

ECHOES OF US AND THEM: POPULIST NARRATIVES AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN HUNGARIAN DISCOURSE ON X

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Abstract: *This article examines whether populist narrative frames used by Hungarian citizens on X relate to the emotional tone and cohesion expressed in user comments. The analysis draws on 240 Hungarian-language comments collected across three salient themes, namely migration, the European Union and Russia, and integrates automated frame identification with human-coded assessments of tone and cohesion. The study finds that emotional tone, rather than narrative framing, is the factor most closely associated with cohesive or non-cohesive discursive patterns. Positive tone aligns with expressions of solidarity, while negative tone is linked to more fragmented or antisystem orientations. These results suggest that affective valence plays a central role in shaping how online political talk consolidates or destabilizes discursive bonds across topics.*

Key words: *populism; affective polarization; Hungary; social media; content analysis.*

1. Introduction

Political expression intensifies online, where citizens debate sensitive issues and the elites test messages. In Hungary, post-2010 narratives often oppose “the people” to “corrupt elites”, a pattern consistent with populism as thin-centred ideology and with discourse-theoretical logics of equivalence (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Laclau, 2005). Sociology frames these dynamics as affective polarization—the alignment of group identities with emotions—not mere fleeting discontent (Iyengar et al., 2019, Reiljan, 2020). Systematic evidence is still lacking on how emotional valence shapes whether conversations coalesce or fracture, especially in citizen-level interactions.

This study addresses that gap by analysing 240 Hungarian-language comments posted by non-elite users on X (March 2025), balanced across migration, the EU, and Russia (80 comments for each). Reaction type, tone (positive/neutral/negative), and cohesion (solidarity/antisystem/fragmentation) were human-coded; frames (anti-elite, people-centred, nationalist) were auto-labelled via a multilingual lexical codebook. A sequential

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mixed-methods design combines contingency tables and χ^2 with Cramér's V and standardised residuals, plus close readings of 15 purposefully selected comments for.

A focused literature analysis motivates this design. Platform affordances amplify affect-laden messages (Bartlett et al., 2012, Chadwick, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015; Sunstein, 2018; Bennett & Segerberg, 2023). Most Hungarian studies centre on elites or media posts, while citizen comments - the arena of raw affect - remain under-examined; mapping work shows a government-centric agenda alongside an isolated counter-public (Bene & Szabó, 2021; Háló, 2022, Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022; Buzogány & Varga, 2023). Methodologically, large-scale computational pipelines can miss semantic nuance, whereas qualitative discourse analysis offers depth but limited generalizability; transparent hybrids are still rare (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013).

Within this standpoint, the article has three contributions. First, it offers a cross-sectional profile of Hungarian online discourse with reproducible statistics at the citizen level. Second, it tests whether frames organize affect and cohesion or whether valence is the proximal mechanism; the guiding claim is that tone, not frame labels, best predicts cohesion. Third, it releases a reusable workflow (codebook and scripts), enabling rapid replication and extension. Positioned in debates on digital fragmentation, the study proposes a topic-aware, valence-centred account of how populist talk can redraw moral boundaries in ways that matter beyond the platform.

2. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 depicts a three-layered model linking narrative frames (outer ring), emotional tone (middle ring), and cohesion (inner ring). Frames supply thematic content and tone functions as the proximal mechanism that channels content into cohesion outcomes. Cohesion records the observable patterns in user exchanges.

