

Online Campaigning for All? Mapping the Digital Infrastructure of the Czech Party System During the 2025 Electoral Campaign

Alberto Lioy, Petra Vodová¹

Abstract

This innovative article maps the digital infrastructure of the nine main parties in the Czech party system – *ODS*, *KDU-ČSL*, *TOP09* (all part of *SPOLU*), *ANO*, *STAN*, *Pirates*, *SPD*, *Motorists* and *Stáčílo!* – in the month preceding the 2025 general election. By digital infrastructure we mean their formalized online presence over a range of online platforms, websites, and social media portals. Methodologically, this article performs qualitative coding for eight analytical categories, looking at these parties not only through their main pages, but also through the digital platforms of their best-known politicians and a sample of local/regional branches. By performing this mapping, we reconstructed the main features in their political communication and messaging towards the electorate at large. What the data reveals is the degree of personalism, professionalism, negative messaging, and issues of focus of the different parties and their candidates. Coming now to the research question, we wanted to investigate the degree of variation between parties in the level of development of their digital infrastructure and in their style of ‘platform politics’ and see if we could find patterns between parties according to their characteristics. To do so, we formulated a series of clear hypotheses expecting the effect of party type, internal centralization, and incumbency on the digital infrastructure of Czech parties. The findings do not fully support our expectations but point to a crisis for some traditional parties in building digital infrastructures, and a partial success for some of the new parties. Overall, this article promises to change our way of thinking about the online presence of Czech political parties.

Keywords: party systems; online campaigning; platform politics; personalism; parliamentary elections

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1. Introduction

The 2025 Czech election has marked a critical juncture in the Czech party system, shifting the equilibria towards a new government coalition. The pre-electoral period was typical, in that parties used all traditional channels, and even worked at new forms of voter contacting, but all parties also extensively used digital tools for targeted campaigns. In particular, the last month of social media campaigning was labeled an ‘avalanche’ (Nejedlý, 2025). Digital infrastructures, through and beyond social media presence, are increasingly important for the daily activities of political parties, and virtually all parties use some kind of platform to survive in the digital age. However, only a little is generally known about the extent to which parties use those tools at the intra-party level, their strategies, and how to explain possible differences.

Our paper breaks new ground by examining for the first time in an academic context the main formations in the Czech party system in their use of online platforms of different kinds. It does so by going under the surface and proposing a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the social media pages of a purposeful selection of party candidates at different levels. This paper comes at a time when the Czech party system is in flux, both online and offline. Even at three decades from independence, Czech politics is not showing any sign of having halted its evolution, and the country’s party system is no exception to the trend (Balík & Hloušek, 2018; Havlík & Voda, 2016; Havlík and Voda, 2018; Věrtěši et al., 2025). At present, we see that old and new parties are reconfiguring their roles among each other and towards the electorate at large, and these political processes involve the digital sphere.

In times where most Czech citizens have online access¹, political parties cannot afford to avoid digitalization, lest they lose relevance among a majority of the public that lives constantly connected through mobile devices (Macková & Štětka, 2016; Macková et al., 2017). The literature connects the expectations of various uses of digital tools of parties to features such as intraparty organization and centralization (Lisi, 2025), party age (Sandri et al., 2025), or the incumbent/opposition position within the party system (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020). Therefore, we formulated expectations about differences between parties’ approaches to their digital infrastructures based on those characteristics.

Our research questions are: what are the main differences in the online presence of Czech political parties? Do variations in party type, intra-party organization, and government/opposition position lead to differences in how parties run their digital infrastructures? The findings create an interesting dialogue with the party digitalization literature. Party age does not predict digital proficiency: only some modern parties have ramified or professionally managed infrastructures, while several established parties ran polished campaigns. Nor do traditional parties necessarily outperform in local and regional digital

presence; here, the Pirates, STAN and TOP 09 fare better than ODS and KDU-ČSL. Crucially, internal party organization is better reflected online: leader-centric parties concentrate more around national-renown figures and higher communicative personalization, whereas the Pirates, STAN, and KDU-ČSL have more spread or open platform politics. Finally, opposition parties generally use more negative messaging, yet two governing parties did as well. On this basis, the article also offers a typological contribution, distinguishing within the Czech party system professional incumbents, open digital or localist parties, traditional parties lagging in their digitalization, and concentrated leader-centric outsiders.

After this short introduction, our article is structured as follows. The second section deals with party digitalization in contemporary politics to introduce the concept of digital infrastructure and formulate the hypotheses for testing. Then a third section describes the Czech party system of the 2025 electoral campaign with special focus on digital infrastructures. The fourth explains the qualitative methodology, then the fifth presents the results, with the help of comprehensive tables aiming for both description and theory-testing. Last, a short conclusion takes stock of the work done, assesses its main limitations, and traces avenues for future research.

2. Literature review and defining digital infrastructures

Over the course of the past three decades the spread of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has gradually become inescapable for political parties within the transition to a hybrid media system, where old media does not disappear but adapts to new technology and is flanked by new media (Chadwick, 2017). This happened through two dynamics. One was characterized by disintermediation, where the internet allowed political parties to go straight to their members and the electorate at large, without having to pass through media brokers, and often using other sorts of intermediaries instead (Gibson, 2020; Dommett et al., 2021b). This has been the adoption of data-driven campaigning, with the possibility to target not only voter groups, but single voters, something which has had profound repercussions over party organization, voter communication and resource generation at all levels (Dommett et al., 2021a; Dommett et al., 2024a).

At the level of party systems, the diffusion of these new technologies proceeded through cycles of equalization and normalization (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016; Potter & Dunaway, 2017; Liroy and Contreras Medrano, 2024). Equalization happens when smaller parties use ICTs to fill the gap with larger political formations, exploiting the lower costs associated with campaigning online, while normalization represents the recovery of big parties, which transfer their organizational advantage to the online sphere of *platform politics* (Liroy, Del Valle,

& Gottlieb 2019). Research on the topic has been largely run on Western European cases, while for Central-Eastern Europe the scholarship is still lagging, with notable exceptions like Hungarian-focused Oross and Tap (2023). In the Czech context, the *Pirate Party* has gained a comparative edge through the promotion of internet-related issues and through a distinctive use of online platforms (Martínek & Malý, 2024; Malý, 2024; Jääsaari & Šárovec, 2021; Voda & Vodová, 2024).

