


Mobilizing Distrust: Persuasive Strategies in Czech Disinformation Email Subject Headings

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Abstract: This article examines the persuasive function of subject headings in Czech-language disinformation chain emails, an understudied component of cross-platform disinformation in Central Europe. The study focuses on the first six months of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and analyzes a corpus of email subject headings collected by the civic initiative (Czech Elves) Čeští Elfové. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, relevance theory, and presupposition theory, the article explores how subject headings establish relevance, mobilize shared assumptions, and encourage recipients to access and disseminate disinformation content. The analysis identifies recurring thematic frames centered on national victimhood, fear of the “other”, distrust of political and media institutions, and the construction of an imagined community of resistance. Linguistic and typographic strategies, including informal address, hyperbolic punctuation, and directive speech acts, presuppose ideological alignment and familiarity with alternative information networks. The findings demonstrate how highly condensed subject headings function as effective ideological triggers within email-based disinformation practices.

Keywords: disinformation; chain emails; presupposition; critical discourse analysis; Czech Republic

INTRODUCTION

Disinformation and its impact on the public sphere has been the subject of numerous studies since the late 2010s predominantly due to new types of influence campaigns brought about by computational propaganda. Following significant news media attention as a result of allegations of foreign interference in the lead-up to the American presidential election in 2016, many nations began to examine the potential for harm in their own domestic environments (Palmer & Wilner, 2024; Ohiln, 2021; Fidler, 2021; Boulos, 2021). Much of the concern has been with the “weaponization” of social media (Kuś & Barcyszyn-Madziarz, 2020).

In the Czech Republic, in addition to the webpages and social media accounts used to attract readers, a chain (disinformation) email environment also became very active in this period, culminating in approximately 1000 different disinformation emails being sent monthly in the winter of 2022 (Pravidelný přehled české dezinformační scény, 2022). The Czech Republic is rather prominent in terms of the vigorous nature and reach of these campaigns. For example, one study showed that 90% of senior citizens had been reached by disinformation emails (Elpida, 2018).

This study focuses on the disinformation chain email phenomenon in the Czech Republic. Specifically, it discusses the persuasive factors involved in accessing disinformation email content. To understand the incentives at work in this engagement, email subject headings were analyzed for persuasive thematic indicators, and functional linguistic patterns. The project examines the first 6 months of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The study aims to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: What sort of knowledge/prior understandings are the authors of the subject headings expecting readers to have that would motivate them to access/open the email upon reading the subject heading?
- RQ2: What do repeating thematic frames used in subject headings indicate about presupposed views of the audience?
- RQ3: What do evident functional linguistic patterns in the subject headings indicate in terms of presupposed views of potential audiences for the emails?

The article aims to contribute to the research in two main ways: firstly, to emphasize the significance of chain mails in the cross-platform disinformation mix in the Czech Republic; secondly, to break down persuasive factors at work for recipients.

CROSS PLATFORM PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION

Although propaganda has been discussed as part of scholarly work for a century, disinformation became prominent only in the latter part of the second decade of the twenty-first century (Freelon & Wells, 2020). Disinformation is often conceived of as coordinated attempts to spread false information by political players, whether domestic or foreign (Guess & Lyons, 2020). Tucker et al. (2018:22) define disinformation broadly, describing the diverse content it can contain, specifically “trolls, bots, fake-news websites, conspiracy theorists, politicians, highly partisan media outlets, the mainstream media, and foreign governments”. The text in this study can be best defined as disinformation, but it seems important to recognize the role of state propaganda as a significant stand-alone element.

The Czech Republic is an interesting area for the study of propaganda, due to its strategic position on the historical border of the former Soviet Bloc, and therefore a volatile region in light of the often-discussed suggestions that the Russian Federation seeks to return its sphere of influence to Soviet-era times (Studzinska, 2015). The country is also interesting to examine in terms of the medium and platforms used for propaganda, since the demographic make-up of the country means that the less technically savvy have an overwhelming influence in elections, those aged 65+ making up 20% of citizens (“Age Structure”, n.d.). Additionally, the growth of malaise with democracy and increased belief in disinformation as described by Bennett and Livingston (2018) clearly apply in the Czech Republic, with only 34% placing trust in news media (Mihelj & Štětka, 2022), and numbers trusting disinformation reaching dramatic levels at 40% (STEM, 2021).

The country for many constitutes fertile ground for disinformation and propaganda not only because of its geopolitical positioning, but also due to a combination of historical, cultural, and institutional factors. Long-standing skepticism toward official authority, shaped by experiences of state socialism and reinforced by post-1989 political and economic disillusionment, sharpened by instances of capture of the media by oligarchs may contribute to low levels of trust in political institutions and mainstream media. Research shows that this environment has facilitated the growth of alternative interpretive frameworks that present politics through narratives of elite betrayal, national victimhood, and hidden power structures (Štětka et al., 2021; Mihelj et al., 2022).

