

ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to pinpoint and analyze the characteristics and modus operandi of political enemy-construction, but instead of the traditional platforms of political communication, the analysis focuses on a rather specific segment of the area, namely the digital public sphere.

Consequently, the study is aiming to shed light on how the basic principles and mechanisms of the digital sphere (mainly social media) are affecting the communications of political actors in general, and the utilized narrative techniques of political enemy-construction in particular.

It is also subject of the analysis to determine how these phenomena are adapting to the 'rules and regulations' of the digital public platforms and how political actors utilize within their communication the opportunities presented by these platforms.

Keywords: *Political Communication, Digital Public Sphere, Political-Enemy Construction, Political Discourse Analysis*

ABSZTRAKT

Jelen tanulmány a politikai ellenségkonstruálás jellemzőinek, sajátosságainak vizsgálatára törekszik, ezt azonban a politikai kommunikáció klasszikus platformjai helyett egy speciális szegmensben, a digitális nyilvánosság közegeben teszi.

Az elemzés középpontjában az áll, miként befolyásolják a digitális tér (azon belül is elsősorban a közösségi média) törvényszerűségei tágabb értelemben a politikusok kommunikációját, szűkebb értelemben az ellenségképző politikai narratívák nyelvi technikáit, működési mechanizmusait.

Vizsgálat tárgyát képezi tehát, hogy miként igazodnak ezek a jellegzetességek a digitális nyilvánosság platformjainak "szabályaihoz", illetve, hogy miként használják ki a politikusok kommunikációjuk során a digitális nyilvánosság adta lehetőségeket.

Kulcsszavak: *Politikai kommunikáció, politikai ellenségképzés, digitális nyilvánosság, diszkurzív politikatudomány*



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NARRATIVES OF POLITICAL ENEMY- CONSTRUCTION WITHIN THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

*A POLITIKAI ELLENSÉGKÉPZÉS NARRATÍVÁI A
 DIGITÁLIS NYILVÁNOSSÁGBAN*

1 Introduction¹

The technique of constructing political narratives around certain enemy-images is an increasingly common in nowadays' political communication. It would be a mistake though to confuse this as a new trend in politics, since the usage of enemy-images dates back to the very beginning of the formations of political communities. In that regard, Carl Schmitt even states this specific aspect, meaning the ability to divide a community by this friend-enemy (us versus them) distinction as a defining characteristic of politics from which every political action and motive can deduced from (Schmitt, 2008: 26). Furthermore, it is important to note that although on the surface it might seem that the increasing occurrences of such enemy-constructive narratives is linked to politicians' need for momentary political gain (e.g. mobilization, electoral advantage etc.), the phenomenon possesses some crucial *functions* within the broader sense of the political sphere (Schlett, 2018).

The operation and fulfilment of these functions vary recognizably however based on the platforms on which the enemy-constructive discourses appear. For instance, while on the more traditional media platforms (such as television and newspapers) we expect lengthy reasonings, detailing why and how our perceived enemy is posing a threat to our community, with the emergence of social media the techniques and modus operandi of such discussions had to adapt. As a result, just as we grew accustomed to the fact that with

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an approach of an election, we encounter increasingly more posts published by the candidates of said election, we are also not surprised by the fact that the contents and tone of such posts differ greatly from the content and tone of a television interview or a speech in Parliament given by the same candidates.

Therefore, additionally to observing an abundance of the usage of enemy-constructive narratives, we also learnt to expect encountering them outside of their traditional platforms and seeing them progressively more often on our personal social media feeds, as well. Moreover, the two trends work hand in hand with each other: just as we are not surprised by the fact that political actors tend to paint each other in a negative light, we are considering the increasingly more prominent presence of politicians (and their narratives) on social media as part of the natural order of politics.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is to identify the core changes that the different platforms of the digital public sphere have on the techniques of narrative enemy-construction, while also determining how enemy-constructive messages are adapting to the 'rules and regulations' of the digital public platforms. To achieve an understanding of the role and mechanisms of enemy-constructing political narratives, first we must call upon the academic literature of Political Discourse Studies and Political Thinking, in addition to the findings of Political Communication with special regard to the digital public sphere and attention-based politics. Therefore, following a brief overview of the theoretical framework of political enemy-construction, the second half of the paper is focusing on the digital public sphere, and how it alters some core aspects of enemy-constructive narratives, followed by a conclusion that also addresses the possible scientific approaches to the abovementioned questions.