Nowadays, all national political parties in Czechia are active online in some form, yet no closer academic look at their differences has been made. Filling this gap is fundamental for several reasons: (1) to evaluate who is and is not using these tools to their full potential; (2) to test assumptions about the digitalization of traditional and non-traditional parties; (3) to unveil new elements for neglected cases or new formations, and (4) to dispel possible misconceptions and abandon past labels. The pre-electoral period is the most appropriate time for such a study, as the stakes for political communication surge, and all parties seek visibility and use their own channels to attract voters, going above and beyond business-as-usual. Our paper explores this diversity by comparing Czech parties' digital infrastructure.

We define a political party's digital infrastructure as *the platforms, tools, channels, and access points that allow it to function in societies where most people live connected to the internet, with the term digital referring to the software, not the hardware layer*. Recent works in this direction have traced the temporal evolution of the websites of 66 political parties in 16 countries (Dommert et al., 2024b) and covered the use of digital platforms and their affordances by 62 political parties in France, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain (Sandri et al., 2025). Here, to concretely operationalize the study of digital infrastructures, we focused on:

Presence, to assess where the party infrastructure is located, on which platforms and for which members, branches, and organisms.

Strategy, visible through which platform a political party chooses and the different affordances and audiences that it can then reach.

Geographical spread, or whether the party is only present through a national page and the pages of its leaders and MPs or whether local branches and candidates are also online. This neglected aspect matters because a capillary political campaign can shift electoral equilibria (Datts and Schultze, 2022).

Openness, or the extent to which the party uses its digital infrastructure to practice internal democracy. At its two extremes lie a 'networked party' with open participation, against the top-down, closed structures of a 'platform party' (Lioy et al., 2019; Gerbaudo, 2019; Deseriis, 2020). For open social media use we expect at least some genuine engagement, and two-way responsiveness in information flows.

Of course, digital infrastructure is not a technical assemblage of different platforms and channels. Party digitalization has a political and organizational

weight because of the use that members and different centers of power make of the digital infrastructure for purposes such as communication and campaigning (Gibson, 2015; Dommett, 2021b; Correa et al., 2021; Raniolo, Tarditi, & Vittori, 2021). Digitalization is not deterministic in its impact, and can facilitate participation or help the work of a personalistic leader (Deseriis, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2019, 2021). We therefore agree with the approach adopted by Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016), who see digital campaign practices as emerging from the interaction between the digital tools, their use and party organization. In other words, we distinguish between the digital infrastructure itself and the outputs that are generated by parties through it, which can be seen through the degree of personalism, professionalism, tone of messaging, and issues of focus (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Bøggild and Pedersen, 2018; Dommett, 2021a; Basu, 2020; Hansen & Pedersen, 2008; Walter et al., 2014). To assess personalism, one can look at whether politicians act and speak as if they were *de facto* independent from their own political party (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Liroy, 2023). Then, professionalism has been shown to be a salient element for this field, due to the current prominence of visual political communication. Here, professionalism refers to a party's level of care and production in their content, ranging from amateurish, anti-professional home-style videos and photography to highly curated television-like campaign advertising materials (Baldwin-Filippi, 2019; Farkas, 2023). Given how most parties today generally have a professional core around their leaders, we expect the real differentiation to come from the levels of coordination of their social media communication across different profiles and platforms, and the presence or absence of professional materials in the pages of less important politicians or regional/local branches. The tone of the party's messaging ranges from mostly promoting their own agenda, to routinely targeting their adversaries in various forms of negative advertising (Holtz-Bacha & Johansson, 2022). This is also not to be confused with the overall professionalization of party campaigns, which is a much broader topic, going well beyond digital infrastructures (see Ostrá, 2021, for a roadmap). Finally, examining online infrastructures informs us about the range and salience of issues that they explore, something often related to party size (Basu, 2020).

3. Hypotheses connected to the intra-party functioning and government position

Thinking about how party characteristics impact their digital infrastructures, we shall look deeper into the discussion about the inclusion of ICTs within intra-party organizations, which differentiates between non-intense and intense reforms. The non-intense reforms are connected to general inclusion of digitalization to party communication and campaigns, such as digital tools for spreading information,

attracting new members, and carrying out electoral campaigns (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020). This should affect electoral campaigns, which may be focused more on decentralized and grassroots forms (Dommett et al., 2020; Gibson, 2015). On the other hand, there is the expectation that inclusion of ICTs to intra-party functioning will bring party members empowerment and inclusion to intra-party decision-making processes, and will help radical structural changes for aggregation, integration and participation functions. However, centralized intra-party organizations may be a strong inhibiting factor for any of those changes (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020). As such, the factors in our analysis may be connected to two distinct patterns of digitalization. Non-intense changes, which apply to all parties, are in our work connected to decentralization and digital professionalization. More intense changes, affecting intra-party functioning and party leadership, map onto digital personalism and range of issues presented.

Following the adoption of digital tools by almost all parties, the question is, to what extent will parties adopt them. We will firstly make our arguments connected to the non-intense changes, and then to the intense, more disruptive changes, which are – as we argue – highly dependent on party original internal organization. In the following section, we argue that the party's age and intra-party power relations, and the government-opposition status, may impact our criteria on the features of digitalization. Of course, age is not an absolute quantity, but has a relative weight in party systems where the older parties are of different ages. This applies to Czech Republic, as to any other country in the world.