In light of this context, we consider the medium used for accessing news. In addition to traditional channels and social media platforms, news by email is also a common method of distributing information by a broad range of news organizations. In some ways resembling a curation process related to theme/topic, the success of the model seems to be related to the connection made between the reader and the news organization, or individual journalists themselves (Seely

& Spillman, 2021). Finding it to be a financial model that works has provided encouragement (Jack, 2016). Significant numbers of people claim to receive news by email, ranging from one in ten to one quarter of the population in a recent study (Newman, 2022).

Email communication is also common in political campaigning, with manipulative and deceptive tactics being the norm (Mathur et al., 2023). Further, chain emails used for disinformation purposes, a natural cousin to news by email, as is fake news to “real” news, are a surprisingly understudied part of the cross-platform propaganda approach, particularly since news email “audiences” can be found that are not necessarily social media users, and for some of the population, for example those of retirement age, it is a gateway to internet communication (Madden & Zickuhr, 2012). Chain disinformation emails often use a deflective source model (Jowett and O’Donnell, 2019), attracting the attention of the receiver with a personalized message in the subject heading, but sharing information from a third source – not the email author. Commonly referred to as astroturfing (Howard, 2002; Chan, 2022), the overall aim is to allow for messages to be spread farther.

Chain emails written in the Czech language contain socio-political content intended to provoke a reaction in receivers, including encouragement to share (forward) the email to others. The source of the emails being analyzed in this study is very often the object of speculation. Some observers feel that a major source of the emails is a hostile government (often the Russian Federation) paying local citizens to spread content in order to bring about unrest. Others feel it is local (Czech) citizens with sympathies toward Russia, while others have alluded to mainstream domestic political parties being involved. Thus, elements of state propaganda and non-state localized / non-state organized disinformation form the backdrop of the manipulative use of email for persuasion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is typically characterized as a unit of language which is greater in length than one sentence, but whose meaning extends beyond the unit itself. This conceptualization enables analysis of text, co-text and wider context, including the sociocultural realities underpinning discourses.

Van Dijk (2005) has argued for the articulation of CDA to cognitive analysis and pragmatics and the negotiation of meaning. Any discourse-based analysis of news reporting (including news by email) entails exploration of the relationship between writer/speaker and reader/listener, engagement with the pragmatic dynamics underlying this relationship, and uncovering the ideological messages concealed beneath the immediate text. We need to understand the

assumptions that message authors make about their readers in terms of their existing knowledge and likely ideological attitudes. Bekalu (2006), advocating a greater engagement by analysts with the cognitive dimension of discourse processing, provides a useful framework following Van Dijk's (2005) lead, linking presupposition with cognition.

One key linking approach is via relevance theory (see Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]), which accounts for the ways in which writers (including subject heading authors) secure audience attention. The value of an utterance is determined if: "(1) it is sufficiently relevant to be worth the audience's processing effort, and (2) it is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences" (Bekalu, 2006, p. 155). Using presupposition to establish relevance is thus one important component in uncovering the ideological content of a media message. Althusser's (1971) concept of interpellation proposes that everyday cultural knowledge is ideological, and that communicators construct individuals as subjects with shared assumptions regarding power and authority. For example, if a news source describes a public figure as "hardline", it assumes that its readers/viewers have been positioned to share, and judge, this "knowledge" of what constitutes "hardline" behavior. Van Dijk (2005) proposes deployment of a "context model" that posits knowledge as "shared beliefs satisfying the specific (epistemic) criteria of an (epistemic) community" (Van Dijk, 2005, p. 73). This approach recognizes the impossibility of absolute truth in epistemology, adding a flexible dynamic to the cognitive schemata we draw upon to function in the everyday social world. Context accepts the importance of pragmatic negotiation of knowledge, "because many aspects of discourse depend on what the speaker assumes the hearer to know or not to know" (Van Dijk, 2005, p. 76). Van Dijk goes on to assert that ideological presuppositions are easily formed or reinforced by the media:

Since people learn by the acquisition of new knowledge through public discourse, they may thus be manipulated into believing that such presumptions of authoritative sources are in fact forms of knowledge that no longer need to be certified (demonstrated, proved, etc.) (Van Dijk, 2005, p. 88).

Of course, the process of reading an email heading must be cognitively rather different to reading an entire email or a mainstream news report. With such minimal verbal content and context, the amount of processing needed is highly dependent on the familiarity of readers with chain emails and an expected ideological alignment with their content. Although we might accept that at least the previous link in the chain is a person known to the receiver, the subject heading plays an important functional role in inducing a reader to open it. Until the email is opened, they are largely unaware of its content. As is the case with

conventional reports, news headlines (and by extension email subject headings) establish relevance via the promise of new information pertaining to a (probably) familiar subject. The role of the headline creator is to pique readers' curiosity, that is to make a topic "relevant" while reassuring them that their cognitive and ideological presuppositions will be satisfied by the content.