2 Enemy-construction

First of all, we have to acknowledge that the scientific examination of political enemy-construction is a highly interdisciplinary area: in addition to the disciplines with which the interrelation is more apparent (like Political Communication and Political Discourse Studies), Political Theory, Political Psychology, Political Anthropology and even some Regime Theories (e.g. the theory of Plebiscitary Leader Democracy²) have strong connections to the topic, while even some research on populism and on the extreme right are concerning themselves with the subject as well – as pointed out by Geró et al (Geró et al., 2017).

Moving forward, this paper follows the basic principles of Discursive Institutionalism (a branch of neo-institutionalisms) as a framework for analysis, which is a scientific approach

² Plebiscitary Leader Democracy (PLD) is a regime classification theory developed by the authors, András Körösiényi, Gábor Illés and Rudolf Metz in order to describe the characteristics of the post-2010 Hungarian political regime more accurately. PLD has six defining character traits, with *demagogue or populist communication style* and *permanent crisis discourse* among them – with the latter per definition including the blaming of a scapegoat-like enemy-figure, strongly relating to enemy-image based political communication (see Körösiényi, 2018; Körösiényi et al., 2020).

that uses ideas and discourse to explain political change (and/or continuity). This includes – among others – the representation of ideas through discourse, including frames, narratives, myths, collective memories, stories and scripts (Schmidt, 2010). By emphasizing the role of political agency and political action (including communicative actions) this approach is in accordance with the scientific approach of Political Discourse Studies. As Márton Szabó, one of the most prominent researchers of the discipline explains, people always act discursively, while their actions are always imbedded within a certain language or textual structure. Consequently, with regard to enemy-constructing political narratives, we can also state that they can be considered as actions carried out by words, that aim to identify and define a common enemy, while often utilising certain performative elements to achieve and strengthen that aim (Szabó, 2016). As it is concluded by Gábor Pál, political enemy discourses are therefore a complex web of violent actions of speech. It is of utmost importance, however, that we separate all this from the phenomenon of *hate speech*, that is a verbal expression of collective negative and often violent emotions, that is able to transform the language of politics into an active political force that can become a component of actual wartime discourses (Pál, 2019).

All this falls in line with a special characteristic of the approach of Political Thinking itself, namely that it is always aimed to achieve *some kind of action*. As István Schlett explains in his extensive work on the subject, it is to attain this capacity of action that is the main driving force of political thinking. According to him, the *differentia specifica* of political thinking – that is, in this context, one of the *structural components of politics* – can be grasped in its role in political action. As mentioned above, assigning someone the role of one's political enemy is inherent in the ways of political thinking, since as soon as one enters the political arena as a political actor, one has to define not only what they stand for, but also what (or whom) they stand *against*. Therefore, pointing out one's adversaries in the political scene is an integral part of one's *self-identification* that can be considered a crucial aspect of creating one's own political community (Schlett, 2018). Hence, as Gerő et. al. point out, it is not a coincidence that there is a lack in academic literature of a simple and consensual definition of the term “enemy”, but many attempt to create such a definition grasps this aspect with relation to the political community. We already pointed out that Carl Schmitt emphasized the importance of the us-them distinction which in this regard has an existential character as well, since it defines the search for an enemy as part of the human nature, therefore implying that there can be no political community without its “Others” (Schmitt, 2008). Gerő et. al. also highlight this aspect by quoting Louis Oppenheimer as he stated that group identity is defined by contrast to other groups and “is the result of systematic comparisons with and differentiation from other groups” (Oppenheimer, 2006). Accordingly, it is among the most common traits of democratic politics that it provides the opportunity for a legalised and open competition between the political actors of the respective political community, with that competition also being able to continuously rearrange the relations and boundaries within that community. In modern politics, political adversaries are not inherently given though, as the role is not predestined but created through discursive practices. Hence, it is the discursive process that constructs and deconstructs them within the political sphere (Szabó, 2016).

Concerning the more specific techniques of this discursive process, Szabó lists five discursive methods more commonly used in enemy-constructive narratives. There are 1) *redefinition*, which refers to the discursive method in which a naturally occurring difference (e.g. physical appearance) is communicated as a potential threat, 2) *asymmetrical counter-concepts* coined by Reinhardt Koselleck and pointing out the difference between standard self-ascriptions and pejorative other-references³, 3) *semantic oppositions*, referring to the black-and-white notion of purely morally good and morally bad actors within these narratives, 4) the usage of *stereotypes* within the narratives and finally 5) the *revealing nature* of such narratives, namely that the enmity between the parties are presented as an unquestionable fact, while the communication is strictly one-sided, in which the “enemy” has no means to create an actual dialogue. Szabó also defines a method called the *process of narrative exclusion* or *discursive act of exclusion* that is based on *questioning the legitimacy* of the person or group that has been labelled the “enemy”, which can be done either by 1) *demonising their intrinsic qualities*, stating that they are morally corrupt, therefore not fit to be part of the community or by 2) *criminalising their actions*. The latter case can be categorised in two further sub-types: both of which stem from the conviction that the perceived enemy is causing harm to the community, but 2a) one is explaining this by invoking the incompetence of the labelled person or group, while 2b) the other is stating that the enemy is *intentionally causing harm* to the community with their actions (Szabó, 2016).

