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Heřmanová, Marie

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Article

Politicisation of the Domestic: Populist Narratives About Covid-19 Among Influencers

Marie Heřmanová

Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic; marie.hermanova@soc.cas.cz

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Abstract

The article analyses the proliferation of narratives about Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event among female lifestyle influencers on Czech Instagram. As the Covid-19 pandemic turned even the most basic everyday activities into politically loaded questions, the boundaries between lifestyle, domestic, and political content posted by influencers became increasingly blurred. The article explores this process of “politicisation of the domestic” with a focus on (a) the gendered character of influencer communities on Instagram, (b) the process of authority building within the newly politicised and gendered spaces, and (c) the post-socialist socio-political context of the Czech Republic that frames current political events by symbolic references to a totalitarian past. Empirically, the article builds on data collected using digital ethnography and ethnographic content analysis of selected Czech female lifestyle influencers’ Instagram profiles.

Keywords

Covid-19; Czech Republic; Instagram; political influencers; populism; social media influencers

Issue

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1. Introduction

The past two decades have been shaped by the rise of networked communication, where “single media logic” is replaced by “multiple media logic” (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). The one-directional flow of information from content producers (journalists, mass-media gatekeepers) is now dispersed into multidirectional flows from different types of producers (journalists, politicians, influencers, activists, experts) towards wide and diverse audiences via digital communication platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (Suton, 2021). Blumler (2016) suggests we should talk about the fourth age of media communication defined by communication abundance and complexity, a decline in the importance of traditional mass-media outlets such as public service radio and TV, and increasing “mediatisation” of political communication (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). At the same time, the distinction between who is a producer and who is a consumer becomes increasingly blurred in the environment of digital communication platforms that are based on the user-generated content princi-

ples, resulting in concepts such as prosumption, prosumers (Chia, 2012; Ritzer et al., 2012; Toffler, 1980), and producers (Bruns, 2009). On the user-generated-content platforms, expert authorities and traditional gatekeepers such as academics, journalists, or politicians compete with newly emerging opinion leaders such as influencers, who often position themselves as a direct challenge to expert knowledge and base their authority on practical, everyday experience (Baker & Rojek, 2020). For young users, in particular, social media has become a preferred way to engage in public affairs and political discourse (Fischer et al., 2022). In this way, social media are driving a significant change in the dissemination and reception of political ideas and ideologies.

With the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, social media became the dominant channel of communication about the pandemic, central to informing citizens about new developments, restrictions, and risks (Baker et al., 2020; Fuchs, 2021). As Fuchs (2021) noted, all information about Covid-19 quickly became appropriated by proponents of various ideological groups, both mainstream and fringe. On the one

hand, various political actors from all sides of the political spectrum often used narratives about the origins and impact of Covid-19 to support their ideological views (Fuchs, 2021; Lyu et al., 2022). On the other hand, a new group of actors, opinion leaders, and influencers emerged within the domain of health communication on social media (Baker, 2022).

Heřmanová (2022a, 2022b) and Baker (2022), among others, have explored how the Covid-19 pandemic was discussed among predominantly female influencers on Instagram and other platforms. Online influencers play an increasingly important role in political communication. They serve as both intermediaries and producers of political messages. As established opinion leaders in areas such as fashion and lifestyle consumption, many influencers recently turned towards more political content (Fischer et al., 2022; Riedl et al., 2021). For influencers who built their personal brands around aspirational domestic and lifestyle content, the Covid-19 global pandemic created an opportunity (and sometimes even a necessity) to engage in political discourse. The most basic everyday acts and decisions, such as where to shop for food, how to organise playdates for children, if and where to go on holiday, suddenly turned into political discussions and the influencers found themselves either promoting or challenging anti-pandemic restrictions imposed by national governments as they were forced to actively defend their decisions on such matters to their followers. In this article, I explore this process of *politicisation of the domestic* and analyse how Czech influencers developed new ways to build authority and leadership within their communities and acted as experts or “lifestyle gurus” (Baker & Rojek, 2020). In particular, the article focuses on the proliferation of one specific political narrative among female Czech influencers on Instagram that explains the Covid-19 pandemic as an orchestrated political event deployed by the elites to control the people. Within the Czech-speaking online spaces, this narrative originally emerged at various conspiracy-dedicated and disinformation websites and blogs, and it mostly stayed there during the first wave of lockdowns in the Czech Republic (between March and May 2020). Over the summer of 2020, the narrative was gradually co-opted by fringe populist political groups, such as the movement around prominent Czech conspiracy theorist Lubomír Volný and on occasion was even referred to by the MP Tomio Okamura, leader of the party SPD (Svoboda a přímá demokracie—Freedom and Direct Democracy) and prominent representative of right-wing populism in the Czech Republic (Janáková, 2014).