The Czech party system sees internal variation from both the developmental and the organizational perspective and is still open to new parties. Generally, we can differentiate between traditional and new parties. Today's parties come from three separate generations, with the first two composing the traditional party type. The traditional category includes institutionalized parties from the time of mass politics, with higher membership figures, including catch-all parties. For the first generation, the Christian democrats (*KDU-ČSL*) and Communists (*KSČM*) are the surviving mass parties from early XX Century, and have strong organizational capacity, a ramified local structure, and party membership. For the 2025 election, the *KSČM* rebranded as *Stačilo!*, with electoral lists that also included some small extreme left parties, which motivates its inclusion among the traditional parties. The so-called second-generation parties built their organizations after 1990 and fit the catch-all party type like *Civic Democrats (ODS)* and *Social Democrats (SOCDEM)* (Kopeček & Svačinová, 2016).² Those parties fit the traditional category and have standard, non-personalist party leadership.

Finally, the third-generation parties – the 'new' ones in our classification – were founded later: 2004 in case of *Mayors and Independents (STAN)*, 2009 for *TOP09* and *Pirates*, 2011 for *ANO*, 2016 for *SPD*, 2022 for *Motorists (AUTO)*. Here, we can differentiate between standard and leader-centric parties. *TOP09* is characterized as a modern cadre party (Grabow, 2001; Kopeček & Svačinová,

2016), with limited membership, party elite overlapping with parliamentary representation, but standard roles for party members and elites. The *Mayors and Independents* (STAN) are a decentralized party that empowers its local branches (Žmolík, 2018). In contrast, *Pirates* belong to a special type, as a ‘networked digital party’ (Martínek & Malý, 2024; Voda & Vodová, 2024). This is a highly digitalized and decentralized party type, allowing party members to broadly participate in agenda setting, deliberation and voting, and leadership positions emerging from the network (Deseriis, 2020). On the other side, both ANO and SPD function as entrepreneurial parties (Hloušek, Kopeček, & Vodová, 2020), with ANO carrying recognizable features of a business-firm party with financing from a strong, internally powerful party leader, his managers as party cadres, and a limited role for party members (Kopeček, 2016).

3.1 Non-intense changes – party age as an important factor

Thinking about ICTs’ adoption, Raniolo et al. (2021) stressed higher intensity or radicality is likelier for parties ‘born in last decades’ which lack organizational and communicative structures but can use the Internet to go directly to the public (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020). These newer parties can invest in ‘disruptive innovations’, i.e. ‘intense and radical changes of parties’ structural architectures, leading to organizational coordination, and adding to aggregation, integration, and new participatory channels. Conversely, internal change is costly for traditional parties, which implement ‘sustainable innovations’, i.e., small changes focused on disseminating information, increasing membership, or campaigning (Raniolo et al., 2021).

Regarding the spread of information, digital tools allow parties to inhabit the current media environment. The adaptation of parties to the digital transformation of public arena is necessary, because parties can no longer rely on traditional media for their public messaging (Jungherr, 2023). As such, parties now cultivate new and alternative media and have a varied online presence, with party type influencing parties’ ability to accommodate digital reality. Traditional parties should have established ways of communication channels for their supporters, as well as the relations towards traditional mass media. New parties need to be creative in attracting voter interest, because of lower membership size, and scarce resources and thus look for other ways. Parties ‘born in last decades’ also likely lack a media relationship, so they may be forced to use the Internet to go directly to the public (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020, p. 238). Finally, the new parties may enjoy the advantage of having ‘digital’ in their DNA, applying new technologies, or stressing them when campaigning. Conversely, old parties must firstly ‘re-invent themselves without losing their character and identity’. Old parties likely have

large and heterogeneous membership bases and might be expected to use more established communication channels. Thus, the adoption of digital infrastructures may be slower and harder (Correa et al., 2021).

As Jungherr (2016) showed for Germany, these differences have been empirically validated. In Germany, new and small parties experiment with digital campaigning (such as the *Greens*) or even depend on digital infrastructure when making their political campaign (such as *AfD*, or the *Pirates*). Compared to them, mainstream parties, such as *CDU* or *SPD* already have their established campaigning and mobilizing mechanisms, with less pressure to develop new ones. Figeac et al. (2025) found that digital parties extensively use social media to mobilize their activist base, relying strongly on Internet-based mobilization. As such, new parties may be expected to develop professional campaigns and have a higher online presence, such as their way of competing with traditional parties, which likely have more diverse ways of attracting electorates. However, traditional parties with a larger electorate may use digital tools to strengthen some regional presence, activating existing local branches. The newer parties usually lack this advantage, and thus, their presence at regional and local levels will be smaller.

Our expectations carry over to Czechia: traditional parties, with higher membership and established local networks, have more occasions to attract voters beyond digital infrastructure. Newer parties with few members have higher incentives to build a digital infrastructure to attract voters, but also to involve people more into their decision-making, and be an equalizing force within the party system. However, the geographical spread of their digital infrastructure may be limited by their lack of local branches offline. Still, the internet has allowed even smaller, personalistic formations like the *Motorists* to compete nationally and obtain unthinkable electoral results with the help of internet TV (Vox TV) that enabled them to present the opinions of the party leader Filip Turek without any criticism or moderation (Zelenka, 2025) Finally, ‘digital parties’ have a specific behavior (Gerbaudo, 2021). Firstly, they likely attract young members, who are open to new communication tools, and may tend to higher decentralization and smaller organizational hierarchy (Magin et al. 2017).

H1a: New parties (*ANO, SPD, AUTO, TOP09, Pirates, STAN*) have a more professional online presence, compared to traditional parties (*ODS, KDU, Stačilo!*)

H1b: New parties (*ANO, SPD, AUTO, TOP09, Pirates, STAN*) have a more open online presence, compared to traditional parties (*ODS, KDU, Stačilo!*)

H1c: New parties (*ANO, SPD, AUTO, TOP09, Pirates, STAN*) have a lower presence at regional and local levels, compared to traditional parties (*ODS, KDU, Stačilo!*)

3.2 Personalism, issue focus and centralization of power

Party digitalization is often connected to the vision of new ICTs included to the intra-party decision making processes, empowering party members, and reducing the role of party elites. These changes are defined as rather intense, and not all parties are willing to adopt them, even when digitalizing other aspects. The internal power relations of parties can dictate how they use their digital infrastructures, determining factors like issue variance and communicative freedom. Digitalization may serve a spectrum of party goals, from empowerment of party members and supporters, to erosion of intra-party democracy, weakening of middle-level elites vis-à-vis party leaders and elites, and even to leader-control over the party (Correa et al., 2021; Deseriis, 2020, Gerbaudo, 2019, 2021). Party leaders who centralize power usually enjoy charismatic legitimacy and gain power over other intra-party bodies, using digital infrastructure to strengthen their personal position. As Raniolo et al. (2021: 185) argue, leader-centric parties often use new ICTs to *‘to reduc[e] the competencies of the executive and collegial party bodies, guaranteeing the leader direct access to the electorate’*. Gibson (2015) even argues that party elites may use ICTs to increase the divide between the passive members and hyper-activist elites.