METHODOLOGY

Our goal was to understand the persuasive factors at play in the subject headings in chain disinformation emails in the Czech language distributed by Czech servers via personal email accounts. The aim was to try and discover linguistic and even typographic patterns that motivate people to open seemingly unknown emails, although they may have been forwarded by persons known to the recipient. In this study, the focus of attention was limited to email subject headings as discrete items, generally shorter in length than a sentence. Some potential data regarding context and wider meaning that could be found by reading the emails in full, or searching for their provenance, is absent. The research team felt it was important to approach each chain email as a typical reader would find it among their everyday personal emails.

The researchers gathered data for the period starting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, thus from February 24, 2022, to August 24, 2022. The data was provided via a database compiled by the Czech Elves, a volunteer civic movement that, inspired by similar 'Elf' movements from the Baltic countries, maps, analyzes and actively fights against foreign disinformation campaigns on the Czech internet. The Elves keep a protected database of chain emails and provide access for researchers. The database, called Eldariel, catalogues disinformation chain emails circulating within Czech cyberspace and is available in both public and restricted formats. The public version offers anonymous access and presents messages in a machine-shortened form to prevent their further dissemination. A complete, unedited version is reserved for journalists, academic researchers, and comparable professionals. Access to this full dataset must be formally requested and justified, and applicants' identities are verified prior to approval. In line with state security requirements, the Czech Elves do not release copies of the database to third parties, prohibit automated remote processing, and do not allow automated downloading or replication of its contents (Čeští Elfové, 2026).

The database allows for filtering, and thus researchers filtered the emails by 'Ukraine' and 'refugees' in the database in the time period described above, leading to thematic and functional analysis of presuppositions about recipients' views.

The gathered data enabled identification and description of persuasive thematic and functional indicators, revealing common features which may be influential

in persuading readers to open the email. The researchers then refined the data further to identify and discuss key presuppositions about email readers' views and expectations inherent in the subject headings.

DATA ANALYSIS

THEMES

Thematic analysis confers familiarization with patterns of discursive strategies. In this case, we can assume that email authors and disseminators make choices, based on what they know or surmise about the typical profile of the target reader of disinformation emails, in order to direct their attention in the most favorable manner. We may also choose to go beyond the thematic profile of the subject headings to consider their speech act functions.

All subject headings filtered for *Ukrajina/Ukraine* and *úprchlíci/refugees* from February-August 2022 were counted and categorized thematically. Given that the focus was on headings only, the filtered corpus was small (3,882 words), thus, thematic and functional patterns could be discerned with relative ease by eyeball scrutiny. The filter used also flags up articles about Ukraine and refugees when those keywords do not occur in the subject headings. However, in most cases, we can assume that the regular reader has already inferred this, either from linguistic and other signs in the headings, or based on knowledge about the email's source (e.g., a friend or acquaintance). The categorizations were eventually narrowed down to four overarching themes (plus a fifth, "other" category which is predominantly functional rather than thematic).

OVERVIEW OF COMMON THEMES

Anecdotal evidence and hearsay are frequently deployed, drawing on testimony of eyewitnesses who are often unnamed (a friend, a witness, etc.) *Svědectví řidiče z Brna při převozu tzv. uprchlíků z Ukrajiny/Testimony of a driver from Brno relating to transport of so-called refugees from Ukraine*. At the same time, the theme of negative change appeared via a search for words and phrases such as *invaze/invasion, je zlá doba/it's a bad time/Je zlá doba, bude hůř?/Times are bad, will it be worse?*

Individuals and institutions commonly named in subject headings were subdivided into "heroes" and "villains". Regular disinformation email readers are likely to be triggered by known names in subject headings. "Heroes" are typically bloggers, far right influencers, lawyers and journalists whose names may be familiar in news reports or have become familiar via social media to

regular disinformation readers. Czech government ministers and officials, as well as mainstream media, are typically portrayed in non-mainstream news media as “villains”: *FIALO, zodpovídej se národu, lidu této země, všech 499 mých kontaktů souhlasí s OKAMUROU, a ti to rozeslali dalším celkem 10,117 lidí a ani jeden není při vás. / [PM] FIALA, take responsibility for the nation, for the people of this country, all 499 of my contacts agree with [far right politician] OKAMURA, and they have forwarded to a further 10,117 people and not one of them is with you.*