This article follows the broadly accepted definition of populism as a political ideology and discourse that posits “the people” against “elites” (Canovan, 2002; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) and uses the example of a concrete populist narrative to analyse how female influencers engaged in populist political discourse via the above-mentioned process of politicisation of the domestic. The narrative explains the Covid-19 pandemic as an

orchestrated event and an intentionally planned political strategy whose main aim was to strengthen the control of the political elites, both the visible ones (Czech and European politicians) and the hidden (often labelled as “pharmaceutical lobby,” but also generally referred to as bureaucrats and greedy political leaders detached from the lives of ordinary citizens), over “the people.” Within this narrative, the influencers situated themselves as representative voices of the people and used this position to form a type of political authority based on intuition and lived experience (as opposed to expert knowledge and political power). The analysis focuses on the social and discursive practices developed and used by the influencers to amplify the above-mentioned narrative, which enabled them to position themselves as authorities within the political discussion.

1.1. Methodology, Ethics, and Context of the Research

The analysis is based on a long-term digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016) among Czech female Instagram influencers. The data for this study were collected between March 2020 and December 2021 using participant and non-participant observation on Instagram, participant observation with influencers and influencer management agencies, and semi-structured narrative interviews with the influencers (n = 15). The research participants are female influencers between the ages of 23 and 35 whose primary focus is lifestyle, travel, and parenting content. Influencers are defined here as social media platform users who monetise their content and whose social media profiles represent their main source of income (Abidin, 2018). The follower count of the research participants on Instagram ranges from 6,000 to 80,000. In the Czech context, a user with more than 5,000 followers is considered a micro-influencer, and a user with 50,000 followers is categorised as a mid-level influencer, as was confirmed by Ian, the owner of the biggest Czech influencer management agency, in an interview. In this regard, with its limited size, the Czech influencer market differs significantly from the English-speaking market. While the participant and non-participant observation occurred exclusively on Instagram, some of the influencers also used other platforms for building their personal brands, most often YouTube and TikTok. The data from digital ethnography were complemented by a thematic analysis of the content posted on Instagram by six research participants between February and April 2020 and September 2021 (to compare how the content has evolved during the pandemic). The data from the selected Instagram profiles were downloaded manually in real-time (posts from the feed were screenshotted and saved, and stories were recorded via Android screen-recording software), after which the data were coded in Atlas.ti software via open coding method (Rivas, 2012). Ethnographic content analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; van den Scott, 2018) was used to code and analyse the visual material (photos and stories from Instagram).

The analysis included two rounds of coding. This process reflected the real-time developments that occurred during my research. The postdoctoral research project from which this article stems started in January 2020; its original aim was to explore the authenticity strategies of Instagram influencers, specifically focusing on how these strategies are gendered. The original selection of research participants thus reflected this set-up and focused on female content creators within the lifestyle, fashion, travel, and parenting areas. However, two months after the start of the project, the pandemic significantly changed the everyday lives of my research participants and heavily impacted their opportunities to create lifestyle content, as will be explored below. The research focus thus necessarily shifted to how the pandemic itself was reflected in the influencers' content and what strategies and practices they developed to cope with the pandemic-related changes in their everyday lives. The pandemic also impacted my choice of research methods, as face-to-face interviews and participant observation in offline spaces were not possible for most of 2020. I thus opted for the additional method of ethnographic content analysis to complement the data from digital ethnography. Later in 2020, I scheduled online interviews (via Zoom) with some of the research participants that I was already in contact with via Instagram messages or email. In the first half of 2021, I also recorded two face-to-face interviews. The resulting bulk of data is thus a combination of digital ethnography (participant observation, non-participant observation on Instagram), online interviews, face-to-face interviews, and ethnographic content analysis.

In the first round of coding, I focused on the data collected between February and April 2020, aiming to capture and analyse changes in content creation practices caused by the pandemic. Within this first round of data analysis, it became clear that many of the research informants had taken what they themselves called a "non-mainstream" approach in discussing the pandemic with their audiences—a focus on the role of political elites, calls for independent thinking and research, and dismissal of the narrative offered by politicians and mainstream media. As the pandemic evolved and the political restrictions designed to curb it fluctuated in severity, some of my informants abandoned the topic and focused on creating apolitical, positive spaces where (again, in their own words) their followers could talk about normal things and not just politics. Others, however, used the opportunity to shift fully towards political content and created a political authority for themselves. In the second round of online data collection, I thus focused on the content posted by six of my informants whose shift towards political content was most pronounced and visible in their everyday posting practices. The article presents an ethnographic study of a trend that emerged among the influencers during the pandemic, which I believe can be illustrative of wider shifts both within the media landscape and the influencer economy, as will be discussed later.