How free party members and candidates are in electoral campaigns may depend upon intra-party organization. Personalism is likely possible only for party elites, but not for candidates who must strictly toe the party line (Bøggild & Pedersen, 2018). Following this argument, we expect that the digital infrastructure of centralized parties will focus on party leadership, with professionalized presentation of party elite, declining among other party members and branches, and a low range of issues covered (Metz et al., 2020). In Czechia, ANO and SPD notoriously have centralized power structures (Hloušek et al., 2020; Kopeček, 2016). Furthermore, even if the internal functioning of the *Motorists* is still fluid, there was a strong businessmen role in their foundation (Neumannová et al., 2025; Novotný & Ryšavá, 2026). Regarding *Stačilo!*, while belonging to the traditional type, the party selected a new secretary and only 10 formal members for the 2025 parliamentary elections, attempting not only to rebrand the Communists, but also to center its organization around Konečná's personal leadership (Cirhan & Collini, 2025). As such, we considered *Stačilo!* as a traditional, but personalist party. Conversely, the *Pirates* empower their own members and reduce their leaders' power. Somewhere in between are the more standard structures of ODS, KDU, TOP09, STAN. The question regarding online personalism is less trivial than it may seem, because we would like to check whether the internet makes even party elites of non-leader-centric parties become the digital focus. At any rate, we expect:

H2a: Parties enabling higher membership freedom (*ODS, KDU, TOP09, Pirates, STAN*) have lower personalism compared to leader-centric parties (*ANO, SPD, Motorists, Stačilo!*).

H2b: Parties enabling higher membership freedom (*ODS, KDU, TOP09, Pirates, STAN*) have a higher variability of issue focus compared to leader-centric parties (*ANO, SPD, Motorists, Stačilo!*).

3.3 Government and opposition

Moving on, government and opposition status may impact parties behaving differently in their digital presence. Raniolo et al. (2021) examined the government-opposition divide, arguing that the government parties may not invest as much in the new ICTs. The argument is similar, such as for new-traditional party divide: government parties have a more diverse way of how to communicate their message to voters. Government parties enjoy incumbency advantages, can emphasize policy and promote themselves through their government position. Because of their government status, they need to communicate rather positively, and with respect to reporting the policies they delivered. As the opposition parties lack policy outcomes or issue competence, they need to explain to voters why the government parties do not deserve to govern anymore, and why the opposition parties should replace them (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008; Dolezal et al., 2018). Claiming poor incumbent performance is thus a natural strategy, using posts to evoke negative emotions and drama to raise user engagement (Klinger et al., 2024), a trend that holds in multiparty systems (Walter et al., 2014). For the Czech parties' use of their digital infrastructures, this becomes:

H3: Opposition parties (*ANO, Pirates, SPD, Motorists, Stačilo!*) use more negative messaging compared to government parties (*ODS, TOP 09, KDU, STAN*).

Based on these characteristics, we can make four types of Czech political parties (see in Table 1 below), crossing the categories related to leader-centrism and party age, and the H1 and H2 hypothesis sets.

Table 1:
Structuring the first two hypothesis sets

parties	standard	leader-centric
traditional	less professional (H1a), smaller presence (H1b), more spread (H1c), less personalized communication (H2a), more issues (H2b)	less professional (H1a), smaller presence (H1b), more spread (H1c), more personalized communication (H2a), fewer issues (H2b)
	ODS, KDU-ČSL	Stačilo!
new	more professional (H1a), broader presence (H1b), less spread (H1c), less personalized communication (H2a), more issues (H2b)	more professional (H1a), broader presence (H1b), less spread (H1c), more personalized communication (H2a), fewer issues (H2b)
	TOP 09, STAN, Pirates	ANO, SPD, AUTO

Source: The author.

4. Digital infrastructures in the context of the 2025 Czech election

The current Czech party system is highly fragmented, with eight parties winning seats in the 2025 election, a ninth barely missing the 5% threshold. Academic literature helps us reconstruct the development of their online presence, even if most works are focused on specific parties. In fact, the *Czech Pirate Party* has been one of the best-known cases of a digital party, transcending its Czech context (Folvarčn ý & Kope ek, 2025). Early evidence of online participation dispelled the myth that Czechs only used the internet as a performative tool, and showed that digital activity already translated into political participation (Maz k & Št tka, 2016), and the mobilizing character of the *Facebook* presence of Czech parties (Št tka et al., 2019). Internet platforms were also studied to trace the rise of Czech populism, as seen with *SPD* in the 2021 elections (Charv tov   & Niklesov  , 2024). Lamentably, the lonely academic account of the Czech party system covered the websites and social media of central party organizations, therefore only a fraction of digital infrastructure (Šarovec, 2024). Our study aims to fill this gap and provide a richer characterization.

Table 2 summarizes the following characteristics of the nine main parties that competed in the 2025 Czech elections: (a) parliamentary seats compared to four years prior, (b) main ideological focus, (c) the year of foundation, (d) their number of formally registered members in 2023 (we preferred a consistent measurement over figures for different years, except for *Motorists*); (e) the average followers across the pages of the central organization and all politicians that

we followed (excluding regional/local pages), (f) the page that has the highest number of followers within their digital infrastructure, (g) a simple index of concentration – as an average of the four platforms – calculated by dividing the standard deviation of the number of followers by its mean; (h) a quick evaluation of their local presence across the four platforms; and (i) a short description of the main party website. They are discussed in Table 2 following column (e), roughly measuring their online popularity.