Consequently, we can determine that in addition to its connections with the formation and maintenance of one’s political community, the other crucial function of enemy-construction within political communication is the *legitimation of one’s action*. Hence, as Gerő et. al. put it, “enmification” in this sense can be considered an action-legitimizing strategy (Gerő et. al., 2017: 18). Accordingly, keeping the political discourse focusing on the constructed enemy-images is crucial, since the existence of the perceived enemies legitimises the actions the speaker wants to take or has already taken against them. Keeping the enemy-image on the political agenda also has benefits concerning the mobilisation aspect, since one’s supporters are more easily called to action when unified against a common enemy that poses a (perceived or actual) threat to the political community.

In conclusion, we can observe that one of the main *functions* of the constructed political enemy is the creation and maintenance of a political community (Gerő et. al., 2017), while also creating its capacity to act (Schlett, 2018). In a more pragmatic manner, enemy-constructive political narratives are also able to legitimise one’s actions taken against said perceived enemies, while also helping to mobilise against them. While these functions,

³ Asymmetrical counter-concepts are defined by Reinhardt Koselleck based on the asymmetries between standard self-ascriptions and pejorative other ascriptions, as he traces many important cases of social, political and cultural domination to the string of recurrent. His original cases include the historical semantics of the dichotomies of *Hellenes-barbarians*, *Christians-pagans* and *Übermensch-Untermensch* – all of which has one side that at first glance might seem a neutral description, in contrast with its counterpart, but on a closer look, carries a moral, and usually pejorative connotation (e.g. negative sentiments towards barbarians or pagans). See: Koselleck, 1997.

as mentioned above, can be considered inherent parts of the nature of politics, instead of being newfound tools of nowadays' political actors, we also have to acknowledge that the currently experienced overuse of enemy-image focused narratives can indeed erode democratic processes as explained in detail by Foa and Mounk, but their exploration here is beyond the scope of this study (Foa and Mounk, 2016).

3 Digital public sphere

In addition to the core aspects of enemy-constructive narratives, we also have to observe the main characteristics of the digital public sphere. Going by the original definition coined by Jürgen Habermas, the *public sphere* is closely linked to concept of democracy, since (through open societal discourses and public debate) the public sphere is the main platform where the “will of the people” can manifest, therefore making it one of the most important tools in the hands of the people to control the political power. According to this definition, the public sphere is made up of “private people gathered together as a public” and “articulating the needs of society with the state” (Habermas, 1991: 34).

Therefore, regarding its functions, the public sphere presents a platform for the community of free and equal citizens of a state to exchange their opinions on public matters. With the emergence of the mass media this aspect is even more amplified, since the different media outlets are able to increase the visibility of such public discourses and opinions towards political actors and institutions (Merkovity, 2018: 58-59.). Hence, the public sphere gives an opportunity to private individuals to join into debates and discussions about topics concerning the society as a whole (Splichal, 2012: 159). On one hand, this helps include the individual into the society, while on the other hand, contributing to the formation of a public opinion that can be considered “the will of the people”. Although, in addition to these functions, there is also a comparatively pragmatic approach to the topic of the public sphere, that it creates a link between “average citizens” and the governance, therefore helping to mitigate societal conflicts and contributing to the legitimacy of the government by increasing their accountability (Salvatore et al., 2013: 2-3.). It is worth noting however, that we cannot treat the public sphere like one uniform entity, as we can differentiate between political and cultural public spheres, both of which are determined by different, yet – due to the digital age – still intertwined legal norms is (Gripsrud et al., 2010: xx-xxii.). That being said, due to the fact that in terms of technical aspects, both of their characteristics are appearing within the platforms of the digital public sphere, this study will henceforth treat them as a unit.

