

Cringe Politics in the Digital Age: Humor and Affective Boundary-Making in Central and Eastern European Political Communication

In recent years, political communication has increasingly moved into digital platforms, which are shaped by entertainment logics and affective dynamics (Papathanassopoulos & Giannouli, 2025). Political actors are no longer judged solely by their policy proposals or ideological positions but also by their ability to perform authenticity, relatability, and cultural competence within rapidly evolving media environments (Luebke, 2021). Within this landscape, a particular communicative phenomenon has gained remarkable visibility: cringe. Cringe describes a distinctive emotional reaction triggered when audiences observe behavior that appears socially awkward, norm-violating, or incongruent with shared expectations of competence and authenticity (Mayer et al., 2021; Strohl, 2026). In everyday language, „cringe” refers to feelings of embarrassment or awkwardness experienced either directly or vicariously when witnessing another person’s socially inappropriate behavior. Recent scholarship also argues that the concept has evolved into a polysemous and multi-functional category that extends beyond a simple emotional reaction, distinguishing between everyday and analytical understandings of cringe and cringe humor (Iché et al., 2026). We argue that in contemporary political communication, cringe operates not only as an emotional response but also as a communicative strategy and a mechanism of political evaluation. In this Special Issue, we approach cringe as a form of affective political communication in which failed political performances become publicly evaluated through embarrassment, humor, and moral judgment, thereby producing symbolic exclusion and reputational hierarchies.

The rise of cringe in political discourse reflects broader transformations in the nature of political communication (Jones, 2010). Over the past decades, politics has become increasingly personalized, shifting attention away from institutions, parties, and policies toward the personalities, performances, and emotional displays of individual political actors (Van Aelst et al., 2012). In this environment, the credibility of political actors is evaluated not only by ideological positions but also by perceived authenticity, charisma, and social competence (Valgarðsson et al., 2021). Political actors are thus required to perform convincingly across multiple communicative arenas, from parliamentary speeches and

televised debates to social media videos and influencer-style content (Kissas, 2024). Within such conditions, the boundaries between politics and entertainment have become blurred. Scholars have described this phenomenon as *politainment*, referring to the fusion of political messaging with entertainment formats and popular culture (Van Zoonen, 2005; Diehl, 2026). Political actors increasingly adopt communicative styles associated with celebrity culture, stand-up comedy, or online influencer communication in order to capture attention in crowded digital media environments (Cervi et al., 2023). Humor, irony, parody, and spectacle have thus become central components of political performance (Gournelos & Greene, 2011).

Cringe emerges precisely within this intersection of personalization and *politainment*. When political actors attempt to adapt to entertainment-driven media environments, such as participating in viral challenges, using youth slang, or performing humor, they expose themselves to new forms of evaluation (Cepernich et al., 2026). Attempts to appear authentic, relatable, or entertaining can easily backfire, producing performances perceived as forced, inauthentic, or socially awkward. These moments frequently trigger cringe reactions among audiences. Digital media environments provide particularly fertile ground for the emergence and circulation of cringe. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and X facilitate the rapid dissemination of short, visually striking, and emotionally charged content. Within these infrastructures, moments of awkwardness or performative misalignment are easily extracted from their original context, transformed into memes or short clips, and circulated through networks of users who collectively evaluate and comment on them. As a result, cringe has become a recognizable aesthetic and communicative mode in digital political discourse (Ray & Bhattacharya, 2026).

Despite its growing prominence, cringe has received relatively limited systematic attention in political communication research. While scholars have extensively analyzed political humor, satire, populist style, and emotional communication (Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020; Beck, 2024; Prakken, 2025; Bliuc et al., 2026), cringe occupies a somewhat ambiguous position at the intersection of these phenomena. It combines humor with embarrassment, ridicule with discomfort, and moral judgment with amusement. In addition, cringe often centers on failed performances, awkward self-presentation, and perceived cultural incompetence.

