

“I Am Not Racist, But ...”: Rhetorical Fallacies in Arguments about the Refugee Crisis on Czech Facebook

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Abstract: This paper examines the strategies of social media users commenting on the so-called refugee crisis. This qualitative analysis of the role of passion politics discourse on social media primarily employs the concept of rhetorical fallacies. It aims to stress the interdiscursive nature of immigration as a topic. It is connected with anti-liberalism, anti-feminism (or homophobia), and conservatism. For the purpose of this study, we used techniques for social-media monitoring to analyze social-media conversations related to migration on the Facebook page of Parlamentnílisty.cz news during the Czech parliamentary and presidential elections. This analysis showed that rhetorical fallacies were used in a relatively small amount of the studied material. Only 13% of all comments contained rhetorical fallacies, among which the most used was the *ad hominem* fallacy (55% of the total), "call for fear" (11%) and "false authority" (7%).

Keywords: refugee crisis, Facebook, emotions, rhetorical fallacies.

1. Introduction

In May 2018, Petr Bezruč Theatre in Ostrava saw the premiere of the production *#nejsemrasista_ale* (#I'mnotracist_but). It comprised transcripts from Internet discussions, where, as the creators of the production stated, “hate and fear are so often spread under the cover of anonymity and pride in personal opinions”. The title of the production points to the long-term use of a type or form of rhetorical fallacy (as described in the second part of the sentence and later in the article), where the speaker attempts to distance himself in advance from negative evaluations of his statements by others. The phrase was previously linked chiefly with anti-Roma speech in Czech society: for example, as shown by the project HateFree Culture organized by the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic or by the results of the Intercultural Education project carried out in primary and secondary schools in 2002, by the organisation *Člověk v tísni* (“People in Need”). The results of the survey that was part of this latter project showed that “the majority of secondary school youth reject intolerance; but, on the other hand, an overarching proposition prevails: “I’m not racist, but I hate Gypsies” (Kroupa 2002).

Rhetorical fallacies are often connected with a fear or the attempt to cause it: “reading this article [about the number of immigrants coming to Europe], I get goose bumps thinking about what awaits my daughter, granddaughter, great granddaughters and their families”, writes the debater Hana in one of the comments we analyzed.

Fear appeals – in this case “a message that attempts to arouse the emotion of fear by depicting a personally relevant and significant threat and then follows this description of the threat by outlining recommendations presented as feasible and effective in deterring the threat” (Witte 1994: 114) – are a common feature of the argumentation inventory of online discussion participants. They are regarded as one of the standard rhetorical fallacies by popular educational projects, such as HateFree Culture and Logically Fallacious, as well as specialized publications (Tindale 2007, Walton 2013).

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The aim of this article is to analyze the extent of the use of rhetorical fallacies in discussions about immigration in online discourse conducted in Czech. The intention is to capture the extent to which the phrase “I’m not racist, but” appears or whether it is replaced by other types of manipulative argument. We first put the theme of manipulative rhetorical techniques into a theoretical context, primarily in their relationship with affective turns, which emphasize the role of emotions as the source of all social interactions and relationships. Subsequently, we present a qualitative analysis of the use of rhetorical fallacies with use of some quantitative data: i.e., in what quantities do they appear in discussions or which categories are most often used.

2. The topic of migration online

The media plays a key role in framing crises. It creates the scale and speed of news (Entman 1993) and its framing process determines how a crisis is perceived (Thomson 2016). The mass use of social networks as a tool of political communication contributes greatly to the intensity of framing. In the Czech Republic in 2018, 85% of individuals over 16 years of age use the Internet, 97% of whom reported that they use the Internet regularly; while 87% of users connect to the Internet every day or almost every day (Czech Statistical Office 2018: 26). Facebook, Twitter and other platforms have become a key component of the communication mix. For the purpose of mobilizing voters, they can be used to facilitate the spread of conspiracy theories (Stempel *et al.* 2017) or unverified rumors, as well as the promotion of so-called speculative politics: “the intentional use of unverified information to undermine the credibility and public image of a political opponent” (Rojecki & Meraz 2016: 26, Shin *et al.* 2016).