In accordance with the increasing popularity of social media platforms, the above-mentioned aspects of the expression of public opinion are also highlighted, since the inclusivity of said websites present a convenient platform where users' opinions can clash. These tendencies, among others, contributed greatly to concretization of the definition of *digital public sphere*, since we consider it to be a platform created by information and

communication technologies that can appear on every openly accessible platform where interested parties can freely join communication processes either as participants or observers. Therefore, we can categorize almost every digital platform to be part of the digital public sphere, including social media outlets, websites, and blogs. It is important to note however, that there is a significant difference between these platforms compared to the previous concepts of the public sphere, namely that while in the traditional approach always included the common goal of reaching a joint public opinion through public debates and compromises, this aspect is completely absent within the platforms of the digital public sphere. Additionally, the anonymity provided by these platforms also contributes to this trend, at times even feeding into the aspirations of intentionally creating conflicts among the participants of a debate (Merkovity, 2018: 59.). Consequently, Schäfer argues that although the digital public sphere tends to successfully make diverse actors and their positions visible, it also exhibits a wide range of communicative styles that only on rare occasions seem to conform to ideas of the rational and compromise-seeking nature of debates advocated by Habermas' original deliberative theory (Schäfer, 2015).

One of the other main differences is that while in the case of the more traditional public platforms or media outlets (such as news broadcasts of newspapers), people usually seek out political topics and debates, hence the messages mainly reach people who are already interested in the topics in question, the different platforms of social media is able to transform the messages of the political actors to users who are generally not receptive to such topics (Merkovity, 2017; Bene, 2020). Therefore, political actors who appear in the online space are forced to adapt to the possibilities allowed by social media platforms in terms of the 1) *scope*, 2) *tone* and 3) *content* of their messages, while also actively participating in a *competition for users' attention* with other, non-political actors and subjects – such as celebrities, sports news, pop-culture topics etc. (Merkovity, 2017).

Among the abovementioned changes, the change in the *scope of the messages* is the most self-explanatory one, since many social media platforms have explicit limits regarding the length of the content that can be posted (e.g. twitter), while on others, that do not have such regulations, it is dictated by common sense that actors keep their contents short and straightforward, or else they risk losing the interest of their target audience. Consequently, actors on these platforms do not have the opportunity to go into in-depth reasonings like they would do in a case of a televised interview or a pre-written and structured speech. Instead, they have to pick and choose from their messages and/or manifestos, emphasizing those aspects that they consider to be the most able to grab users' attention. All things considered, the changes regarding the scope of political messages on social media can be attributed to one external and one internal factor, the external being the explicit word limit applied by certain platforms, while the internal being dictated by common sense and the realization that lengthy posts cannot stay in the competition that is fought for users' attention – considered in this case as a limited resource (Merkovity 2017: 48).

The changes observed in the *tone of the messages* of political actors on social media compared to the more traditional outlets can also be contributed to the specific charac-

teristics of the digital public sphere: since political actors have to participate in the competition for attention with non-political actors as well, their more neutral-toned messages tend to blend into the vast information-overload that is presented by social media, while the more confrontative and controversial (hence, attention-grabbing) messages are able to reach more users. Studies have also shown that messages that are aimed to provoke strong emotions have a greater chance of reaching their target audiences, especially in the case of negative emotions that tend to be significantly more affective in that regard. Similarly, messages of emotional and confrontative nature also tend to evoke more interactions from users, and as a result, creating more visibility to posts containing such messages (Bene, 2020; Burai–Bene, 2021; Burai, 2022). All of these trends fall in line with the findings of cognitive studies that assumed that enemy images distort information processing, referring to the tendency that people are more likely to notice information about the perceived enemy's aggressive actions than about their peaceful acts (Gerő et al., 2017).

All this is connected to the third most visible change of political messages when entering the digital public sphere, namely the changes observed in the *contents of such messages*. Similarly to the tone, the content of these messages also tend to be more confrontative and controversial, since it is more likely to reach wider audiences then, for example, a well-reasoned debate about agricultural policy. Consequently, topics focusing on the shortcomings of political rivals, or the threats posed by constructed enemy-figures tend to gain significantly more visibility than of those that focus on policy issues or political manifestos. This also works hand in hand with the fact that posts from the former category also tend to evoke stronger feelings (such as anger, hate or frustration), paving the way for the more enemy-image based online narratives (Szabó, 2020; Altheide–Merkovity, 2021; Szabó et al., 2021).

One of the most well-known cases of the successful realization and utilization of these tendencies is case of Donald Trump, who both in his primary and presidential election campaigns excessively used short, controversial, strongly hate-filled statements (e.g. targeting immigrants as well as his political competitors), resulting in a creation of a communicative environment where even the traditional media outlets had to cover his statements, as they were so attention-grabbing that it was impossible not to talk about them. As Norbert Merkovity pointed out, by realizing that the operation of the parties, the electoral system, and especially the media could not keep pace with the explosion of communication that took place over past decades, he could exploit these shortcomings and take advantages of the more fast-paced and interactive digital public sphere, not only securing his eventual presidential victory but saving a lot on advertisement costs as well (Merkovity, 2017).