Importantly, cringe reactions are rarely emotionally neutral. They often involve forms of moralized judgment, particularly emotions such as contempt and communicative practices including humiliation and ridicule. When audiences experience cringe, they frequently position themselves as morally or culturally superior to the performer whose behavior appears inappropriate or incompetent. This evaluative dimension distinguishes cringe from simple embarrassment: it involves not only witnessing a social misstep but judging it. Such dynamics resonate with broader processes of moralization in political communication. Contemporary political discourse increasingly frames conflicts in moral terms, portraying opponents not merely as ideological adversaries but as morally flawed, incompetent, or socially deviant actors (De Luca & Buell, 2005; Szabó, 2024; Metz, 2025;

Tyler, 2025). In digital environments, humor and ridicule can turn such evaluations into collective acts of moral judgment (Momen, 2018). By presenting political opponents as laughable, awkward, or embarrassing figures, communicators invite audiences to participate in a collective act of moral judgment.

The emergence of cringe as a recognizable feature of political communication is closely tied to broader transformations in media environments and political performance. Political discourse increasingly unfolds within a hybrid media system, where legacy media institutions coexist with digital platforms, influencers, and user-generated content. Within this environment, visibility and attention have become central resources (Marwick, 2013). Political actors must compete for attention within crowded information spaces characterized by rapid content turnover and algorithmically driven distribution. Emotional intensity, humor, and visual appeal tend to determine whether content gains traction within these environments and their networked affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015). Such moments thus lead to instant wide circulation, as the logic of digital platforms further intensifies these dynamics. Content that evokes strong emotional reactions – whether positive or negative – tends to be more widely shared and circulated (Cervi et al., 2023; Papacharissi, 2015). As a result, cringe-worthy moments frequently become viral phenomena, spreading through networks of commentary, parody, and ironic reinterpretation. In this sense, cringe can be understood as part of a broader attention economy of affect, in which emotional responses drive the circulation of content. Cringe reactions do not necessarily indicate rejection; they often combine discomfort with amusement, encouraging audiences to share and comment on the content precisely because it is awkward or embarrassing.

HUMOR, SUPERIORITY, AND THE EMOTIONAL LOGIC OF CRINGE

Understanding cringe communication also requires situating it within broader theories of humor. Classical humor theory distinguishes several mechanisms by which humor operates, including superiority, incongruity, and relief theories (see Bardon, 2005; Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017). Among these, superiority and incongruity provide particularly useful analytical tools for understanding the emotional dynamics of cringe. According to the superiority theory, humor arises from a sense of superiority over others who appear foolish, incompetent, or socially inferior (Ferguson & Ford, 2008; Stone, 2021). This perspective emphasizes the hierarchical and often aggressive dimensions of humor. Laughter can function as a social mechanism that reinforces group boundaries and hierarchies by ridiculing those who violate shared norms. Cringe humor strongly resonates with this mechanism (Scheel & Zekavat, 2025). Similarly, when audiences experience cringe, they frequently position themselves as socially or culturally superior to the individual whose behavior appears awkward or inappropriate. The discomfort generated by witnessing the performance is often accompanied by a sense of judgment: the performer is perceived as lacking self-awareness, cultural competence, or social intelligence. At the same time, cringe

humor also reflects the logic of incongruity, which emphasizes the role of mismatches between expectations and outcomes in generating fun. In political communication, such incongruities may arise when politicians attempt to perform roles associated with digital culture or popular entertainment but fail to meet the implicit expectations of those roles.