The theme of “undeserving refugees” comprises two main sub-categories: a) the common populist trope of “[national majority] first”, b) Czechs as victims, or the “we’re the fools” subcategory. Authors/senders attempt to reinforce the validity of their case often by making parallels with other countries, especially neighboring Germany, or by poking fun at the perceived gullibility of Czech citizens. *Ukrajina z vděčnosti k České republice a její pomoci zdražila poplatky za tranzit ropy... In gratitude to the Czech Republic and for her help Ukraine has increased tariffs for transport of oil.....Nejsme vaši sluhové!!! We’re not your servants!!!*

The “other” category denotes subject headings of zero or minimal semantic content (e.g., punctuation markers such as exclamation marks, emojis, single words such as *video*, *info*, or *zpráva/news*, etc). Some headings with minimal semantic content might be categorized as “exclusives”; a common clickbait trope here indicated by phrases such as *Málokdo ví.../Not many people know... Praha/Prague, or Sdílejte/Share*. These were categorized as providing little or nothing in the heading that would indicate the email’s topic. Punctuation such as multiple exclamation points, or the occurrence, for example, of single trigger words such as *záhada/mystery* might also act as clickbait without providing any indication of content.

FUNCTIONS

Functional analysis focuses on interplay between the following: presuppositions, implicature, speaker/reader-meaning, content (semantic content), grammar (grammatical mood). We distinguish between a meaningful (a referential) utterance, or locutionary act, in Austin’s terms, and its illocutionary force (its intended or perceived meaning). Searle (1969) suggests that some locutionary acts also behave as illocutionary acts. Certain locutionary meaning determines their illocutionary force (i.e., what is intended by the utterance). This necessitates a contractual alignment of meaning between writer and reader. Readers may interpret this subject heading (“po přečtení budete plakat”/after reading this you will weep) as a prediction, a threat, or even a hidden command.

Similarly, a heading referencing anecdotal testimony as in “kamarádka ze Vsetína viděla”/a friend from Vsetín [a town] saw comprises a grammatically

coherent (if incomplete, without an object) utterance, comprised of meaningful words, however, its pragmatic meaning, function and significance may be understood by different readers in different ways.

As would be expected from disinformation, the primary function of many subject headings is to warn, or remind, readers that mainstream media is failing to keep the population informed about “the truth”, and that the situation regarding Ukraine policy is worse than it appears (as in most examples below). The use of colloquialisms, non-standard grammar and punctuation may be deliberately deployed as a contrast to the perceived elitism of mainstream journalism. This is prominent in the *we’re the fools* narrative in which Czechs self-represent as victims. Some headings take the form of directives (forward, resend, or watch). Underlying the warning/alerting function is the promise that readers will have access to the “real” version of events, and that they will thereby continue to seek out “alternative” messages, including disinformation.

PRESUPPOSITION

In this section subject headings are considered in relation to presuppositions about readers. Typographical anomalies in the table are retained.

Table 1 (below), the largest category, deals with presuppositions that underlie nomination strategies used in the headings. Some individuals are named and assumed to be known to the reader as public figures, for example, Vaclav Klaus (former prime minister), Jaroslav Foldyna (politician of the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy party), Robert Vašíček (local Prague politician), and Petr Štěpánek (actor). These politicians are presupposed to be aligned with the populist opinions of the sender, and target readers are those who have expressed opposition to or skepticism about the Czech government and EU policy regarding Ukrainian refugees. Others in the list are deemed to be unknown; these include “normal-thinking citizens”, “elderly Czech lady”, “Slovak Serbian war veteran”, “Ukrainian Liudmila”, “Petr”, “Jan”, “Pavel” and “lawyer Mgr. Jana Zwyrttek Hamplová” (with emphasis on her academic title and profession as a reliable witness). To the reader of these emails, even less well-known opinion leaders may be recognized from previous email content elsewhere.

The current Czech PM (Fiala) is named twice, but as the object rather than subject of an action (by an “elderly Czech lady” and (former president) Vaclav Klaus).

Table 1. “Reader will approve of or respect these opinion leaders or witnesses”