In the Czech Republic, the incorporation of social networks into the ways that politicians use to build an agenda has grown continuously since the parliamentary elections in 2010. Similarly, the attention given to this subject in academic research is growing (Macková & Štětka 2016, Štětka & Vochocová 2014). The discourse of migration is often connected with the topic of anti-Islamism (Křtínová 2017: 96), especially in the agenda of political parties. All use (or were forced to use) the depiction of migration as a tool to fight with opponents and gain more voters: “Islam is criticised as a dangerous ideology and all immigrants are categorized as Muslims” (Křtínová 2017: 96). For example, anti-Islamic discourse is a central theme for the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party of Tomio Okamura (SPD) (formerly Dawn of Direct Democracy of Tomio Okamura). Křtínová’s research shows that the number of Okamura’s ideas about Islam in his posts have been rising since 2014.

In the depiction of migrants, Chouliaraki (2012) has noticed a symbolic duality in media discourse: the media refers to immigrants as either voiceless victims or evil-doing terrorists. Essens (2013) claims that negative portrayals of immigrants in the press are dehumanizing and can engender the sense that a social crisis represents a threat; however, framing is not geographically uniform. The determining factor is the local context, and differences between countries are significant (Berry *et al.* 2015). For example, a strong anti-Islam/anti-Muslim sentiment can be found in Czech public discourse, even though the Czech Republic has a relatively poor reputation among migrants (Malý 2015). In 2018, the Czech Republic recorded only 154 people in cases of illegal transit migration.

3. The affective turn

Emotions are elements of human social behavior and relationships and, as such, are important in all phases of the political behavior of all political actors (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001). It is only in recent years they also have been given their appropriate role in academic studies. This tendency to give attention towards emotions in the fields of public and political life is often referred to as the *affective turn*. For example, Hoggett and Thompson perceive the role of emotion as a determining factor in the attitude-making process, thus opposing the predominant “assumption that political actors are, by their very nature, rational actors who maximize their strategic interests” (Hoggett & Thompson 2012: 1).

In the last three decades, emotions have been negatively perceived by the prevailing direction of academic research, where “emotional studies have no place in rationalist, structural and organizational models” (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001: 1). Warner (2002) states that too much emphasis on Habermas’ (1989) concept of the public sphere as a platform of debate with rational-critical discussion suppresses discussion on other forms of communication, such as performative. Other authors even call the rationalist approach to the public sphere a nostalgic chimera (Schudson 1992: 161).

Affective and narrative practices are common and decisive elements of communication, although emotional dynamics are an often-neglected part of the argumentation process (van Stokkom 2012). From van Stokkom's (2012: 41) research into deliberative rituals in the field of Dutch landscaping discussions, “it is not rational argumentation which changes the views of the participants but being confronted with particular stories or metaphors”. He has designated such negotiations as transition rituals, which create new forms of collective identity.

Although emotional practices are standardized and their patterns internally structured, their use differs across social groups (Holmes 2012). In Internet discussions, examples can be observed where the purpose of the communication is not an attempt to present certain arguments to an opponent, but a need for self-satisfaction in socially closed groups. Castells (2009: 66) refers these online forms of communication to “mass self-communication” or “electronic autism”, although the use of the term “mass” is not entirely appropriate.

These practices are close to so-called hate speech: verbal and other symbolic actions that aim at expressing the inferiority of members of a particular social group or intense antipathy towards them (Simpson 2013, Nielsen 2002, Tirrell 2012). The technological development of the Internet and, above all, the social networks that are a key platform for hate speech (Miskolci, Kováčová & Rigová 2018) allow for the maintaining of solidarity and building up of power for hate groups (Bargh & McKenna 2004). Collective characteristics, such as ethnicity and religion, are at the very core of hate speech (Hawdon, Oksanen & Räsänen 2017). For Hoggett and Thompson (2011), hatred is a negative political emotion that is often associated with racism, nationalism, or the fact that foreigners take advantage of the benefits of the social system of the given country. This is typical of the Czech context, where abuse of the social security system is traditionally emphasized in “problematic” ethnic groups: especially Roma in the past, and currently Arab or Muslim immigrants.