Recent experimental research on political attacks further clarifies why humor is such a powerful ingredient in hostile political communication. Verhulsdonk, Nai, and Karp (2021) show that combining political attacks with “other-deprecatory humor” reduces the likelihood that the attack will backfire against the attacker, while preserving its effectiveness against the target. Humor, in other words, can make negative campaigning more acceptable without blunting its persuasive force. These findings are highly relevant for the study of cringe. Cringe communication does not merely rely on humor to entertain; it uses humor to package moral judgment, ridicule, and hostility in ways that are more easily circulated, more affectively engaging, and less vulnerable to normative sanction. Whereas Verhulsdonk (et al., 2021) focuses on experimental campaign messages, cringe extends this logic into the realm of digital political culture, where awkwardness, failed self-presentation, and exaggerated inauthenticity become raw material for humorous attack. In this sense, cringe can be understood as a stylized and multimodal form of humorized negativity: it does not simply “soften” political attack, but transforms it into pleasurable, participatory, and highly shareable moral devaluation.

Cringe, therefore, represents a hybrid of these mechanisms: the incongruity of a failed performance combined with the superiority-based judgment of the observing audience. In political contexts, such dynamics can easily escalate into practices resembling symbolic humiliation, where political opponents are framed not merely as mistaken but as ridiculous and socially incompetent figures.

WHY CRINGE MATTERS FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

The growing visibility of cringe in contemporary political communication raises important questions for scholars interested in the emotional, cultural, and performative dimensions of politics. While humor, satire, and ridicule have long been part of political discourse, cringe highlights a particular affective configuration that has become increasingly salient in digital media environments.

First, cringe offers a useful lens for analyzing the performative cruelty and vulnerabilities of personalized politics. As political communication is now overwhelmingly centered on individual actors and their mediated performances, political legitimacy is evaluated not only through policy positions but through perceived authenticity, competence, and cultural fluency. Cringe thus exposes the fragility of mediated political authority. Second, the circulation of cringe content illustrates how affective publics shape contemporary political discourse. In networked media environments, emotional responses such as embarrassment, ridicule, or amusement quickly become collective experiences that structure

political communication flows. Third, cringe communication sheds light on the moralization of political conflict. By framing political actors as ridiculous, incompetent, or socially inappropriate, cringe often operates as a form of symbolic exclusion that delegitimizes opponents through affective judgment rather than ideological debate. Finally, studying cringe contributes to broader debates about the democratic implications of platform-driven political communication. While humor may foster engagement, the widespread circulation of ridiculing content may also reinforce personalization, polarization, and reputational attacks at the expense of substantive political discussion.

CRINGE ACROSS POLITICAL CONTEXTS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Although the phenomenon of cringe communication is observable across many political systems, the contributions in this special issue highlight its particular relevance within the political landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe. Across the cases examined in this issue – Hungary, the Czech Republic, Serbia, and Albania – cringe emerges as a versatile communicative mechanism operating across different political contexts.

Despite important differences in political institutions and media systems, several common patterns become visible. Cringe often emerges at the intersection of digital platform culture and political authority, where politicians attempting to adapt to platform-native communication styles risk producing performances perceived as culturally out of place. At the same time, ridicule-based communication frequently contributes to political polarisation and identity formation, as audiences use shared humor to reinforce in-group cohesion. Across these contexts, cringe operates both as a strategic communicative tool used to ridicule political opponents and as a spontaneous affective response to performances perceived as culturally inappropriate or excessive. In either case, cringe reveals how political legitimacy is increasingly negotiated through affective and cultural evaluations within digital media environments.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The articles included in this special issue examine these dynamics across various political landscapes and digital platforms in Central and Eastern Europe. While each study focuses on a different political environment and methodological approach, together they illustrate the diverse ways in which cringe operates within contemporary political communication.