All the names used in the text are pseudonyms, and all data have been anonymised. Even though informed consent has been obtained for all research participants, I decided to opt for full anonymisation for several reasons: (a) in some cases, while I obtained informed consent before the start of the pandemic, during the research, the content and narratives proliferated by the influencers significantly changed, putting them in a different position within the political debate; (b) all my research participants have previously experienced hate-speech and verbal threats on their profiles and given the polarised character of political discussion regarding the pandemic, non-anonymised analysis openly accessible online could expose them to further abuse; (c) I agree with Kozinets' (2019) observation about "consent gap" between "the ascribed and actual beliefs about social media users regarding the need for permission in the research-related use of the information they share online" (p. 173). I believe that the informed consent needs to be interpreted within the frame of the consent gap and with regard to the fast-changing dynamics of the discussion about Covid-19 (which was significantly different at the time when the consent was given). All the quotes from interviews and Instagram posts were translated from Czech to English by me.

2. Covid-19 on Instagram: Politicisation of the Domestic

In April 2021, I was in London and meeting with Sonya, a 24-year-old travel influencer based in the UK. Sonya was born in the Czech Republic, and both her parents are Czech, so when I asked her to meet me in person for an interview, she was excited to have the opportunity to have a conversation in Czech. While we were drinking coffee in the park, Sonya reflected on the previous year:

It was difficult, I think it was difficult for everyone in my position. So many trips were cancelled. I survived because I have a few long-term partnerships that I could still work on from home, cosmetics, and such. But the change was drastic, and some people really did not cope well.

She laughs at the last sentence. We discuss how influencers reflected on the lockdowns and anti-pandemic restrictions, and Sonya noted:

The thing is, it was impossible to avoid. Honestly, I didn't want to talk about it, but what was I supposed to do, a travel blogger stuck in a house with flatmates in London? I've seen some people still doing trips, like, moving to Thailand in the middle of the lockdown. And I thought, how is that professional? What kind of message does that send to the followers?

A similar sentiment was echoed by Vanda, a 25-year-old lifestyle influencer based in Prague, with whom I spoke a

few months prior:

You feel sort of responsible because you know you are setting an example for some people. So, you really think about what you post, but at times, I felt like nothing I post will be okay; like if I talk about Covid at all, people will just get mad and argue about it.

I recorded most of my interviews between September 2020 and May 2021, and everyone I talked with sounded almost desperate when I asked how the pandemic had changed their job and posting routine. The topic of Covid-19 was unavoidable, even though everyone was tired of speaking about it. “I don’t think people realised what it meant, though,” Vera, a 28-year-old fashion and lifestyle influencer based in Prague, said: “I know everyone was impacted, but for an influencer, this is a disaster. I thought I could avoid the topic, but I couldn’t—because it just felt wrong,” she adds. Vera’s pre-pandemic content focused on lifestyle, fashion tips, and her speciality: testing and reviewing organic skincare. Her feed consisted of outfit pictures taken at various photogenic locations in Prague, beach photos from her holidays, and pictures of her favourite things: candles, books, cosmetics, and her dog. During the first wave of the pandemic, she joined many other Czech and international influencers in the campaign #StayAtHome; she posted a selfie taken in her car in which she wore a respirator, accompanied by a caption about the importance of kindness and a plea to her followers to take care of themselves and their loved ones (the picture was later deleted from her Instagram feed). When most of the restrictions were lifted throughout the summer of 2020, she resumed her usual content, and her feed was full of vacation pictures, beach selfies, and iced lattes. In September 2020, it became clear that another lockdown was inevitable, and Vera’s content slowly changed. In November 2020, she started to share (always to Instagram stories only, never in feed) different statements criticising the governments and medical experts for using the pandemic as a pretext to control the citizens. She, for example, shared a post from a US-based website, GreenMedInfo.com, run by a prominent conspiracy theorist and QAnon prophet Sayer Ji, that talked about the dangers of anti-Covid-19 vaccines (see also Heřmanová, 2022a).

The reactions of Vera’s followers differed widely, especially at the beginning. However, as the content of Vera’s stories became more and more political, most of the dissenting voices disappeared from the comments, and Vera’s followers mostly echoed her sentiments, praising her for speaking about the situation openly. In a direct message on Instagram in January 2021 she wrote:

People would send me messages saying, I am not here for Covid, I am not here for politics, I want to read cosmetics reviews, what are you doing, you’re dumb. And that really hurt because all I was trying to do was to spread awareness. But later, a lot of follow-

ers also told me that they appreciated my profile as a safe space.