Table 2:
Digital infrastructures and stylized facts for the nine parties

political party	seats 2021 seats 2025	year founded	members (2023)	average followers	top page	concentration	local presence	website
ANO	72 76 (+4)	2012	2,574	34,294 high (1)	Babiš FB 550,000	2.59 uneven	Facebook only	news feed with menus
ODS	34 27 (-7)	1991	12,000	19,945 medium (5)	Fiala X 373,000	1.57 balanced	low, FB only	media outlets, social media, map at bottom
KDU-ČSL	23 16 (-7)	1919	19,000	7,751 low (9)	Jurečka X 62,000	1.69 balanced	Facebook only	minimal, text based
TOP 09	14 9 (-5)	2009	2,497	15,532 medium (6)	Pekarová X 189,000	1.78 balanced	Facebook, Instagram, X	short, image-based, media outlet
SPD	20 10 (-10)	2015	11,000	24,423 high (2)	Okamura FB 475,000	2.18 med. spread	Facebook only	small print, Okamura video, media outlet
STAN	33 22 (-11)	2004	2,200	14,001 medium	Rakušan X 165,000	2.34 uneven	Facebook, Instagram, X	modern, very pink, articulate, image-based
Pirates	4 16 (+14)	2009	1,183	19,679 medium (3)	Pirates FB 186,000	2.04 med. spread	everywhere	many functions, has a map, people, menus
STAČILO!	29 0 (-29)	2024	10	9,005 low (8)	Konečná FB 167,000	2.48 uneven	low, FB only	simple, lots of text, donation buttons
AUTO	0 6 (+6)	2022	1,400	11,047 low (7)	Turek IG 262,000	2.48 uneven	none	program, people, media, with lots of images

Source: The author.

Table 2 above highlights the main differences between the 9 main parties competing in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections, ordered by their followers’ average. *KDU-ČSL* represents a negative outlier, as a traditional party anchored to a 20th century way of practicing politics. Its website is minimal and text-based, with a lack of functions and affordances, and their social media following is the lowest, both on average, and also for top party figures. In fact, it is the only party to not even have one page with 100,000 followers, and its local presence is limited to *Facebook*. Together with *ODS*, it is one of two parties with a balanced presence, without excessive attention given to leaders. The other two national organizations with limited online following – *Stačilo!* and *Motorists* – faced their first ever election as populist formations at ideological opposites and have a very similar digital infrastructure. In fact, they share the same high concentration (2.48) around their leaders’ pages and lack a local online presence. They diverge in the highest sophistication and wider range of website affordances for the *Motorists*, *vis-à-vis*

the streamlined, text-based one for *Stačilo!*, the only to prominently display a donation button. In a way, these two parties' websites prefigured their electoral performances.

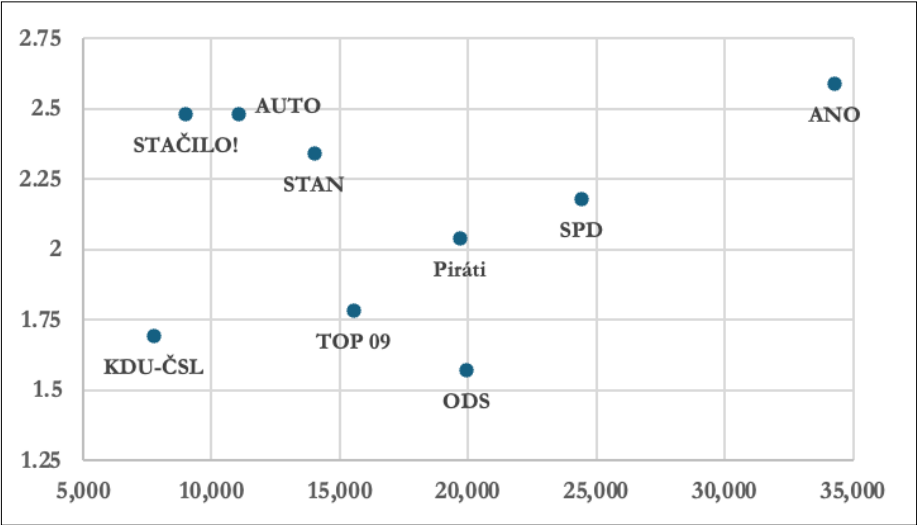
Then comes *STAN (Mayors and Independents)*, which, as a localist party, is endowed with a peculiar digital infrastructure. Its degree of concentration is due to the popularity of former Kolin mayor and Minister of the Interior Vit Rakušan, but it is balanced by a broad geographical spread across the eight regions and cities. Moreover, their website infrastructure is competently made, with a choice of color (magenta) that distinguishes it, and information presented in a clear vertical order: news, important people, program, newsletter signup, local branches, and social media contacts. *TOP 09* has a comparative average in online presence, with a low concentration reflecting a relatively horizontal structure, at least in the public image; its current leader Markéta Pekarová Adamová did not seek re-election in 2025. While it has a good geographical presence, with local pages everywhere, its website is comparatively simple and has a short, official-looking homepage. Its image as a reliable government partner in the *SPOLU* coalition should not imply a lack of creativity.

Still in the middle range lies the *ODS* party of outgoing Prime Minister Fiala, who enjoys some personal popularity online, as the second most followed politician on X after Babiš. Despite this high number, the party's digital infrastructure is balanced, with a good following for almost all surveyed politicians. Surprisingly, the party has a limited geographical spread, as its local branches lack social media accounts across the four platforms (only 11 out of 32) and merely have 3,787 followers combined. Finally, *ODS's* website follows a standard format, with media and press releases, social media updates, and a map for accessing local branches. Along similar averages lie the *Pirate Party*, which offers an intriguing combination of centralization and diffusion. Centralization, because it is the only party where the main organization's page outnumbers all its politicians in followers, and diffusion because the *Pirates* have social media pages for all administrative levels (likely to pay out in electoral contests). Their website is competently made, rich in content and affordances, and prominently features a nationwide map, reinforcing its geographical spread. Thus, we cannot completely say that local presence is more typical for a particular party type (as was expected in H1c) - instead we found a better local and regional infrastructure for *STAN* and *Pirates* (as expected), but also for *TOP09*. Surprisingly, *ODS* and *KDU* created a scarcely developed regional and local infrastructure.