Poslechněte si to – advokátka Mgr. Hamplová	Listen to this – from the lawyer Mrs. Mgr. Hamplová, M.A.
Česká stařenka...dotaz na Fialu	Old Czech lady – a question to Fiala
Slovenský veterán ze srbské války – to je bohužel realita !!!	Slovak veteran from the Serbian war – this is unfortunately the reality
Ukrajinka Ludmila k současné situaci ... to si přečtete všichni ,TO JE DÍLO	Ukrainian Ludmila to the current situation – everyone read this – IT IS SOMETHING
Petr posílá video z Vaclaváku	Petr sends a video from Vaclavák (the colloquial term for Wenceslas Square)
Názor z druhé strany – od normálně myslících občanů..	An opinion from the other side – from normal thinking people
Krátce hovoří Bc. Robert Vašíček – zástupce Prahy 11 – video – a je moc pravdivé ...	A brief talk from Robert Vašíček, B.A., a government representative of Prague 11 – video – it is very truthful
Foldyna k Ukrajině, kde bere tu odvahu? Velmi zajímavé..	Foldyna to Ukraine – where does he get the courage? Very interesting...
MACEK – STAREJME SE O NAŠE LIDI ! – k vyjádření k rozpravě p. Moravce skutečnost	MACEK – LET’S TAKE CARE OF OUR OWN PEOPLE! – in response to the Mr. Moravec conversation – the reality
Klaus napsal Fialovi a jeho vládě – přeposli dál, at to ví co nejvíce Čechů	Klaus wrote to Fiala and his government – send it on, so as many Czechs as possible know about this
Jan Vymazal na TikTok ,toto většina národa neví ,jaká	Jan Vymazal on TikTok, most of the nation don’t know ,how
Petr Štěpánek. Jeden z mála, kterému zůstal rozum v „hlavě“!	Petr Štěpánek. One of the few that still has common sense!
Dopis od Pavla – pracoval dlouho v Rusku a přehledně a výstižně!	A letter from Pavel – he worked in Russia for a long time – clearly and precisely!
TOHLE SE NA MAINSTREAMU NEDOČTETE !!!...výborný článek od Pavla ŠTÁSTKA.....	YOU WON’T FIND THIS IN THE MAINSTREAM!!! – excellent article by Pavel Štástek
Vladimír Vladimírovič Putin děkuje Zelenskému, že dokázal skoro nemožné!!!	Vladimir Vladimirovic Putin thanks Zelensky that he achieved almost the impossible!!

Source: work of the authors

Table 2. Disrespect for various authorities (predominantly the current government) is formally expressed by the second person singular (informal you), and the absence of title in connection with names (*voc. Fialo*), which is rather pejorative. The vocabulary contains derogative terms and slurs (gypsies), insults connected to the cognitive and general mental capacities of the current government (stupid, stupidity). The form also creates a sense of urgency through the usage of capital letters and the absence of proper punctuation (one may only speculate if it is due to the lack of accurate knowledge). The headlines suggest that no matter what the government says and does, it is and always will be incorrect, inappropriate, or fraudulent (a trip by government representatives to Kiev was “fraud”). There is an acute division between ‘us’ (the senders of the emails, normal, right people) versus ‘them’ (wrong, inaccurate, unfair government).

Table 2. “Reader will disapprove of or disrespect these opinion leaders or witnesses”

DOPIS Rakušanovi od zdr. sestry – Pan Rakušan nás nazval šváby!	A LETTER to Rakušan from a nurse – Mr. Rakušan called us cockroaches!
Rakušan se omlouvá za příkoří cikánům.	Rakušan apologizes for cruelty to gypsies
Nouzový stav – vláda může nařídít ubytovat přidělený počet tzv. uprchlíků u Váš doma. a nebo zabavit nemovitost.	State of emergency – the government can order the accommodation of an allocated number of so-called refugees at your home or confiscate real estate.
Hloupost našich vládních představitelů – Agresivita místních „hrdinů“ se zvyšuje...	The stupidity of our government representatives – The aggressiveness of local „heroes“ is increasing...
Cesta premiéra Fialy do Kyjeva je podvod	Prime Minister Fiala's trip to Kyiv is a scam
FIALO TO SI PŘEČTI A SPOLUTVOŘITELÉ KONFLIKTU TĚŽ Otevřený názor M.Knížáka.*	FIALO, READ IT AND CO-CREATORS OF THE CONFLICT TOO Open opinion of M. Knížák
Opakovaná výzva starostky obce premiérovi Fialovi	Repeated challenge of a village mayor to Prime Minister Fiala
FIALO, zodpovídej se národu, lidu této země, všech 499 mých kontaktů souhlasí s OKAMUROU, a ti to rozeslali dalším celkem 10,117 lidí a ani jeden není při vás. Další volby už neobsadíte	FIALA, answer the nation, the people of this country, all 499 of my contacts agree with OKAMURA, and they sent it to another total of 10,117 people and not one is with you. You will never win another election

Source: work of the authors

Table 3. A common trope of populism is the narrative of victimhood, as proposed, for example, by al-Ghazzi (2021), who describes the ways in which perceptions of historical injustices are woven into contemporary national political discourses (e.g., Taking Back Control in Brexit-supporting Britain). Victimhood is commonly expressed in small-nation populist discourse as the desperate struggle to maintain a discrete, independent cultural identity, and wrest political control away from elites and “back” to “the people”. In the Czech Republic, this issue is heightened by the migration of large numbers of Ukrainian refugees, perceived government ineptitude, and pressure from the European Union.