I had asked her about something she posted a day earlier, an anti-vaccination meme in English, shared from a profile of a US-based wellness influencer accompanied by a caption in which she compared the vaccination efforts of the world governments to the totalitarian state that the Czech Republic had experienced before 1989. Throughout the beginning of 2021, Vera continued to share political content in her stories and kept her feed dedicated to lifestyle posts.

Vera’s approach to the situation she found herself in (locked at home and needing to produce lifestyle content, feeling severely limited in her way of life and profession by the anti-pandemic restrictions) is, in many aspects, illustrative of the change in the tone of the discussion about Covid-19 on Czech Instagram. All respondents reflected on the pandemic in different ways, some defensively, like Vera, and some passionately advocating for the restrictions and later for vaccination. As they reflected in the interviews, the pandemic created a significant challenge for them because it blurred the notions between what could be considered a lifestyle and domestic content and political discussion. Everyday decisions (Sonya deciding to accept an invitation to a press trip; Vanda going to a café and not wearing a mask; or Evie, a mother of two and parenting content creator, organising playdates for her kids) suddenly put the influencers in a position where such simple everyday acts needed to be explained, defended, and contextualised within the highly polarised political discussion about Covid-19, the restrictions imposed by the government to curb its spread, and the competence of the politicians in doing so. Evie told me over Zoom in July 2020 that: “You know, this has been my job for the past four years,” and:

I sometimes feel like people don’t really get it, that this is not just about me boasting about my outfits and my kids and...well, my life. I’m not doing this because I am an egomaniac; this is my job. I am paid for promoting content; I have a community of people with whom I talk almost every day. So, what was I supposed to do? Stop posting?

We were talking about a recent article in a Czech tabloid media that accused influencers of spreading misinformation and using the pandemic to gain more followers by sharing sensational news. “This is actually hurtful,” Evie sighed. “And they are the worst—tabloids—like, accusing someone of spreading sensational news, are you kidding me? We had to talk about the pandemic! Talking with people on Insta is our job,” she shook her head, visibly frustrated. Evie used to work in publishing before having kids and then focusing full time on her Instagram, and she thus felt compelled to comment on the article publicly. She shared a screenshot from her stories as an example of this, in which she had pleaded with her

followers not to be manipulated by the media. When I talked to her again about a year later, this time face to face, at a playground near her house, with her children playing nearby, she reflected on the episode:

I am now actually convinced that it was my duty to talk about Covid with my followers. I am not a political person, but this has impacted all of us; I have a community and feel a responsibility towards them. If you have a platform, you have a responsibility. So it was my duty to share the information that I had and to try to have a balanced discussion.

Similar sentiments were echoed in all the interviews. The influencers felt that it would be irresponsible for them to avoid the topic of the pandemic completely, not only because they felt personally impacted by it but also because they didn't want to seem detached and uninformed. And it also couldn't be avoided because the impact was visible in everything they did. As Sonya noted, if you decided to do something like travel somewhere, you would, pre-pandemic, simply do it because it was your life and job, but now you had to defend these decisions. The often-defensive stance the influencers felt compelled to take thus shifted them towards the territory of political discussion, which many of them had never engaged with on their profiles before. Within this process, which I call "politicisation of the domestic," the domestic, lifestyle, and aspirational Instagram content upon which the influencer relies in their everyday job, became politically loaded. Vanda had never previously expressed any interest in political discussion, but when faced with the challenge of the pandemic, she felt that her authority as an influencer enabled her to be part of the discussion and also to include her followers to participate in it. Similarly, Evie felt compelled to use her voice and authority because the unprecedented situation required her to do so.

A great deal of scholarly research attention has been addressed to the spread of populist narratives, including conspiracies and disinformation, on digital communication platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Instagram has, until recently, been relatively absent from these debates. In the public imagination, Instagram tends to be perceived as a female-dominated space for aspirational lifestyle content where politics is intentionally overlooked, despite the fact that evidence shows Instagram has been used for spreading disinformation since at least the 2016 US presidential election, to mention just one example (Howard et al., 2018). The gendered character of influencers' work on social media (Duffy, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2019) often leads to the assumption that politics, seen by some researchers as a male domain, is excluded from the influencer communities on Instagram. Within this context, the process of politicisation of the domestic is interesting because the politicisation happens on the same platform, not via a move to another. The politicisation of the domes-