Finally, even if their absolute numbers diverge, the digital infrastructures of *ANO* and *SPD* resemble each other. Both parties are very leader-centric online, with skewed numbers for Babis and Okamura, their inner circle, and everyone else. Furthermore, the geographic spread at the regional and urban level is limited to *Facebook*, with the other platforms being neglected. Their websites look different, but are both rather simple, with *ANO* privileging a classic news feed, and *SPD* choosing an uncharacteristic use of small print.

In addition, the graph below portrays the combination of reach and spread for the nine political parties. Four groups emerge, with *KDU-ČSL* against *ANO* and *SPD* representing two opposite sides, that of a traditional party with a small and diffused online presence, and that of two modern, personalistic parties with a popular, concentrated digital infrastructure. Then the other two groupings are for the unlikely trio of *Stačilo!*, *Motorists*, and *STAN* which are lagging with comparatively lower numbers, and digital infrastructures concentrated on a few pages. Finally, *ODS*, *TOP 09*, *Pirates* (ordered here by concentration), represent different shades of platform politics in the mid-range of the graph.

Figure 1:
Followers and concentration



Source: The author.

5. Methodology

This methodological section starts with a summary of our procedure before providing the criteria that we used for coding specific categories and a description of how the coding process unfolded. As for any scientifically rigorous qualitative work, our article is based upon a detailed process of data collection. An internal case selection for every party generated a list of party officials, MPs, local representatives, and local branches. An internal selection guaranteed that for every party we would have (1) the main party organization; (2) the main party officials outside of parliament; (3) four senators and eight members of parliament (where this was impossible, we filled the gaps with mayors and local representatives);

(4) four regions of Czech Republic (Central Bohemia, Southern Bohemia, Southern Moravia, Moravia-Silesia); (5) four towns of different sizes (Hradec Králové, Cheb, Prostějov, Jihlava).

This process generated a total of 254 units of observation, for which it was possible to examine social media profiles on Facebook, X, Instagram, and Youtube (and more) offering over one thousand potential profiles. Then the data collection proceeded linearly, checking for active social media accounts for all selected members and branches, and gathering figures for evaluating presence, strategy, and spread. The following step was to examine the posted materials during the month preceding the general election of October 3-4, 2025, to perform the theory-guided qualitative coding grounded in the operationalization developed in the theoretical section over this broad range of outlets, without pre-made codes, for openness, personalism, professionalism, message tone, and issues. Then, the following step was to reduce this copious material to categories for each party, with a 0-1-2 scheme detailed later in Table 3. Finally, through this copious data we performed the test of our hypotheses or how the parties' features influence their online infrastructure. The two large-format tables in the appendix cover the five coding categories in discursive form and should be helping to understand more in detail the specific functioning of the nine featured parties.

We made clear criteria for coding, and we offer here a series of examples for professionalism, personalism and negative messaging. A social media profile contains professional materials when it usually incorporates things like HD photography and videos, clear audio, edited music, consistent branding, and similarity to televised advertising. On the other hand, amateur content is characterized as having poor visual quality, with pixelation, unclear audio, a 'handheld camera' feeling, improvised setting, simple memes, casual selfie-style and so on. Then, personalism was not just merely linked to the presence of a politician in a post, but rather related to self-referred language, individual, non-party campaign material, lack of references to the party, absence of party symbols, and the like. Finally, negative messaging does not simply apply to any disagreement or reference to other competing parties. Rather, it referred to the attribution of blame, the use of heavy-handed language along the lines of treason, corruption, danger, delegitimation (unfit to rule, anti-democratic, harmful...) and the repetition of an 'against them' framing, where opposition to another party becomes the dominant message.

For these three categories, the coding was open insofar as the categories relied upon a list of decisive but non-exhaustive examples. That is, our guidelines for the coders for coding did not cover the full range of possibilities. Moreover, other categories such as 'issue coverage' were fully left to the coders' discretion, since politicians might be covering exoteric or local issues of their liking, which it would be impossible to know beforehand. The first step of the coding was to write descriptions, such as (for professionalism) *'relatively, although of a kind - not party*

materials, but own videos and photos, which are ok, but sometimes even selfies from a mobile phone'. Which was then translated into a second-level coding for amateurish material for these specific politicians. Notice that since the coding applied to single politicians' profiles, we took information from a wealth of profiles into coherent representation of the digital infrastructure of a political party. The descriptions did not disappear, but informed the final description made for each party.

Then, the final step of the coding was to assign a 0-1-2 code for all five categories for the party as a whole, in order to facilitate the level of comparability of the different materials. This amounts to a loss of nuance – which is maintained in the descriptions which can be found in the appendix – but allows us to test in a rigorous way the hypotheses formulated in the previous section. The following Table 3 provides us with both the minimal descriptions of the codes and the coding for all nine parties.³

Table 3:
Trinomial qualitative coding for all parties

	ODS	TOP 09	KDU/ČSL	STAN	ANO	SPD	AUTO	Pirates	Stacilo!	HP
professionalism	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	1	H1a: x
openness	1	1	2	2	0	1	1	2	0	H1b: x
personalism	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	0	2	H2a: ✓
issue breadth	1	2	2	2	1	0	0	2	1	H2b: ✓
negative messaging	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	H3: ✓

openness: 0 closed 1 semi-open 2 open; **professionalism:** 0 fully amateurish, 1 hybrid/professional only at the core, 2 fully professional; **negative messaging:** 0 near-absent, 1 present but not prominent, 2 constant, foundational; **issue breadth:** 0 narrow, repetitive, 1 mixed, 2 broad, large issue portfolio; **personalism:** 0 low (the party matters more), 1 medium, 2 high (the leader matters most). **Bold** indicates that the selected hypothesis holds for a specific party, **red** indicates that it does not.

Source: The author.