Hoggett and Thompson (2012) also class fear as a negative political emotion, which can reach forms of paranoia when the object of fear is largely imaginary. The use of the fear appeal in connection with immigration is described by scientists from the University of Copenhagen in their research on cloaked Facebook pages and fake Islamist propaganda. “This rhetoric directly relates to the fear of the Islamisation of Europe through immigrant rape discourse as well as the victimisation of white European women alongside the ‘evil feminists’” (Farkas, Schou & Neumayer 2018). The fear appeal need not arise only from other discussants; “politicians can even use hateful ideas feeding on irrational fears based on prejudices on social media as an electoral strategy to win the popular vote and the presidential

or parliamentary seats” (Miškolci, Kováčová & Rigová 2018: 1). So-called *fear culture* (Glassner 2000) or the *politics of fear* (Altheide 2006) is credited as a means of creating consent and political apathy (Wolin 2004).

4. Methodology

The subject of this research is commentary on the Facebook posts of ParlamentníListy.cz (“Parliament Papers”). This media entity was chosen for two reasons. First, according to a Phoenix Research (ParlamentníListy.cz, 2016) April 2016 online survey on public interest in the refugee crisis and sources of information, less than half of the 1,088 respondents said they draw information from domestic media, of which approximately 40% came from television and the Internet. Of the respondents who cited the Czech Internet as the main source of information on the topic, 22% identified ParlamentníListy.cz as the truest source, representing the second largest share after 24% iDNES.cz and 16% before Novinky.cz, the online platforms of the two biggest print papers: MF Dnes and Právo.

Second, ParlamentníListy.cz has long been criticized for its bias, unethical reporting and violations of the principles of objective journalism (European Values 2016, Gregor & Vejvodová 2016). It is perceived as an alternative source of information in contrast to traditional media. According to the Kremlin Watch report (European Values 2016), ParlamentníListy.cz is considered to be one of the six most disinforming media entities (and also the most read and most cited) publishing so-called fake news in the Czech Republic. Gregor and Vejvodová (2016) describe the manipulative potential of ParlamentníListy.cz to spread fear and destabilize Czech society.

One of the objectives of this research is to open discussion on the use of so-called *social listening tools* as relevant forms of data collection. These tools, the essence of which is “an active process of monitoring, observing, interpreting and responding to various stimuli through mediated, electronic and social channels” (Steward & Arnold 2017: 2), allow for scans of online channels (web discussions, online fora, social networks, etc.) based on specific criteria, which are most often time ranges and keywords. Thanks to this, it is possible to aggregate a large number of encoding units (such as Facebook comments). While social listening tools are used primarily in marketing, they are gradually being promoted in academic research, where they can offer innovative data collection solutions and the potential for exploring the entire online space (Chlpková 2018).

In this study, we used Zoomsphere analytical software combined with the keywords “migra*”, “uprchl*” (“refugee”), “muslim*” and “islam*” to collect the material for analysis, with the wildcard operator * capturing various derivations of the basic words. The date ranges were chosen as the period before the Czech parliamentary elections (7 October 2017 – 28 October 2017) and the period before the Czech presidential elections (5 January 2018 – 31 January 2018), where an increased interest in the topic of migration and higher activity on social networks could be expected. Out of a total of 139 posts, those where migration is a central theme were manually selected. There were 34 in total, which contained 2,152 comments that were further coded. Although this work is purely qualitative, it is advisable to conduct a quantitative analysis applied to a large volume of data.

5. Results

Consistent with the literature cited here, refugees were depicted as a de-personalized threat and evil. The narrative of an upcoming civil or religious war was often highlighted. The terms “wog” and “slug” were used for refugees while *sluníčko* (“sunshiner”), *vítač* (“welcomer”) and *dobroser* (“do-gooder”) were used repeatedly to describe those who support refugees.

Comments were coded according to a typology of rhetorical fallacies. In the posts analyzed, rhetorical fallacies surprisingly appeared in relatively small numbers. Only 13% of

all comments contained a rhetorical fallacy. Most of those (55%) who used rhetorical fallacies used an ad hominem argument, such as questioning the education of debaters or attacking their use of grammar (the so-called “Grammar Nazi” argument) or using simple hate speech (Bargh & McKenna 2004). Otherwise, the rhetorical fallacies corresponded to the current trends in online discussions, including false authority (7%) and call for fear (11%), where the object of the fear response is largely imaginary (Hoggett & Thomson 2012). Only 1% used the phrase “I’m not racist/xenophobic, but...”.

