cultural meanings and contextual requirements. The content shows politicians view young audiences as unengaged consumers who can be reached through basic viral content adoption instead of understanding the complex cultural abilities needed for meaningful platform interaction. Moreover, the failed trend attempts highlight the limitations of treating digital cultural phenomena as marketing tools rather than authentic communicative practices.

Figure 16. „Everybody wants this“ meme



Source: www.tiktok.com/@marian.jurecka

Figure 17. „Everybody wants this“ meme



Source: www.tiktok.com/@marian.jurecka

PERFORMATIVE CRINGE SPECTACLE

If cringe operates on a spectrum of intensity, then its most extreme manifestation appears in the category of Performative cringe spectacle. This cringe type is characterized by politicians adopting props, costumes, or personas that transform substantive policy discussions into entertainment spectacles. Political actors incorrectly assume theatrical elements enhance message accessibility, failing to recognize how such approaches undermine their authority and credibility.

This phenomenon represents a particularly problematic form of political communication because it trivializes serious policy issues while attempting

to make complex topics more accessible or memorable through inappropriate theatrical means. Unlike platform-specific cringe types, performative cringe spectacle creates content that appears undignified regardless of distribution channel. It reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of appropriate political communication standards, while also frequently extending into traditional media formats such as television broadcasting. When politicians use character performances and mascot costumes for serious policy communication they suggest that political information requires childish entertainment formats for citizens to understand. Key indicators include politicians dressed as objects, characters, or in themed costumes that directly relate to their policy announcements.

Figure 18. French fries spectacle



Source: www.tiktok.com/@aschillerka

Figure 19. French fries spectacle



Source: www.tiktok.com/@aschillerka

Figure 20. French fries spectacle



Source: www.tiktok.com/@aschillerka

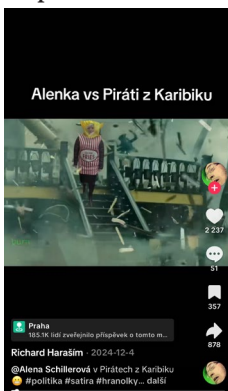
An illustrative example involves Zdeněk Hřib, chairman of the Pirate Party, and other Pirate Party candidates, who appeared in a TikTok video addressing food price reduction and VAT decreases. The entire video is situated within a grocery store setting, where Zdeněk Hřib performs the role of a cashier wearing an apron emblazoned with the Pirate Party logo. A further prominent example, representing the extensively mediated instance in the Czech context, involves former Finance Minister Alena Schillerová's (ANO) cosplay performance in a French fries costume to critique governmental policies regarding temporary employment and taxation of student jobs. This TikTok video exemplifies performative cringe spectacle through its transformation of serious fiscal policy debate into theatrical absurdity, with Schillerová conducting a dialogue with herself while alternating between her costumed persona and her parliamentary role. This initial video spawned multiple sequels maintaining the costume motif, including instances where Schillerová explained the costume's absence

due to dry cleaning while holding a McDonald's French fries container, and celebratory content featuring high-five exchanges with costumed figurants following governmental policy reversals.

This case demonstrates how performative cringe spectacle can achieve viral spread through its capacity to generate meme-worthy content, though the resulting attention typically overshadows substantive policy discourse. In this instance, the performative cringe spectacle generated extensive secondary content across multiple levels and platforms. The French fries costume became a catalyst for various meme formats, including traditional pop-cultural references connecting Schillerová's performance to „Pirates of the Caribbean“ themes.

Additionally, Generation Z users created derivative content employing contemporary meme formats, such as „Me when my crush says they like French fries,“ and a prominent Czech television presenter donned a hot dog costume during a broadcast program, directly referencing and parodying Schillerová's original performance. The secondary content development reveals how cringe political communication can achieve cultural saturation through its capacity to inspire parody, imitation, and critique across diverse media platforms, while simultaneously diminishing democratic discourse dignity and demonstrating disrespect toward public intelligence and civic engagement abilities.

Figure 21. French Fries Spectacle Remixes



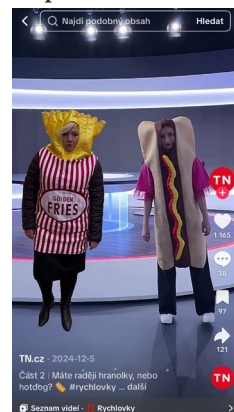
Source: www.tiktok.com/@purn_memes

Figure 22. French Fries Spectacle Remixes



Source: www.tiktok.com/@flopking69

Figure 23. French Fries Spectacle Remixes



Source: www.tiktok.com/@televizninovin

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive analysis of cringe political communication in Czech TikTok discourse demonstrates fundamental tensions between traditional political communication practices and the cultural expectations of digital platforms. The five-category typology shows that cringe originates from more than technical mistakes or aesthetic problems because it stems from fundamental misinterpretations of authenticity, cultural participation and political authority in digital spaces.

The research shows that Czech political actors across the political spectrum struggle with similar challenges when attempting to engage with TikTok's cultural environment. The repeated misinterpretation of platform-specific cultural codes and audience expectations is evident in Prime Minister Petr Fiala (ODS) through his inappropriate use of gaming memes in combination with formal stand-up presentation style, Alena Schillerová (ANO) through her viral French fries costume performance, and Tomio Okamura (SPD) through his misguided lip-sync attempts. The communication failures documented in individual politicians' TikTok content may signal broader challenges. When political figures repeatedly misinterpret platform conventions, it suggests that the organizations supporting their digital communication—including party communications teams and professional consultants—may lack adequate understanding of youth-oriented platform cultures. This pattern of individual failures, when systematic across the political spectrum, points to potential gaps in how political institutions approach digital communication training and strategy.

The research findings have broader implications beyond the Czech Republic for answering essential questions about political representation, democratic participation and cultural competencies in digital communities. The growing political engagement of younger people on TikTok requires political actors to participate authentically in these spaces for sustaining democratic legitimacy and effective governance. This study conceptualizes cringe as both a descriptive category of communicative misfires and an analytical lens revealing structural tensions between platform culture and political authority. The typology developed here captures cringe at the descriptive level through its five categories, while the underlying framework provides analytical purchase on why such misfires occur systematically when traditional political communication encounters platform-native expectations. The dynamics observed in Czech political TikTok are likely not unique to this national context. Politicians across Europe and beyond face similar challenges when adapting to youth-dominated platforms, as the fundamental tension between institutional political communication and platform-native authenticity expectations transcends national boundaries. Future comparative research could examine whether the typology developed here applies to other national contexts or requires modification based on local

political cultures. Moreover, the development of cringe as a particular political communication category requires innovative political literacy frameworks which integrate digital competencies with cultural awareness.

Future research should examine how political actors can modify their communication approaches over time and what the extended electoral and institutional effects of cringe political communication are, while the evolution of digital platforms requires scholars and practitioners of political communication to understand cultural mechanisms which determine political communication success or failure in shaping political discourse.

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