tic happens on Instagram precisely because Instagram is perceived—by the influencers themselves as well as by their audiences—as an apolitical platform. The penetration of political topics into spaces perceived and designed as domestic was previously observed by scholars who study the far-right and alt-right political movements. In her study of the US alt-right movement, Stern (2020) noted that social media offered women in this fringe political group an unprecedented tool of political expression because it enabled them to weaponise the fact that they were not political in the traditional sense (participating in meetings, applying for leadership roles, writing essays in mainstream media) and make it into a political statement in itself. According to Stern, via social media, women's political communication became political not because they had left the kitchen but because they had turned the kitchen into a political arena (Stern, 2020, p. 3). In the case of Czech Instagram influencers, however, this process occurred without reference to any particular political movement or party, and none of my participants ever openly discussed their adherence to any political group. The Covid-19 pandemic, in this case, served as a sort of catalyst for turning everyday domestic issues into political ones.

It is also important to note that the process of politicisation of the domestic is significantly gendered. I have elsewhere analysed the Instagram communities of female influencers as "third spaces" (Heřmanová, 2022a) because they are seen as neutral and safe and, by design, apolitical spaces where political talk happens. A significant body of research has shown that global digital spaces for political discussion tend to be male-coded, with women being actively discouraged from participating (Polletta & Chen, 2014). Vera's mention of the need to create a "safe space" for her followers can be interpreted within this context. Vera admits that she wouldn't feel safe discussing the anti-pandemic restrictions anywhere other than her personal profile or on the profiles of other female influencers she personally knows because it is such a heavily loaded and polarising topic. On her own profile, she feels safe within the community of her followers, and she is able to maintain it as "a safe place for everyone, where different opinions are respected." Via the politicisation of the domestic, lifestyle influencers' profiles on Instagram were successfully turned into spaces for political discussion, offering a way to engage in a political debate that feels non-threatening to the female participants.

3. Do Your Research: The Narrative of Covid-19 as an Orchestrated Political Event

As mentioned above, the process of politicisation of the domestic is highly gendered. The notion of womanhood plays a prominent role in the proliferation of Covid-19-related narratives in the lifestyle communities on Instagram, as the example of a prominent Czech influencer, Hana, shows. Hana is a divorced mother of three

home-schooled children, a former model and philanthropist, and one of the most prominent Czech “spiritual influencers” (Heřmanová, 2022a, 2022b). She rarely works on brand partnerships and instead uses her profile to promote her retreats and webinars about sacred femininity and what she calls “sisterhood” (Heřmanová, 2022b). Unlike Vera or Evie, Hana was sceptical about the pandemic from the beginning and openly criticised the restrictions as not respecting individual freedoms. Hana’s position within the influencer community partly overlaps with what Baker and Rojek (2020) call “lifestyle gurus”: influencers who “employ a mixture of selective scientific knowledge, folk tradition, and personal experience to offer alternative advice and guidance on medical, psychological, and social problems afflicting others” (p. 10). From this point of view, Hana offered psycho-spiritual guidance to her followers throughout the pandemic, often talking about healing and manifesting a better world. She refrained from openly commenting on any specific political events until August 2021, when she posted a picture of herself holding a big golden cup, wearing a flowy white dress, and accompanied it with the caption comparing the lockdown restrictions and Covid-19-certificates mandate to both the holocaust and the censorship and totalitarian practices of the Czechoslovak communist government before 1989 (Heřmanová, 2022b).

Hana’s narrative about Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event was shared, liked, and interacted with by several of my research participants. She continued to defend it and support her argument with various snippets of information from different websites and sources, many in English and disconnected from the Czech context she was talking about. Within the narrative, the restrictions introduced by the Czech government are explained primarily as a tool to control people and curb their freedom. It posits the people, who are being controlled, against the establishment, and the government, who use the pandemic as a pretext to introduce restrictive measures and limit civic freedoms such as the freedom to travel and to gather in groups. In this way, the narrative presents the pandemic as a political event—a battle between the good people and the evil government—rather than a multi-layered phenomenon that has, beyond its political level, many aspects which are beyond the control of either the politicians or the people. Hana and many other influencers have adopted a narrative originally spread by fringe populist figures and politicians such as the above-mentioned prominent conspiracy theorist Lubomír Volný. While Volný was, as of August 2021, banned from all mainstream media platforms in the Czech Republic and interacted with his audience mainly on Telegram, which could be in the Czech context labelled as a “dark platform” (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021), Hana’s profile and community, at least from the outside, still looked like an apolitical space dominated by discussion about spirituality, womanhood, and alternative healing practices.