The first paper, authored by Jan Zápotocký, investigates how social media actors from a Czech conservative party employ hypermasculinity, heteronormativity, and misogyny in their political messaging, often ridiculing gender diversity and female opponents to enforce societal norms and deepen polarization. The second study by Jonáš Syrovátka

and Lenka Vochocová offers a case analysis of TikTok as a performative arena where Czech politicians deploy affective discomfort and social awkwardness, revealing how these digital rituals shape emotional engagement during electoral campaigns. Moving eastward, the third paper, co-authored by Gabriella Szabó and István Benedek, examines Hungarian political humor through the lens of Trombi, a YouTuber who uses insult comedy to reinforce partisan identities and legitimize government narratives amid a polarized media environment. The fourth article by Snežana Bajčeta and Aleksandra Krstić delves into Serbia's public sphere, highlighting how cringe content functions as a battleground between authoritarian regimes and citizen protests, with the production and reception of cringe serving to reinforce deep societal divides. Lastly, the fifth paper, authored by Edlira Gugu, analyzes the use of cringe strategies by Albanian politicians on social media, demonstrating how humor and shame are harnessed to discredit opponents and deepen political polarization. The empirical papers are accompanied by two additional pieces: an interview with Associate Professor Irena Reifová from Charles University, who specializes in cultural phenomena in communication, and a review of the most recent book on cringe humor in digital media and film by Associate Professor Damian Guzek. The interview explores the complex nature of cringe, highlighting its ambiguous emotional and cultural dimensions. Reifová emphasizes that cringe is both a biological affect rooted in discomfort and a cultural construct shaped by social norms, with its perception varying across different communities and contexts. She also discusses how cringe can reveal societal inequalities, serve as a form of resistance, and reflect collective anxieties, making it a valuable but challenging subject for scholarly investigation. Damian Guzek from the University of Silesia in Katowice offers an insightful review of *"Cringe Humor on Screen and in Digital Media: Pragmatic Perspectives,"* edited by Virginie Iché, Célia Schneebeli, and Lynn Blin. He emphasizes that the volume provides a comprehensive framework for understanding cringe humor as a polysemous, relational, and context-dependent communicative phenomenon, exploring its historical, cultural, and media-specific dimensions. Guzek highlights the book's theoretical sophistication and empirical richness, noting its relevance for scholars interested in media studies, digital culture, and humor, while also pointing out its Western cultural focus and the need for further exploration of platform-specific dynamics.

Taken together, the contributions demonstrate that cringe constitutes a multifaceted and distinct communicative phenomenon embedded within contemporary digital political culture and political communication, shaped by the interaction between personalized politics, entertainment-driven media environments, and affective forms of political evaluation.

TOWARD A RESEARCH AGENDA ON CRINGE IN POLITICS

The analyses presented in this special issue suggest several directions for future research. First, further work is needed to clarify the conceptual boundaries between cringe and related phenomena such as satire, ridicule, embarrassment, and humiliation. While these categories overlap, cringe possesses distinctive affective dynamics that merit systematic theoretical attention. Second, comparative research could explore how cultural norms shape the perception of cringe across different societies. Behaviors that appear awkward or inappropriate in one cultural context may not evoke the same reactions elsewhere. Third, audience research is essential for understanding how individuals interpret cringe content and how such reactions influence political attitudes, trust, and engagement. Finally, scholars should examine the democratic implications of cringe communication. While ridicule and humor have long been part of political discourse, the increasing prominence of cringe may contribute to personalization of political conflict and the erosion of substantive policy debate. Cringe has emerged as a distinctive feature of contemporary political communication, particularly within digital media environments where emotional reactions drive visibility and circulation. Combining embarrassment, ridicule, and amusement, cringe functions both as a cultural category and as a communicative practice through which audiences evaluate political performances. By examining different empirical contexts, this special issue suggests that cringe is not merely an accidental by-product of political performances. Rather, it constitutes a cross-cutting communicative mechanism that intertwines humor, moral evaluation, and political power, through which political actors are hierarchized, judged, ridiculed, and mobilized within contemporary media environments. Understanding cringe, therefore, provides valuable insights into how political legitimacy, cultural competence, and authority are negotiated within the affective and performative arenas of digital politics.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA 21129, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is a funding agency for research and innovation networks. Our Actions help connect research initiatives across Europe and enable scientists to grow their ideas by sharing them with their peers. This boosts their research, career and innovation.

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