6. Comparative analysis

6.1 Professionalism

Examining the digital professionalism of featured content shows a clear divide between the three parties of the *SPOLU* coalition plus *STAN*, on one side, and the rest. For these four parties, professionalism looks like a byproduct of good organizational decisions, as there is a clear brand, with materials that are professionally produced and spread across the board. For *ANO*, *SPD*, *Stacilo!*, and *Motorists*, the quality is high on top and for the party leaders but declines dramatically outside of the most important pages and channels. As we see it, the *Pirates* fit to the group of professional online campaigners, although with higher content independence, and some variation. Yet, they systematically use party-provided high-quality

materials across party candidates and regional branches. This finding contradicts expectations in H1a, about a more professional presence of new parties, as the highest professionalism was for government parties.

6.2 Openness

The nine parties use their digital infrastructures at a different level of openness to the practice of ‘platform politics’ online (Lioy et al., 2019). We present them ordered from high to low openness, acknowledging the limits of social media, where platform ownership is external; functions are pre-made; set interactions embedded... Overall, the *Pirate Party* and *STAN* are the most open in interacting with their public, guaranteeing a baseline level of genuine engagement, two-way responsiveness, and a commitment to internal democracy. Crucially, these two parties competed together in the 2021 election, before their electoral coalition broke. Also, in the higher range, *KDU* politicians tend to have open, calm online interactions with followers, with a commitment to keeping the discourse going. Moving on, the most surprising finding in this category was that both the *Motorists* and *SPD* engage their followers, choosing a responsive style of managing their social media pages. This is key to projecting an image of genuine care for their potential voters and can pay electoral dividends. Then, *ODS* and *TOP09* mostly use their digital infrastructure for mobilization and information purposes, without much openness and limited responsiveness. Finally, *ANO* and *Stačilo!* exemplify closed platform politics, conceived as offered from above to a passive electorate. As such, our H1b hypothesis, expecting new and decentralized parties to be more open, is generally unsupported. Some openness is typical for several parties, including some new personalist ones, but is not (surprisingly) present for *ODS*.

6.3 Personalism

Now the discussion moves to personalism, starting from the most leader-centric parties. *ANO* and *SPD* are clearly on their top officials, Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura, with the parties’ official channels covering them extensively, and other party figures constantly mentioning them. The *Motorists* may have a personalistic style, but also a strong party emphasis, and a more oligarchic leadership, at a minimum a ‘duumvirate’ of Turek and Macinka. This also applies to *Stačilo!*, strongly centered around Konečná (*KSČM*) and Maláčová (*SOCDEM*), including on their colleagues’ pages. Inside both *ODS* and *TOP 09* then, the leadership is very visible, but also well-balanced by an emphasis on the party and on the *SPOLU* coalition. The two most anti-personalist parties online are the *Christian Democrats* and the *Pirates*, which play down leadership roles in favor of

support for the party and its agenda. *STAN* deserves a different discussion, since as a party of independents it hosts some important personalities, which are vital to the survival of the party, but practices a form of decentralized, not centralized, personalism (Balmas et al., 2014). Thus, our findings generally support the H2a hypothesis expecting a higher level of online personalism in centralized parties.

6.4 Issues

The campaign issues can easily be reconstructed for the coded material, and their discussion is useful to understand the context of online messaging. Overall, the three parties of the *SPOLU* coalition (*ODS*, *KDU*, *TOP09*) defended their own work, proposed a strong support for democracy and shared European values, in support of Ukraine, with some moderate social focus, and anti-populism. *STAN* campaigned along similar lines but also emphasized local politics and women's issues. For both *ANO* and *Motorists* we can see a blended technocratic/populist approach to politics, with experts speaking on specific topics, and a call for developmentalism in the *Motorists*' case. The *Pirates* represented an outlier, with high internal freedom of issue of focus for its politicians, within a generally socially liberal agenda. Finally, *SPD* and *Stačilo!* modeled their explicit nationalist discourse around sovereignty, albeit with respective emphasis on security or on extensive social welfare. As such, our expectation (H2b) about parties with higher membership freedom having higher variability of issue focus compared to parties centralizing power can be definitely applied to the *Pirates* and *STAN*, but with less level of certainty to other parties (*ODS*, *KDU*, *TOP09*), which rather followed the party line and didn't vary so visibly. On the other hand, the personalist parties followed the party agenda in a more unified way, so we can keep our expectations for them.

6.5 Negative messaging

Negative messaging is an important component of parties' online campaigning but only represents a structural element in the communication of *SPD* and *Stačilo!*, which, despite opposite ideological commitments, had common enemies in the incumbent government coalition and in European institutions. *ANO* and *TOP09* also heavily used negative messaging, respectively targeting the government and the opposition. Then, for *ODS*, and the *Pirates*, this style was present but not dominant, as policy agendas had a prominent space. Finally, the two parties with the most positive rhetorical style were *KDU* (which had some limited anti-*ANO* content) and especially *STAN*, which tended to campaign more on local and national agendas, with only some members featuring negative content. This

finding does generally support our H3 hypothesis: opposition parties did typically choose negative campaigning, even if two government parties (*ODS* and *TOP09*) still deployed these strategies.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has traced the digital infrastructures of the nine main Czech parties during the final month of the 2025 parliamentary campaign. The results show that Czech platform politics go beyond the simple equalization-normalization dichotomy pitting older parties against newer formations. The most professionalized online campaigns were proposed by three governing *SPOLU* parties and *STAN*, while local and regional digital diffusion was higher for *TOP 09*, the *Pirates*, and *STAN*, rather than among the traditional party organizations. Our hypotheses therefore had only a certain level of support. Generally, party age and organizational strength mattered only partially, and the connection between leader-centrism and online personalization was more strongly supported. In addition, the government-opposition divides mapped upon negative messaging, though with two exceptions (*ODS* and *TOP 09*). The broader implication is that digital infrastructure reflects differences in the age of parties, internal power structure, and governmental position, but not in a deterministic way. At this stage of their evolution, Czech parties have not simply digitalized, they have adopted platform politics in manners that are clearly distinct.