The narrative of Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event became dominant over time in the content posted not by Hana, but also by Vanda, who, as mentioned, had previously never engaged in any type of political discussion. Maja, a yoga teacher and wellness influencer who lives in the Czech countryside, told me that when she was following Hana’s posts and many other similar profiles, she couldn’t get rid of the impression that:

This is not random, you know? If you do the research, if you are trying to be informed, then these parallels are pretty clear; it’s history repeating itself. It’s important that as many people as possible open their eyes to this reality.

The notion of “doing your own research” was often mentioned in the context of the above-mentioned narrative. “It’s not something the Czech TV [the public broadcaster] would air on the evening news, isn’t it,” Maja wrote me in a direct message on Instagram. A while later she added:

You have to be active to get to the truth. Or at least to the facts. Like, I can acknowledge that we might have different truths; I know people live in different realities. But the facts are there if you look for them.

Vanda echoed a similar sentiment when we spoke in September 2020:

In a way, I have time to do this; it actually makes sense. I spend time online, and I follow all these people because I need [inspiration] for my own content. So I can do the research, and I can share what I know.

Tessa, an entrepreneur and mother from a mid-sized Czech town, mentions that Vanda’s posts had also encouraged her to share similar messages with her followers. She had been following many US-based influencers and regularly interacted with other mothers in Facebook groups. Tessa is from Slovakia, and although she has been living in the Czech Republic for more than 15 years, she participates in Slovak parenting groups: “That’s mostly where I would find links and such,” she said in our online interview. She continued:

I think it’s pretty clear that in a case like this, you cannot simply rely on the mainstream media. These are controlled by the politicians, and obviously, it is not in their interest to tell us the whole story; they will only talk about what they want you to know. I don’t think the mainstream media is lying, intentionally. They are just part of the system. Look, I’m a mother, first and foremost. So if there’s this law that says you have to vaccinate your child, then, of course, I would try to get all different experiences; of course, I would not just rely on what they tell me on TV. Every mother would do that. And every mother needed to do that, because there was suddenly this pressure, like they

won't take your child into the kindergarten if you don't give them the jab?

Tessa's emphasis on "every mother" is representative of the point my other informants were also making—that this is not a political decision that is distant from you, this impacts you and your children, and therefore, you have a duty to talk about it. Tessa told me later in the interview that because she posted a lot of parenting content, people would ask her about the vaccination even if she tried to avoid the issue.

Tessa became more invested in the discussion around Covid-19 restrictions later in 2021 because that was when the possible vaccination mandate was introduced by Czech politicians. She often shared screenshots from various Czech media to her Instagram stories and commented on them. Her message was coherent: this is a way for them to control you and your children, don't be manipulated; educate yourself. In July 2021, she posted screenshots of a conversation she had had with one of her followers who had asked her who "they" were: "They are the people who profit from this. The pharma companies who will make millions out of you and your children, and the politicians whom these companies corrupt," Tessa wrote and added a link to the film *Plandemic*, a 2020 documentary about the pandemic by US director Mikki Willis. When I asked her about it later in a message, she replied:

Yeah, I mean, the film is a bit crazy. But I still think it offers an important perspective. It shows who the powerful players are in this: the big pharma and the politicians; I think it sheds some light on this issue of manipulation, if you take it with a grain of salt.

While Hana sometimes discussed the pandemic and its political implications and the tools of control it offers to the politicians in livestreams or in short videos; her overall aesthetic stayed the same—light, feminine, filled with pictures of beaches, flowers, and flowy dresses. Similar tactics were adopted by Maja, while Tessa and Vanda restricted the political content to Instagram stories exclusively, and their feed thus displayed an unchanged mix of aspirational, domestic, and lifestyle content (kids, food, yoga sessions, branded posts with skincare products). Argentino (2021) observed a similar adaptation of conspiracy content within the US QAnon movement adjacent to Instagram profiles. He notes that the so-called "pastel QAnon" refers "to the unique aesthetic and branding these influencers provided to their pages and, in turn, QAnon by using social media templates." In many cases, Hana, for example, would share a meme or website screenshot from a US-based influencer, such as the pastel QAnon influencers, and adapt it to the Czech audience by framing it as a symbolic reference to the totalitarian past of the Czech Republic, referring to communist practices. The hashtag "do your research" (often used by QAnon proponents) is within this frame repur-

posed as a plea to remember the past and to see that history is repeating itself with the rise of another authoritarian regime similar to that which existed before the 1989 Velvet Revolution. In this way, using the techniques of pastel QAnon and adapting them with local symbolic references to the past, the Czech influencers proliferated content from fringe platforms such as Telegram within mainstream, lifestyle, and domestic spaces, successfully bridging the gap between mainstream and fringe content.