Victimhood is deployed in some way in most of the presuppositions here, although it can be seen as a reactive response rather than one tied to any proactive, future-oriented movement, and which is tinged with self-criticism. Self-criticism manifests as skepticism regarding the Czechs’ willingness to fight for their endangered future, as disinformation readers see it. As examples below presuppose, the government of the Czech Republic is a laughing stock in the eyes of other countries, too weak to stand up to the wave of refugees set to target Czech citizens, cast them into the streets, deny them access to their own national healthcare system and even prevent their children from using their local playgrounds.

Table 3. "Reader will presuppose Czechs are suffering"

Česká země je ... JEDEN BY BREČEL,TU NEJDE O VTIPY...	The Czech lands are ... BRINGS ONE TO TEARS, THIS IS NOT FUNNY...
Pět minut kruté pravdy – Češi jsou pro Evropu pouhá pakáž !!!	Five minutes of cruel truth – Czechs are the trash of Europe!!!
Ukrajinské děti vyhánějí české dítě ze hřiště, musel zasáhnout otec...Sláva ukrajině...a to je teprve začátek	Ukrainian children kicked a Czech child out of the playground, the father had to intervene...Glory to Ukraine...and this is only the beginning
VIDEO: Češi končí na ulici, sdílejte to!	VIDEO: Czechs will end up on the street, share it!
Ukrajinství „utečenci“ v Česku...to si poslechni , opravdu by stím už měli něco dělat , aby nás přestali využívat!!	Ukrainian „refugees“ in the Czech Republic... listen to this, they really should finally do something so they stop using us!!
Zneužívání zdravotní péče	Health care abuse
Nejsme vaši sluhové!!!	We are not your servants!!!
Ekonomické a zdravotní důsledky války na Ukrajině pro Česko a Slovensko! Analýza, co nás asi čeká.	Economic and health consequences of the war in Ukraine for the Czech Republic and Slovakia! An analysis of what awaits us.
ČR jako terč !	ČR as a target!
Pro blbou vládu!!! Celý svět se vám směje!!! Ve světě si neškrtnete a když tak jen se smíchem všem, kdož vás využijí a vy to při své temnotě nevidíte For the stupid government!!!	The whole world is laughing at you!!! You can't cut yourself off from the world, if so only by laughing at everyone who uses you and you won't see it in your darkness

Source: work of the authors

Table 4 shows the premise that refugees pretend that they are in a difficult situation to take advantage of the Czech social system and misuse it into their advantage (buying expensive cars, going for expensive vacations). They pretend to be injured, poor, etc. in order to demand systematic help. Czechs who offer any help are considered stupid. Institutional help is mocked. Meanwhile, the Czech government does not help the Czech people. There is the implication of the Czech self-stereotype using envy, and not wishing well to those in need, foregrounding the “Czechia first” trope.

Table 4. “Reader thinks refugees take advantage of Czechs’ generosity”

Superdovolené Ukrajinců...	Ukrainians’ superholiday
Rozbor dávek pro ukrajinské běžence, nebo válečné uprchlíky nebo sociální turisty ???	Benefit trends for Ukrainian fugitives, or war refugees or welfare tourists ???
Cizinec není našinec	A foreigner isn't one of us
Šok: Romové z Ukrajiny se přeplněnými vlaky valí do Prahy,„Pořád se ptají, kdy dostanou nějaká eura... když nastupují s jízdným zdarma do pendolína z Košic do Prahy na nikoho s místenkami neber	Shock: Roma [ethnic minority] from Ukraine are filling trains and heading to Prague. They keep asking when they will get some Euros...when they get on the Pendolino [trains] from Kosice to Prague for free
Už se lidé začínají ptát proč jsou zde...???	People are already starting to ask why they are here...???

Ukrajínští „utečenci“ v Česku...to si poslechni , opravdu by stím už měli něco dělat , aby nás přestali využívat!!	Ukrainian “refugees” in the Czech Republic... listen. They really should do something so they stop taking advantage of us!!
Ukrajinci se vrací domů v nově nakoupených autech	Ukrainians are returning home in newly-bought cars
Utíkají i ti, co to nepotřebují – jak to s námi dopadne?! :((Even those that don't need to are fleeing – how will that work out for us?! :((
Šok: Romové z Ukrajiny se přeplněnými vlaky valí do Prahy	Shock: Roma [ethnic minority] from Ukraine are filling trains and heading to Prague

Source: work of the authors

Table 5. Arguably one of the most popular, oldest strategies in persuasion is trying to convince the audience that the true reality is not the one that they have been accustomed to accepting. Although the approach may not be novel, the end of scarcity in information and communication technologies and the explosion of content creation tools mean it has become increasingly powerful. Presupposing that the audience is skeptical and willing to accept alternative narratives is thus an obvious avenue for exploration. The sample provides a number of trends, ranging from metaphors which possibly provide a sense of layperson authenticity (‘open [your] eyes’, ‘the Czech media won’t show you this!’), to ‘truth’ synonyms and antonyms (‘reality!!!’, ‘truth’, or ‘lies’) the use of punctuation to emphasize the seriousness of the ‘disinformation’ (multiple exclamation marks, question marks), reference to ‘reputable witnesses’ (‘Slovak veteran of the Serbian war’, ‘Slovak lady from Kiev) and key nation states which would have the motivation, in the context of the invasion, to not show the ‘truth’ (Ukraine, USA, and Germany).