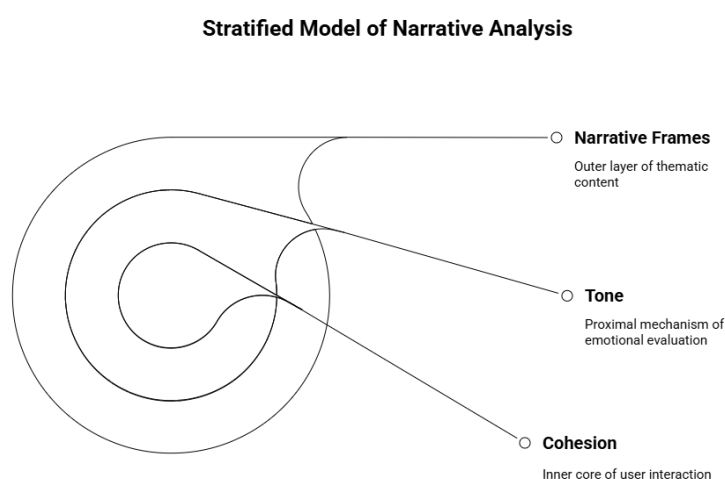


Fig. 1. *The logical architecture underlying the methodology.*

Source: author, Napkin.ai

In line with a thin-centred ideology and discourse theory (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Laclau, 2005) and the ideational and performative strands of populism (Hawkins et al., 2018; Moffitt, 2015; 2016), the analysis tracks three frames: anti-elite (domestic/supranational elites as betrayers of the common good), people-centred (protection of ordinary people, families, community), and nationalist (sovereignty, borders, national defence). Tone follows affective evaluation theory (Frijda, 1986) and aligns with affective-polarization dynamics (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, 2012; Reiljan, 2020): negative/neutral/positive. Cohesion is treated as a discursive outcome (Bene & Szabó, 2021): solidarity, antisystem and fragmentation.

3. Objectives, Questions and Hypotheses

Guided by the conceptual model and by work linking populist discourse to affective dynamics (Laclau, 2005; Iyengar et al., 2019), this study has one objective: to map how frames distribute across three themes (migration, the European Union and Russia) and to test whether emotional tone aligns with discursive cohesion in 240 Hungarian comments collected in March 2025 (χ^2 tests with Cramér's V and standardised residuals, $\alpha=.05$), complemented by qualitative notes on 15 cases. The research question: Is emotional valence, rather than narrative frames, the proximal organizer of cohesion across themes?

The hypothesis (H) is that emotional valence, and not the narrative frame, is responsible for the proximal organisation of discursive cohesion in all themes; (1) Tone x Cohesion shows a significant association-positive tone is overrepresented with solidarity and underrepresented with antisystem/fragmentation, while negative tone reduces solidarity; (2) Frame x Tone and Frame x Cohesion are compatible with independence ($\alpha=.05$). This hypothesis derives from discursive and evaluative-affective logic (Laclau, 2005; Iyengar et al., 2019) and operationalizes insights about emotion and social (de)coagulation from relevant literature (Wodak, 2015; McCoy, Rahman & Somer, 2018; Bene & Szabó, 2021; Háló, 2022).

4. Methods

Design is the key. Sequential explanatory mixed methods (quantitative → qualitative → integration) following Creswell & Plano Clark (2018), see also Plano Clark (2017) and Tashakkori & Teddlie (2010). Public comments were manually collected from X (1–30 March 2025) using only public search (no scraping). Three Hungarian Boolean queries anchored the themes: 'migration' (migráns OR bevándorló OR határvédelem), 'the European Union' (Brüsszel OR EU OR Európai Unió) and 'Russia' (Putyin OR orosz OR Moszkva). Exactly 80 comments were retained per theme (N = 240), applying a random tie-break when several comments appeared within 5 seconds to limit arbitrariness. Each unit was pseudonymised (e.g. C013) and saved with the following standard fields: comment_id, theme, frame, tone, cohesion, reaction_type and text in Hungarian with an English translation. Frames (anti-elitist, people-centred and nationalist) were automatically labelled using a multilingual codebook (case folding/diacritic removal; disambiguation rules: border/sovereignty → nationalist, Brussels/Soros → anti-elitist, family/community → people-centred; uncertain

matches are logged). Reaction type, tone and cohesion were coded by two native speakers (pilot training: 10+10; double coding: 10%; $n = 24$). Krippendorff's alpha was 0.83 for reaction, 0.81 for tone and 0.84 for cohesion.

For the quantitative analysis frequencies were calculated by theme, chi-squared tests of independence ($\alpha = .05$) with Cramér's V and standardised residuals, and expected frequencies were verified. Qualitative analysis involved 15 intentionally sampled comments (5 per theme), a line-by-line reading of metaphors, intertextual clues, pronouns and (de)legitimation, and Hungarian quotes with English translations. Integration was achieved through a joint display aligning the frame–tone–cohesion triad with the excerpt and memo.

The choice of the 1-30 March 2025 interval was guided by both methodological and contextual considerations. Data were collected manually in early April 2025, and a recent one-month window ensured that comments were accessible through public search and reflected ongoing discussions without being affected by strong electoral mobilisation. The period also captured a stable phase in the Hungarian political environment, situated roughly one year before the 2026 parliamentary elections and before the intensification of campaign-driven rhetoric.

