

Weaponized Narratives and the Regulation of Political Advertising: The Case of the Czech Republic

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Abstract

Political advertising in the European Union is undergoing rapid transformation as online platforms and algorithmic targeting reshape the boundaries of electoral communication. Traditional EU regulations focus on transparency and funding disclosure, but they fail to capture the discursive dimension of political persuasion. This paper examines the Czech Republic as a case study, where the communist past continues to shape the politics of memory and informs public sensitivities toward regulation. It argues that disinformation campaigns increasingly weaponize historical narratives—from nostalgic references to the communist era to depictions of the European Union as a new form of domination—in order to influence electoral behavior. Such strategies pose a unique challenge: regulatory frameworks must address manipulative uses of history without reviving fears of censorship deeply rooted in post-communist societies. To respond to this challenge, the paper proposes a discourse-analytic regulatory framework that integrates linguistic analysis, historical context, and interdisciplinary oversight into the regulation of political advertising. By combining insights from political science, law, and linguistics, the paper contributes to the interdisciplinary dialogue at the Bratislava conference, offering both a theoretical perspective and a practical model for addressing the evolving threats of disinformation in democratic societies.

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Introduction

Political advertising in the European Union (EU) has entered a transformative period marked by the rise of digital platforms, algorithmic targeting, and transnational disinformation campaigns. While the EU has sought to es-

tablish regulatory frameworks emphasizing transparency, disclosure of funding, and accountability of online platforms, these measures often remain narrowly focused on economic and technical dimensions of advertising. They do not fully address the discursive dimension of political persuasion, especially when historical narratives are strategically mobilized in the public sphere.

The Czech Republic provides a particularly compelling case study for exploring this gap. The country's communist past continues to shape public memory, inform contemporary political identities, and influence attitudes toward regulation and censorship. Political actors increasingly draw upon this memory—sometimes invoking nostalgia for the socialist era, other times portraying the European Union as a new form of domination reminiscent of Soviet control. Such discursive strategies do not merely recall history but weaponize it, shaping electoral outcomes and undermining democratic deliberation.

This paper examines the challenges posed by disinformation in political advertising that exploits historical memory in the Czech Republic and situates these challenges within the broader EU debate on regulation. It argues that traditional regulatory approaches, which prioritize financial and procedural transparency, are insufficient to capture the linguistic and symbolic strategies employed in modern campaigns. The paper proposes an innovative, discourse-analytic regulatory framework that integrates linguistic analysis, historical sensitivity, and interdisciplinary oversight.

Political Advertising and EU Regulation

Political advertising has long been recognized as a central component of electoral competition (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2006). In the EU, regulatory frameworks have traditionally emphasized transparency and fairness, aiming to ensure that voters are informed about the sources of campaign financing and the nature of political messages (Dobber et al., 2021). Recent legislative efforts, including the Proposal for a Regulation on the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising, extend these principles into the digital sphere. However, these measures largely overlook the semantic and ideological dimensions of communication, focusing instead on data protection and funding disclosure (European Commission, 2021)

Language, Discourse, and Historical Memory

Language is not a neutral vehicle of information but a constitutive element of political reality (Fairclough, 1995). The field of political linguistics and discourse studies has demonstrated how rhetorical strategies, framing devices, and semantic choices shape public opinion and legitimize political positions. In the context of political advertising, linguistic strategies are often tailored to specific audiences, amplified by algorithmic targeting, and embedded within broader ideological narratives. This makes them particularly difficult to regulate through traditional legal frameworks that do not engage with meaning-making processes (Reisigl, 2017).

In post-communist societies, historical memory plays a decisive role in shaping contemporary political discourse (Kubík & Bernhard, 2014). The Czech Republic, like other Central and Eastern European countries, continues to negotiate the legacy of authoritarian censorship, creating sensitivities around state intervention in political communication (Kolerová, 2021). At the same time, historical references—such as appeals to “normalization” nostalgia or depictions of the EU as a supranational authority—are powerful rhetorical tools mobilized in campaigns (Císař & Navrátil, 2015).

The notion of “weaponized narratives” refers to the strategic mobilization of historical or cultural references to achieve political ends (Paul, Matthews, 2016). Unlike conventional disinformation, which may rely on fabricated facts, weaponized narratives operate by reinterpreting shared memories, selectively emphasizing or omitting elements to construct persuasive frames. In the Czech context, this often involves reframing the communist past either as a lost period of social security or as a cautionary tale against foreign domination.

The Czech Context:

Historical Legacy of Regulation and Censorship

Under state socialism (1948–1989), political communication was tightly controlled, with political advertising nonexistent and public discourse subordinated to the ideological monopoly of the Communist Party (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014). This legacy has left a lasting sensitivity toward state interference in matters of communication. Post-1989 reforms emphasized media freedom and plurality, often framed in direct opposition to the paternalistic oversight of the communist era.

Memory Politics in the Czech Republic

Since democratization, political actors have actively mobilized historical memory in electoral campaigns. The communist past is frequently invoked in two contradictory ways. Anti-communist rhetoric is used to delegitimize opponents, particularly those associated with left-wing parties or former regime structures (Císař & Navrátil, 2015). At the same time, nostalgia for the socialist period—emphasizing perceived social stability and welfare guarantees—remains a potent theme in parts of the electorate (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010).