Table 5. “Reader believes things are not what they seem”

Posílám video co otevře oči	I’m sending a video which will open your eyes
Slovenský veterán ze srbské války – to je bohužel realita !!!	Slovak veteran of the Serbian war – this is unfortunately reality !!!
pokud to je pravda...🙄	If this is true...
Zničená nemocnice v Mariupolu: Kdo tady vytváří dezinformace?	Destroyed hospital in Mariupol: Who here is creating disinformation?
V Polsku o migranty policie nestojí a lid ano????	In Poland the police don’t take care of migrants and the people do????
Cesta premiéra Fialy do Kyjeva je podvod	[Czech] Prime Minister’s trip to Kiev is a fraud
Pravda o majdanu na Ukrajině_sdílejte!	Truth about the Ukraine maidan _ share!
Schůzka Zelenského summitu v Kyjevě byla ffašná – schůzka se konala v polském Przemyslu	Zelensky summit meeting in Kiev was fake – the meeting took place in Przemysl in Poland
Jak vznikla Ukrajina – je dobré vědět něco z historie...	How Ukraine was formed – it’s good to know some history
Slovenka z Kyjeva poslala video – toto vám česká media neukáže!!!!	Slovak from Kiev sends video – Czech media won’t show you this!!!!

Source: work of the authors

DISCUSSION

In this section we return to the research questions posed at the outset to assess findings from the data analysis.

Van Dijk (2005: 95-96) describes what he calls the K-device, “the knowledge of language users about the knowledge of the recipient”, which determines the nature and scope of discursive strategies used between interlocutors, and affecting how new knowledge is mapped. This includes assumptions regarding types of knowledge (“personal, interpersonal, group, institutional, national or cultural”). He continues:

Although the various strategies allow speakers [authors] to make more specific assumptions about what recipients know, the overall (meta) strategies are surprisingly simple, such as: When the recipients are members of my community, assume that they know all that I know, except the information about personal experiences or sources not (yet) used by the recipients. This will account for everyday storytelling and news in the press. (Van Dijk, 2005 p. 96).

We might therefore surmise that disinformation email readers, impacted by unfolding news about war in Ukraine and the arrival of refugees in the Czech Republic from early 2022, will probably need to process the new situation and undertake cognitive adjustments to their existing or common ground knowledge framework.

News reporting comprises what is taken for granted (presupposition) and what is (expected to be) new information. However, within what is a narrowcast medium, email headings are even more tightly anchored to dominant readings (author-preferred) than would be the case with news headlines. The element of presupposition in email subject headings is likely to be even less nuanced, that is there is an absence of discursive hedges or modality to express degrees of truth and certainty. This may be partly for stylistic economy (normatively, most email headings are no more than a few words), but it can also be argued that the lack of nuance reflects confident presuppositions by email senders about readers’ ideology.

The emergence of repeated themes raised the question about presuppositions by heading authors regarding the audience in their knowledge of societal affairs, and what would then motivate them to open the emails. Three main areas seem to emerge: 1) traditional fear of the ‘other’, 2) the position that traditional institutions of authority cannot be trusted, 3) the view that a small community of resistance exists that shares their views.

Fear of the ‘other’ has existed as long as humanity itself and is a key sociological concept. More narrowly, it is central in nationalism and propaganda studies,

in a mass media context possibly most famously addressed by Anderson in the formation of his concept of imagined communities (1983). Modern, mediated propaganda campaigns and extremist movements typically use this approach to gather support against an imagined external threat, presented as the source of a problem (Berger, 2018). Thus, we find this fear of the ‘other’ or ‘external threats’ as a repeating frame in disinformation email subject headings. Specifically, in presupposition tables 3 (“Czechs are victims”) and 4 (“Refugees are undeserving”) we see the fear of the other repeating – from Ukrainian children kicking a Czech child out of the playground, to the suggestive, “*Czechs will end up on the street!*” to “*Ukrainian “refugees” in the Czech Republic... listen to this, they really should finally do something so they stop using us!*”, the existential threat from the refugees is made clear. “*Benefits*”, “*superholidays*” going home in “*newly bought cars*”, the message is clear: “*we*” are being “*taken advantage of*” by them. From children to “*Ukrainian fugitives*” to “*welfare tourists*”, the persuasive nature of such selected language entices the reader to open the email.