All things considered, we can observe that the platforms of the digital public sphere differ greatly from the more traditional outlets of political communication in terms of their characteristics, hence affecting the essential qualities and modus operandi of enemy-constructive political narratives and discourses in such platforms as well. Consequently, the characteristics of the discussions of the digital public sphere can be described with concept such as *personalization*, *(self-)mediatization* and *viralisation*: political actors who



enter the digital public sphere have to learn to spread their narratives in a highly competitive environment, in which their competitors are not necessarily political actors themselves, while they also have to learn how to market themselves almost like self-made influencers and how to provoke interactions from their audiences (Bene, 2020: 193; Merkovity, 2022: 126).

4. Conclusion

By closely examining the techniques and characteristics of political enemy-construction and reviewing how the emergence of the digital public sphere altered and brought forward some of those characteristics, we can conclude that the observed changes of political actors' messages and communication style on social media are, in fact, very favorable towards the increasing usage of enemy-constructive political narratives. Naturally, this increasing utilization of such narratives cannot be solely contributed to the attributes and modus operandi of the digital public sphere, we can reasonably claim that it is a significant contributing factor behind the success and popularity of political communication based on enemy-images.⁴

It is important to note however, that only because the logic of social media platforms tend to push political actors toward this more enemy-image based communication style, does not mean that all political actors follow this trend. Case studies have shown that not all political actors can or are willing to adapt to these analyzed tendencies and result to controversial, enemy-constructive narratives (Szabó Palócz, 2024), and although we cannot state that, as a consequence, all of them necessarily fall behind in the competition for users' attention, but it requires a lot more work and effort from them to succeed without using the abovementioned techniques (Merkovity, 2017; Bene, 2020). Another crucial aspect of this is that the concrete linguistic techniques frequently used in these kinds of narratives are very easily adaptable to the altered scope, tone and content of political messages, since using stereotypes or asymmetric counter-concepts, for instance, does not require a well-reasoned and detailed speech (Szabó, 2016). Hence, political actors trying to act increasingly more as influencers in the digital public sphere can easily resort back to these well-known techniques without having to learn an entirely new way of communication.

Finally, we have to point out some observations regarding the scientific approaches towards enemy-constructive narratives that might deepen our understanding of both the increasing popularity and the modus operandi of enemy-constructive narratives. One of these approaches is in accordance with the suggestions of Gerő et. al. that they emphasized whilst trying to identify the reasons and contributing factors behind the popularity of

⁴ The reasons behind the popularity and success of enemy-constructive narrative techniques might vary greatly based on, among others, the historical experiences, the political culture or the special regional characteristics of a country. Several case studies examined, for instance, these phenomena with special regard to the Central and Eastern European region (Kajta, 2017; Kovarek et. al., 2017, Králové and Navrátil, 2017).

enemy-image based political narratives specifically in the Central and Eastern European region. The authors pointed out that by broadening the scope of empirical examinations and transcending the analyzation of these phenomena through their relation to populism and/or the extreme right narratives we can achieve a deeper understanding of their nature. Additionally, by leaning into the interdisciplinarity of the analyzed subject, and incorporating the findings and approaches of other scientific disciplines we can not only learn from each other's work, but also advance it further (Gerő et. al., 2017).

Another aspect that is worth highlighting is that although it is a general premise of discourse analyses that the analyzed materials are examined from the point of view of their *goals*, *functions* and *techniques*, instead of vigorously fact-checking their contents, with the recently observe abundance of such narratives and discursive techniques we have to not only acknowledge, but also emphasize that while analyzing enemy-constructive narratives, we are dealing with constructed realities, that by nature implies that *competing concepts of reality* and *varying knowledge-constructs* are created and strengthened by these narratives. As Balázs Böcskei points out, all these tendencies inherently carry the consequence that when perceiving the reality of politics, we inevitably have to take it into account that within it, different reality-perceptions exist. Therefore, we have to accept the existence of a certain fact-plurality and the persistence of competing concepts of reality. Consequently, he states, we have to acknowledge the legitimacy of such concepts and accept the fact that there is no one objective reality of politics – similarly to how during scientific investigations we can only count on the facts of the chosen scientific methods and models (Böcskei, 2017; Böcskei, 2019).

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