4. Discussion: Political Authority and Gendered Populism on Instagram

The narrative explaining Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event gained popularity among Czech Instagram influencers for several interconnected reasons.

Firstly, the pandemic created a catalyst for connecting the political and domestic content because it represented an event that significantly impacted everyday life and, most visibly, the areas of everyday life usually managed by women—grocery shopping, food consumption, family visits, children's free time and, perhaps most importantly, decisions related to health. As mentioned above, the process of politicisation of the domestic is significantly gendered because these areas and decisions were previously seen as lifestyle choices made by women and unrelated to domestic or international politics. The Covid-19 pandemic created the need for female influencers to frame these decisions as part of the highly polarised political discussion about anti-pandemic restrictions introduced by the government and later also the discussion about vaccination against Covid-19. As Vanda noted in one of our chats, this need to defend certain decisions could also be interpreted as an opportunity: "I would never go on Twitter to argue with people there. But this is my community here, and I feel like I can finally talk about issues that matter." The issue of vaccination introduced more political content into the Instagram influencers' communities within the second year of the pandemic (in 2021) because it presented the "ideal" combination of a highly feminised area (family health) with a highly politicised discussion. As Tessa notes:

My husband is not the one who will take kids to the doctor. In fact, he won't even take himself; I know when his appointments are because I'm at home with our son, so I keep track of these things, and I guess that's normal in most families.

Tessa thus felt that she could insert her authority—and that it was also her duty to educate herself about the truth behind the calls to vaccinate everyone, including children. In Hana's and Maja's interpretation, the pressure to get vaccinated was always part of the elite's wider plan to control women's bodies. Hana as a former model, and Maja as a yoga teacher, were both always interested in the issue of control over one's own body, and they

both felt that the pandemic was a perfect tool of control (see also Heřmanová, 2022a). While the concrete interpretations of the narrative of Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event differ, the question of who has control was central for my informants. They all felt that by talking about it and engaging their audiences, they were the ones in control of what was happening to them, their bodies, their families, and their children.

Secondly, closely related to the issue of control (over both bodies and families, as well as the narrative) is the discussion about authority: who has it, who doesn't, and why. When Hana talked about vaccination with her followers in a live stream in September 2021, she often referenced "female intuition" and "native knowledge" of the human body. These concepts are prevalent within the spiritual influencer communities (Heřmanová, 2022b). However, the same discursive practices were adopted by people who do not see themselves as part of the spiritual community, such as Tessa. In the same reply to her follower about the "us" vs "them" narrative, where she recommended the *Plandemic* documentary, she also spoke about the importance of trusting one's own body and one's intuition. The theme of intuition was central to all my informants' messaging about Covid-19, as it is often seen in contrast with expert knowledge (produced by the ominous "them": doctors, pharmaceutical specialists, etc.). When Maja talked about the fact that "we all have different truths," she also talked about intuition:

There are no guidelines for this; we all live in the reality we manifest for ourselves, so you just have to trust your gut. No one else will ever walk in your shoes. I mean, I don't want to dismiss education and, like, facts and scientific methods, but I think they are biased; these people are paid by someone for their research and data. It's not necessarily related to what people really live through, in my opinion.

Vanda expressed a similar sentiment:

I know my own body. I take care of it. And I just don't feel comfortable when someone tells me what this body can't and can do. We are not all the same and if you don't respect your own feelings, your own body, and dismiss it all because the doctor tells you something...that's not the way to go for me.

In this way, the influencers position themselves as authorities who represent the voice of their (predominantly female) communities. This representation is often seen in direct opposition to the position of politicians, media, and experts, including health professionals. Baker and Walsh (2022) analysed how influencers who openly campaign against vaccination and engage in the proliferation of anti-vaccination conspiracies used the notion of "mother's intuition" to support their claims. In her previous work on "lifestyle gurus" (Baker & Rojek, 2020),

Baker also emphasises the notion of intuition as a crucial feature of the lifestyle gurus' authorities. By adopting and proliferating the narrative that explains Covid-19 as a deliberate action of the elites targeting the common people, the influencers also situate themselves as representatives of the same common people, which gives them authority to speak up—and they support their authority by referencing female intuition as something that is not available to experts detached from the everyday reality. This is also in line with the research on how influencers construct their authority online—via strategic authenticity, intimacy, and relatability (Abidin, 2017, 2018). Lewis (2018) analyses how these tactics are being explored by what she calls "alternative political influencers" on the US alt-right scene and shows that the focus on authenticity, personal stories, and knowledge gained via practical, everyday experiences is often weaponised by alternative influencers to spread extreme and violent political messages. In their analysis of the communicative practices of QAnon movement members on 8chan, Marwick and Partin (2022) coin the term "populist expertise: the rejection of legacy media accounts, scientific consensus, or elite knowledge in favour of a body of 'home-grown' forms of expertise and meaning-making generated by those who may feel disenfranchised from mainstream political participation" (p. 3). Similarly, the Czech influencers represented in this article emphasised intuition, everyday experiences, embodied knowledge, and maternal (or generally female) instincts to help them build their own populist, alternative, intuitive expertise and, thus, authority within the space of their communities on Instagram.