Following the emergence of computational propaganda, scholars in recent years have made efforts to connect the decline of trust in institutions, government and the media to the growth and intensification of disinformation campaigns (Bennet, 2018; Mounk, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Walter et al., 2020). In the headline frames studied, this skepticism towards traditional institutions of authority emerges as one of the most common frames. In table 1 (“Will approve of or respect these opinion leaders or witnesses”) we see repeated allusions to figures that fit: from the average Joe sending a “real” video from a demonstration (“*Petr from Vaclavák*”), to the “*old lady*” grilling the Prime Minister, to the “*admirably courageous*” (far-right) politician, the frame is clear. In table 2 “Will disapprove of or disrespect these opinion leaders or witnesses”), we see, for example, derogatory inferences toward the government (“*The stupidity of our government representatives*”), members of parliament (“*Prime Minister Fiala’s trip to Kyiv is a scam*”, “*A LETTER to Rakušan from a nurse – Mr. Rakušan called us cockroaches!*”). In table 5 (“Things are not what they seem”) we find the emphasis on the “*lying*” media, with plenty of suggestions reflecting this (“*summit meeting in Kiev was fake*”, “*Czech media won’t show you this!*”, “*truth about Maidan*”, “*...a video which will open your eyes*”. All these examples clearly show evidence of the presupposition that potential readers feel they are being lied to by democratic institutions, pawns in greater, orchestrated conspiracies, and that political parties and the mainstream media are colluding in concealing the truth.

Finally, presuppositions imply that potential email readers feel that a small community of resistance exists that is fighting for them, and that they ostensibly may be a part of it. Both Blee (2016) and Ebner (2023) discuss the significance of identification and fusion of personal and group identities in both social movements and extremist activities, including online radicalization. In our categories,

this was also a relevant context, logically in table 1 (“Will approve of or respect these opinion leaders or witnesses”), and table 3 (“Czechs are the victims”).

A final question we sought to answer was on the functional side, seeking to find approaches or trends in language in the subject headings which may be persuasive in encouraging the audience to open the emails, that is what role functional linguistic patterns play in presupposition. What is assumed about the audience in terms of the use of language?

Other common textual features that may affect function include the use of hyperbolic punctuation (e.g., overuse of question marks and exclamation points); non-standard morphology (e.g., “mladej”/young, not standard mladý); frequent interrogatives; non-standard spelling and typography (including emojis and overuse of capital letters, general overuse of conversational idiolect).

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the central role of presupposition, audience positioning, and linguistic form in the construction of disinformation email subject headings in a topic-specific and time-limited analytical frame. As such, it provides a limited account of disinformation activity in the Ukraine war. Undoubtedly, disinformation changes over time, and the passage of time will also have impacted its flow and content, requiring further investigation. The findings demonstrate that these headings are not neutral previews but strategic entry points that activate recipients’ existing knowledge, fears, and ideological alignments in order to prompt engagement. Authors presuppose shared attitudes among their audiences, most notably fear of the “other,” deep distrust of political and media institutions, and identification with a small, oppositional community, and deploy thematic frames that exploit these assumptions to elicit affective responses and encourage email opening.

At the same time, recurring functional linguistic patterns, including hyperbolic punctuation, informal and conversational language, capitalization, and typographic disorder, serve to create urgency, simulate interpersonal familiarity, and lower critical distance between the sender and recipient. These stylistic choices reinforce the persuasive force of the message and support its ultimate purpose: the rapid and wide dissemination of disinformation through forwarding and sharing practices. Taken together, the analysis shows that disinformation email subject headings reflect a sophisticated understanding of audience cognition and pragmatic manipulation, positioning them as a key yet often overlooked mechanism in contemporary disinformation ecosystems.

The findings may have broader implications. The effectiveness of highly condensed, presupposition-heavy subject headings in mobilizing distrust

suggests a structural vulnerability for democratic public spheres: when political communication increasingly operates through minimal cues that activate shared grievances and in-group identities, deliberative engagement may be displaced by affective alignment and rapid dissemination. This has clear implications for media education and literacy interventions, which may need to move beyond fact-checking or source evaluation toward a deeper focus on recognizing presuppositional cues, emotional triggers, and pragmatic manipulation in everyday digital communication formats as simple and unassuming as subject field lines in emails.

Going forward, these dynamics are likely to be further exacerbated by AI-assisted content creation and dissemination. Generative AI tools can already automate the production of highly tailored, emotionally resonant micro-texts at scale, potentially accelerating the circulation of disinformation that is finely tuned to specific audiences' fears, identities, and cognitive shortcuts. While a systematic analysis of AI-mediated disinformation is beyond the scope of this study, the patterns identified here suggest that future research and policy interventions will need to account for how automation may intensify existing persuasive strategies.

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