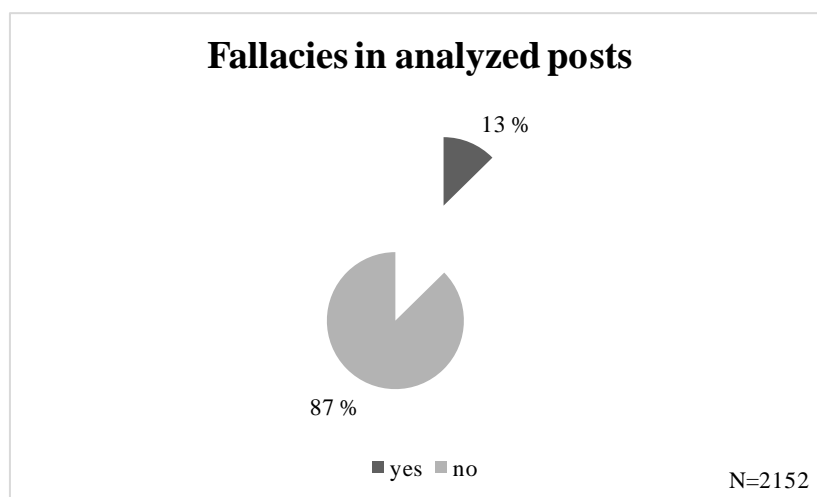


Figure 1: Fallacies in analyzed posts.

The interdiscursive aspect of the topic is related to the fact that the whole discussion was markedly gendered. First, the rhetorical fallacies were promoted by women (i.e., by people with female names²) in 74% of cases. This should not be understood as a claim that women are more prone to using rhetorical fallacies or spreading fake news. However, the explanation of this difference is missing. Second, the evidence of the gendered discussion about immigrants is tied to the media image of refugees; it can be said that immigrants are mostly described as male, with comments emphasizing their sexual activity, as well as the desire to rape and to produce offspring. If female immigrants are mentioned, they are described as victims or sex slaves.

These slugs are not coming here to work, they want to rule us, enslave us, and exterminate us. They want to use our wives as sex slaves. What else are women in Islam?

In terms of framing supporters of immigration as “enemies”, it is important to stress the interdiscursive nature of immigration as a topic: it is connected with anti-liberalism, anti-feminism (homophobia) and conservatism. In 100% of comments where the EU was mentioned, the comment was negative. It could be said that for ParlamentníListy.cz readership, the EU is viewed as liberal, feminist and leftwing; hence, blaming the EU for immigration is a common theme emerging from the posts.

Merkel is an evil sent to Earth by Satan and all MEPs are fools. The EU? What is it for exactly?

Thanks to the stupid Brussels fascist immigration quotas a religious war is coming.

² The Czech language uses gender inflection: a female surname is derived from the male surname by adding *-ová* in the end. Therefore, the purported gender of a comment's author can be recognized more effectively.

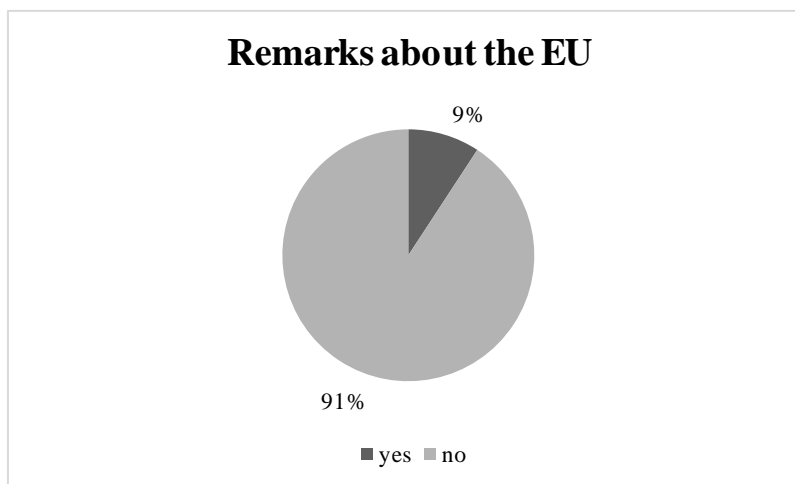


Figure 2: Remarks about the EU; $n = 272$.