Thirdly, while there are many similarities between the practices of English-speaking influencers and the Czech ones, it is important to contextualise the populist narrative of Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event within the local political context. The influencers often referenced the authoritarian communist regime of former Czechoslovakia as a context and framework for understanding current political events. Hana referenced the practices of the communist secret police in her post from August 2021, in which she called on her followers to be brave and not submit to totalitarian practices (in this case, the obligation to have a vaccination certificate to visit certain public spaces). Vera often used similar phrasing when she commented on concurrent political debates in her stories. She often compared the then minister of health and minister of interior to the communist functionaries, who were—in her interpretation—also just puppets of a more powerful elite (then in Moscow; today in the WHO headquarters or the EU capital, Brussels). In one instance, Vera posted an anti-vaccination video featuring the QAnon conspiracy theorist Sayer Ji (she reposted it from the account of Canadian model and actress Shalom Harlow) and added a comment: "We have been through this. We cannot let it happen again" and added a Czech flag and a picture of Václav Havel, the first democratic Czech president and

symbol of anti-communist resistance. While this anecdote presents a textbook example of a context collapse, it also illustrates that local politics, symbolic references to the past and recontextualisation of various narratives from English-speaking online spaces within the Czech reference framework reinforced the populist narrative about Covid-19 within the Czech-speaking online spaces.

These three aspects, the gendered processes of politicisation of the domestic; the creation of authority within these newly politicised spaces; and the localisation of the narratives within the Czech, post-socialist context via symbolic references to the past, together create a powerful incentive for the proliferation of populist narratives and enable the populist content to cross from fringe to mainstream spaces.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how a populist narrative that explains Covid-19 as a political event orchestrated by the elites to curb the freedoms of the people proliferated among female Instagram influencers on Czech Instagram. Based on long-term digital ethnography among Czech influencers, interviews, and ethnographic content analysis, the article presents the concept of the politicisation of the domestic as an analytical tool that explains the proliferation of political content in previously apolitical Instagram communities. As the pandemic blurred the boundaries of domestic and political content on Instagram, Czech influencers adapted narratives about Covid-19 being an orchestrated political event from fringe populist political figures to fit their lifestyle and domestic aesthetics and used the opportunity to situate themselves as political authorities. Via the process of politicisation of the domestic, populist narratives were successfully brought from fringe to mainstream online media spaces.

The findings contribute to the current body of research on how populist narratives, disinformation and conspiracies proliferate on digital communication platforms (Cobbe, 2020; Forberg, 2021; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Schia & Gjesvik, 2020; Zeng & Schäfer, 2021) and the role that influencers as communicative actors within the wider media ecosystem play in the process (Lewis, 2018; Maly, 2020). The analysis also attempts to provide a new context by focusing on the under-researched aspects of online populism: the gender dimension and the interaction of local contexts on global platforms. As Bracewell (2021) notes, the research on populism historically tended to overlook the gender dimension, and if it was employed, it was mostly via a focus on the construction of masculinities and male political power. The role of women in populist political movements has been recently explored within the context of the US (or generally English-speaking) alt-right and far-right movements (Mattheis, 2018; Stern, 2020). The presented analysis builds on this scholarship as well as on the notion of alternative political influencers (Lewis, 2018) and alter-

native health influencers (Baker, 2022) in the presentation of the concept of the politicisation of the domestic. However, it focuses on the politicisation of spaces that were previously seen as apolitical (and are often still perceived as apolitical by both the influencers and their audiences). I argue that the Covid-19 pandemic created both the need and the opportunity to create populist expertise among the influencers while at the same time adhering to the aspirational, lifestyle aesthetics and discursive practices of Instagram as a platform. In this way, the influencers positioned themselves as alternative authorities in opposition to the mainstream experts.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Marie Heřmanová holds a PhD in social anthropology from Charles University in Prague. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, and a lecturer at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. Her research focuses on internet communities, influencer cultures, authenticity on social media, and gender politics of hate speech and online disinformation.