After summarizing our main results, we would also like to acknowledge the main limitations of this work. First, the internal case selection of politicians to follow performed for this paper was useful to get an idea of parties' digital infrastructures but did not cover the whole extent of their online presence. It would have been possible, with more personnel and resources, to monitor all the pages related to each party, and also of other parties currently outside of Parliament (*Přísaha, Generace...*). Second, we chose not to focus excessively upon websites – Table 1 provided some minimal commentary – but rather look at social media sites. This is because websites tend to be more static objects, whereas it was easier to follow the evolution of the campaign on social media platforms. Third, the timeframe of the study was relatively short, and it would also be interesting to examine how digital infrastructures change when parties are not involved in intense rounds of campaigning.

Moving forward, we have suggestions for scholars and practitioners to implement in future research. The one that is perhaps the most important, is that we hope that this study of the Czech party system can inspire researchers in other under-researched contexts to follow our example and perform the same kind of mapping for other party systems. Slovakia would be an obvious starting place, given the degree of similarity between the two, and the countries of the Southern

Balkans would be another easy target. Similarly, we would like to encourage cross-national collaboration, where we can come to a comparative understanding of the current state of the field of digital parties that goes beyond a series of well-known cases as can be drawn from the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, and Scandinavia. Last, this article partially contributed to the research agenda on local party digitalization, but could only discuss it tangentially, while it would deserve its own dedicated space in future studies.

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Appendix:

1. Coding scheme (for creation of table 3 and reliability tests)

Professionalism

Refers to a party's level of care and production in their content, ranging from amateurish, anti-professional home-style videos and photography to highly curated television-like campaign advertising materials.

A social media profile contains professional materials if it typically includes elements such as high-definition (HD) photos and videos, clean audio, edited music, consistent branding, and resemblance to television advertising. Conversely, amateur content is characterized by poor visual quality with pixelation, unclear audio, a 'handheld camera' feel, improvised settings, simple memes, an informal selfie style, and the like.

0 – non-professional

1 – if only the top party elite (a few individuals) is professional

2 – if the broader elite and candidates are professional (though not necessarily all of them or across all levels)

Openness

Namely, the degree to which a party utilizes its digital infrastructure to practice intra-party democracy. At its two extremes stand the 'networked party' with open participation versus the hierarchical, closed structures of the 'platform party'.

0 – closed – the party's sole objective is mobilization and information sharing; negative comments are moderated, or there is minimal reaction from the party/politicians to comments

1 – semi-open – intermediate level; responses to comments may be present among some politicians, but it is not a systematic trend

2 – open – higher frequency of responses to comments by the party or individuals; this constitutes an important characteristic, or there is the presence of deliberation and greater openness of the party to the commentators' opinions

Personalism

To assess personalism, we observe whether politicians act and speak as if they were de facto independent of their own political party. Thus, personalism is not linked merely to the sole presence of a politician in a post, but rather relates to self-referential language, individual non-party campaign materials, an absence of references to the party, missing party symbols, and the like.

0 – politicians, including the party elite, systematically link their communication with the party and their work for it

1 – higher independence of candidates from the party, emphasizing the role of the broader elite and their greater independence

2 – the leader is paramount and conflated with the party; other politicians/candidates do not profile themselves independently, or only a minimal number of them do

Issue breadth

0 – one single type of topic strongly dominates; coherence across candidates

1 – intermediate level (multiple topics that are, however, thematically close)

2 – a broad scope of topics from several different policy areas; individuals introduce their own topics

Negative messaging

Refers to blame-shifting, the use of harsh language in terms of betrayal, corruption, danger, or delegitimization (unfit to govern, anti-democratic, harmful, etc.), and the repetition of an 'against them' framing, where the main message becomes defining oneself in opposition to another party.

0 – virtually absent

1 – present but not dominant

2 – a dominant component of communication among politicians, not only the elites but also lower (regional) branches

Endnotes:

- 1 89% of Czech homes have Internet access according to the Czech Statistical office (2024).
- 2 As the *Social Democrats* disappeared from Parliament after 2021 elections, only a few candidates, including their leader Jana Maláčová, and ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek, ran with *Stačilo!*, which had candidate lists mostly made of KSČM members and marginally of small extreme left parties.
- 3 Initial coding was provided by one of the authors, and the measure of reliability was done with the independent coding by the co-author. We measured the inter-coder reliability of assigning the codes to particular parties (i.e. each coder created 9 codes per topic) with Krippendorff α for ordinal data. For professionalism, agreement levels were initially non-acceptable (-0.214 , 90% CI: $[-0.417, -0.063]$), therefore, we discussed the coding and found a lack of clarity in the definition of professionalism, especially for how to consider the independent content of senators, where the crucial element was how broad shall be the use of professional party material among the party core and other party members and candidates (for differentiation between 1 and 2 values). Therefore, we re-elaborated on the definition of professionalism, to distinguish those two situations. The new round of coding brought, then, a sufficient reliability with α 0.790, 90% CI: $[0.370, 1.000]$. The new definition lead to the decision to change the value of Pirates from 1 to 2. For openness, the value of α was 0.692 $[0.217, 0.921]$, the discussion of differences lead to the identification of the high level of responses to the comments as the systematic character of the party and its representatives' behavior as crucial for differentiation between value 2 and 1 (responses to comments may be present among some politicians, but it is not a systematic trend). Based on that elaboration, the authors found perfect agreement between their coding. The α for personalism was then sufficient (0.802; 90% CI: $[0.386, 1.000]$). The original coding for *issue breadth* also led to a low $\alpha=0.580$ (90% CI: $[0.058, 0.882]$). The following discussion lead to the identification of a key discrepancy between value 1 and 2, based on the range and thematic variance of issues. Therefore, for value 1, we agreed upon 'multiple topics that are, however, thematically close', for a value of 2 'broad scope of topics from several different policy areas; individuals often introduce their own topics'. For value 1, we stated that one single type of topic dominates; coherence across candidates. Adding this criterion, the following round of coding ended in perfect agreement. For negative messaging, we had perfect agreement (1, 90% CI: $[1.000, 1.000]$) after the first round of coding.