5.1 *Ad hominem* arguments

The argument most frequently used was *ad hominem*. This is an argument by which the debater tries to refute the opponent's claim by pointing to his personality, qualities, characteristics, or actions. HateFree (2020) defines *ad hominem* arguments as “attacking the debater, pointing to his negative_*_*_ qualities, instead of questioning the argument as such”. A related fallacy is known as *poisoning the well*, in which the speaker’s reputation is damaged in advance before he even begins his argument. His credibility and thus the strength of his arguments are questioned.

Because this type of rhetorical fallacy was used most often, a typology was developed to explore further its different forms.

- Individual vulgarities or many insults in a row:
 - You cannot be that stupid.
 - You are not funny, just repeating shit. Do something with your life so as not to be so fucked up.
- Challenging the mental health of commenters, with emphasis on mental illness, low education or low intelligence:
 - I hope a psychiatrist will help you.
 - Your studies are evidently not going very well, are they?
 - It’s lucky that you look like an idiot too. Therefore, your dementia will not surprise anyone here.
- Grammar Nazi framing: i.e., bringing attention to grammatical or stylistic mistakes in the comments being replied to:
 - Mister, learn grammar!
- Sexism, sexualization: remarking on the sexual life of the commenter, describing the commentator's sexual practices, threatening rape:
 - It seems you really like black dicks, don’t you?

I hope you are raped by eight immigrants. I hope they tear your butt, splatter your mouth and piss on your head. You are just a prostitute, so you will like it anyway. Wishing many immigrants in your cunt, Misa.

- Homophobic discourse: marking a commenter as gay to devalue his opinion (this argument is used only to hurt male commenters):

There are many latent homosexuals among all these “patriots”, because half of all comments are connected with the anus.

5.2 Call for fear

The second most frequently used rhetorical fallacy was the call for fear. A strong emphasis on emotions and fears is used to end a debate. It often finds a solution to a particular social problem in favor of radical approaches. Of course, one cannot say with certainty whether commenters really believe in the visions they are describing, or whether they merely wish to cause moral panic. Cohen (1972) defines “moral panic” as a group reaction based on a false or exaggerated impression that the behavior of any other group (mostly minority groups or subcultures, so-called folk devils) is dangerously deviant and poses a threat to society. Nevertheless, common features can be found. Commenters using this fallacy often claim that “it's too late” and the state has reached a point of no return. They often speak about the future of their children (the general plural “our children” is used to enhance an impression that not only individual families but the entire nation will be liquidated). Expressive words associated with violence, struggle, war, blood and pain are often used to strengthen the feeling of helplessness and panic.

I'm afraid it's too late. Unfortunately, the only thing that can preserve real European-Christian values is religious war.

Our children have to watch Muslims killing, slicing and burning innocent people on the news.

Surprisingly, the commenters do not seek to provoke fear of the current state. Rather, they provoke fear of the future, when the problem will continue to escalate.

Current reality is presented as the beginning of a series of other – in this case, negative – events. A call for fear is an attempt to increase the fear related to a given course of events, thereby gaining predominance in a discussion, without the person presenting evidence proving the inevitable link between events.

All these 2,600 immigrants will have kids, they will go to kindergarten, and what will happen to pork? Every child will ask for exceptions connected with their “religion” and we idiots will allow them.

We will invite them and they will start to tell us how to behave. They will start to hate Christian symbols and want to implement Sharia law and other nonsense.

Today we see poor and vulnerable immigrants, but who will guarantee they will stay the same? Sooner or later they will start running people over with cars and spreading their faith by violence.

With this rhetorical fallacy, fake analogies are often used. Following this strategy, the debater creates a false analogy or a dilemma to devalue an opponent's arguments.

Simply, if you want Islam, rape, killing and slavery, vote for [presidential candidate] Drahoš.

5.3 False authority

The discussant refers to an unspecified authority. This is intended to add weight to the argument. It can be a friend, a known or unspecified medium (the phrase “the news says” is used often). HateFree (2020) points out that fake news and hoaxes emerge according to a similar principle, where similar information appears in emails, blogs or social networks without a source or author, so that the information cannot be verified.

My friend has family in Germany, and I get info from him. New immigrants do not work much.

In some news they say that war is coming.

5.4 Invincible ignorance

This rhetorical fallacy is related to reluctance or inability – or unwillingness – to base arguments on proven facts, relying instead on appeals to (assumed) common knowledge, claims of omniscience, or – conversely – attacking the credibility of any information source through claiming equivalence between competing assertions regardless of any evidence on which they are based.