Disinformation Narratives and the EU

Disinformation campaigns in the Czech Republic often rely on historical analogies to portray the EU as a hegemonic force comparable to Soviet domination (Wagnsson & Hellman, 2018). These narratives reactivate cultural traumas embedded in collective memory, making them persuasive and emotionally resonant. For instance, during the 2021 parliamentary elections, online advertisements framed EU climate policies as externally imposed diktats reminiscent of socialist-era planning. Similarly, presidential campaigns have used messaging equating EU integration with the erosion of Czech sovereignty (Havlík, 2019).

Nostalgia and Electoral Mobilization

Campaign appeals that highlight the perceived “social securities” of the socialist period exemplify the power of weaponized narratives. While such messages rarely contain outright falsehoods, they strategically omit references to repression, censorship, and lack of freedoms. By selectively reconstructing history, political actors construct persuasive narratives that resonate with economically insecure or politically alienated voters (Beneš & Stulík, 2019).

Emerging Challenges

The EU’s approach to political advertising regulation has primarily emphasized transparency and accountability of funding sources. The *Proposal on the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising* reflects this orientation, focusing on disclosure requirements and restrictions on the use of personal data (European Commission, 2021). While these measures address

important aspects of fairness, they remain limited in scope. They do not engage with the symbolic and linguistic strategies through which political actors persuade and manipulate audiences. As Helberger (2020) argues, current frameworks underestimate the socio-cultural dimensions of digital campaigning.

Disinformation is often conceptualized as the deliberate spread of false information. However, in practice, it frequently takes the form of weaponized narratives that reinterpret historical memory rather than fabricate facts outright (Paul & Matthews, 2016). In the Czech context, this has included portrayals of the EU as a dominating force comparable to Soviet control, or nostalgic appeals to socialist-era social securities (Císař & Navrátil, 2015). These strategies resonate because they are embedded in widely shared cultural memories and are therefore more difficult to contest through fact-checking alone (Wagnsson & Hellman, 2018).

Efforts to regulate political communication also face historical sensitivities. In post-communist societies, there is a persistent fear of censorship, rooted in the memory of authoritarian media control (Kolerová, 2021). This tension complicates the implementation of regulatory measures, as overreach may be interpreted as a return to paternalistic oversight (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014).

Finally, the algorithmic nature of online advertising compounds these challenges. Platforms such as Facebook and YouTube allow political actors to microtarget specific audiences. Research shows that such targeting enhances the persuasive power of political messaging, particularly when combined with culturally resonant frames (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). Nostalgic or anti-EU narratives are thus not only crafted but also selectively amplified to audiences predisposed to accept them, reinforcing polarization.

Towards an Innovative Solution

To address these challenges, this paper proposes a discourse-analytic regulatory framework. Unlike traditional models that focus on transparency and financial disclosure, this framework centers on the semantic and ideological content of political advertising.

Linguistic Analysis Tools

Employ computational linguistics and corpus-based methods to detect narratives invoking communism, nostalgia, or EU domination, flagging content that disproportionately relies on emotionally charged historical analogies.

Context-Sensitive Regulation

Develop guidelines that distinguish between legitimate political references to history and manipulative distortions, ensuring regulators are trained to recognize cultural sensitivities in post-communist societies.

Interdisciplinary Oversight Panels

Establish committees including linguists, historians, and political scientists to advise regulators on ambiguous cases, balancing protection of discourse with avoidance of censorship.

EU-Level Adaptation with National Flexibility

Promote a harmonized EU approach while allowing member states to apply it in ways sensitive to their historical legacies.

Contribution to the Bratislava Conference Themes

This paper contributes directly to the interdisciplinary aims of the Bratislava conference by showing how politics, linguistics, and historical memory intersect in contemporary regulatory debates. From a political science perspective, it exposes the inadequacy of transparency-based EU regulation in contexts where historical memory is central to mobilization. From a linguistic perspective, it demonstrates how narratives of nostalgia and domination operate through rhetorical strategies. From a discourse perspective, it situates Czech cases within broader European struggles to preserve democratic deliberation against algorithmic targeting and disinformation.

Conclusion

The regulation of political advertising in the EU is at a crossroads. While recent legislative efforts represent progress toward transparency, they remain ill-equipped to address the deeper discursive and ideological dimensions of disinformation. The Czech Republic, with its contested historical memory of communism and sensitivities toward censorship, illustrates the limits of conventional approaches and the urgency of innovative solutions.

This paper has argued that disinformation often takes the form of weaponized narratives rather than outright falsehoods. These narratives re-

interpret history, mobilize nostalgia, and frame the EU as a new form of domination, shaping voter perceptions in subtle ways. In response, the proposed discourse-analytic regulatory framework integrates linguistic analysis, historical sensitivity, and interdisciplinary oversight. This model not only addresses regulatory shortcomings but also ensures measures remain culturally appropriate in post-communist societies.

For scholars, the paper underscores the value of interdisciplinary approaches that connect law, linguistics, and political science. For policymakers, it offers a practical model for enhancing democratic resilience without compromising freedoms. Ultimately, regulation must evolve to confront the complex realities of historical memory and discursive manipulation, ensuring that democratic discourse remains both open and protected.

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