In the first case, the debater insists on his assertion regardless of the quality of counterarguments. He is not able or is unwilling to present the facts, expressing his position explicitly, thus maintaining a circular argument.

It is not true, but I will not explain why.

At the same time, commenters using this fallacy demand proof for alternative opinions. This strategy could be explained as an attempt to transfer the burden of presenting facts and arguments to the other, with the belief that the debating party who has produced the fallacy has nothing to prove and his opponent must prove him wrong.

Surely, you have proof, or are you saying that, for example, in Germany there are millions of Arabs wandering the streets? Have you ever been to Germany?

Otherwise, commenters support their statement using the argument that everyone knows these facts. The approach is based on the simple thought that if many people say something, it must be true. It refers to “common sense”, to supposed facts that do need not be proven as they are evident to everyone.

The snails are imported by NGOs; everyone knows that.

Everybody knows about presidential powers – but you clearly don’t have much information.

Any normal person can see that he’s defending the interests of his or her country.

Reluctance or inability to work with facts is also often associated with the aim of masking lies or manipulation by challenging all sources of information. It creates the feeling of a world where there are no credible sources of information. The debater often puts himself in the position of being the only one who “knows everything”.

Nowadays people draw information from news and newspapers, but the truth is you need to seek them in different sources, not only read those subdued by recent propaganda.

The whole world knows the truth, but here people are told lies!

5.5 “I am not racist, but...”

The speaker employs this introduction in an attempt to distance himself in advance from negative assessments of his statements to follow. This fallacy is often associated with the so-called friend argument. This argument is used in the context of racism, xenophobia or homophobia. It refers to when commenters want to show they have friends among a specific group of people, and therefore cannot be labelled as someone who hates this group. In the case of the “I am not racist, but” argument, the commenters do not claim to have friends among immigrants, but they operate with the belief that their hatred of refugees is not based on the color of their skin, but rather with their supposed sociocultural attribute. A similar argument is used in discussions about Roma, where commenters argue that they are not racists because they do not mind the color of the Roma, but rather their lifestyle.

Xenophobia is not my problem, it is an issue for Gypsies, Muslims, vegans and faggots.

It is not a racist argument because I am not racist. I like Gypsies for example, I swear by them. Speaking of racism – it is used by those who use racist comments very often.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative analysis, which used the method of social listening for data collection, showed that rhetorical fallacies were used in a relatively small amount of the studied material in the periods under review, although the nature of the discussions corresponded to the theories mentioned above and users preferred emotive shouts and performative acts to rational, critical discussion (Warner 2002; Hoggett & Thompson 2012; Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001).

Surprisingly, only 13% of all comments contained rhetorical fallacies among which the most used was the *ad hominem* fallacy (55% of the total), call for fear (11%) and false authority (7%). Our expectation about the frequency of usage of “I am not racist, but...” as the main argumentation strategy (which was the reason for using it in the title of this study) was not confirmed. This fallacy, as the “traditional” way of making racist arguments and protecting the commentator’s own integrity at the same time, was used less often than expected. It shows us that anti-immigration comments analyzed in this study are thematically tied more with cultural and societal aspects of the immigration crisis than an ethnic or racial perspective, even though they are often explicitly racist and race-themed.

The whole discussion was markedly gender oriented. Not only were immigrants mostly described as men, comments highlighted their sexual activity and their desire to rape and produce offspring; yet 74% of all rhetorical fallacies were produced by women. The results of the research show that the topic of migration was not significantly associated with the European Union in the case of refugees. On the other hand, where that was the case, then it was only in a negative sense, when the European Union was seen as a culprit.

Apart from the analysis of rhetorical fallacies, it can be said that in discussions on migration on the Facebook pages of ParlamentníListy.cz, only three types of reactions appear: invectives (simple *ad hominem* fallacies), head nodding (“exactly, Mary; have a nice day!”), and exclamations (“Zeman for president” or “immigration is evil”). Every effort to discuss was drowned out -- not only by fallacies but also simple abusive language.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (GACR), Standard Grant Nr 17-17085S: “Dynamics and forms of citizen online participation in the Czech Republic in response to the European migration crisis”.

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