Only public content was collected manually, with no platform IDs, and pseudonymisation and encrypted files were used. Compliance was achieved with X Terms of Service and the GDPR research framework (Art. 89). Offensive language was retained when analytically necessary (Wodak, 2015), accompanied by content warnings and partial masking of insults. The replication package (code, codebook, pseudo-anonymized CSV and expected outputs) is archived on Zenodo with 12 months embargo (reserved DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.16962482).

5. Data Analysis and Results

Following Figure 1, descriptive distributions are first reported by theme, then χ^2 /Cramér's V tests, and finally qualitative anchors. Each theme includes 80 comments ($N=240$ total). On reaction type, the European Union is dominated by antisystem responses (48/80; 60%), migration is more balanced (antisystem 33.8%, opposition 32.5% and support 21.2%), while Russia concentrates opposition (38.8%) and a large neutral share (37.5%, antisystem 11.2%). On tone, migration is predominantly negative (61/80; 76.2%); the European Union is mostly negative (55%) with substantial neutrality (40%); Russia is the least negative (40%) and has the highest neutrality (47.5%) and the highest relative positivity (12.5%). On cohesion, the European Union shows high antisystem (70%) and low solidarity (13.8%); migration is led by fragmentation (41.2%) followed by antisystem (38.8%); Russia has very high fragmentation (51.2%) coexisting with the largest solidarity (37.5%).

Type of reaction by theme

Table 1

Topic	antisystem	neutral	opposition	support
EU	48 (60.0%)	16 (20.0%)	8 (10.0%)	8 (10.0%)
Migration	27 (33.8%)	10 (12.5%)	26 (32.5%)	17 (21.2%)
Russia	9 (11.2%)	30 (37.5%)	31 (38.8%)	10 (12.5%)

Tone on topics

Table 2

Topic	negative	neutral	positive
EU	44 (55.0%)	32 (40.0%)	4 (5.0%)
Migration	61 (76.2%)	12 (15.0%)	7 (8.8%)
Russia	32 (40.0%)	38 (47.5%)	10 (12.5%)

Cohesion by topic

Table 3

Topic	antisystem	fragmentation	solidarity
EU	56 (70.0%)	13 (16.2%)	11 (13.8%)
Migration	31 (38.8%)	33 (41.2%)	16 (20.0%)
Russia	9 (11.2%)	41 (51.2%)	30 (37.5%)

The inferential tests: Frame x Tone shows no association, χ^2 (3) = 0.150, p = 0.985, V = 0.025, min exp ≈ 9.01; Frame x Cohesion is also independent, χ^2 (6) = 2.077, p = 0.912, V = 0.012, min exp ≈ 4.987. Standardised residuals reveal no cell with $|z| \geq 2$ ($|z|$ max ≈ 0.24 and 0.76, respectively). By contrast, Tone x Cohesion is strong, χ^2 (4) = 72.202, p < 0.001, V = 0.386, min exp ≈ 4.987: positive x solidarity is overrepresented (n = 20, z = +6.72), while positive x antisystem (n = 1, z = -2.55) and positive x fragmentation (n = 0, z = -2.76) are underrepresented; solidarity is below expectations under negative tone (n = 15, z = -3.07), whereas negative pairs with antisystem/fragmentation are modestly above expectations. In short, emotional valence-not frames-organizes cohesion.

 χ^2 independence tests for pairs of variables

Table 4

Test	Chi2	df	p	V_Cramér	Min. expected	Decision_α=.05	Notes
Frame x Tone (2 levels)	0.150	2	.985	0.025	9.012	Fail to reject H0 (indep.)	Residuals $ z $ max ≈ 0.24; nearly identical distributions across cells
Frame x Tone (3 levels)	0.525	6	.998	0.000	1.837	Fail to reject H0 (indep.)	No relevant local deviations
Frame x Cohesion	2.077	6	.912	0.012	4.987	Fail to reject H0 (indep.)	Residuals $ z $ max ≈ 0.76
Tone x Cohesion	72.202	4	<.001	0.386	4.987	Reject H0 (strong association)	Overrepresentation positive solidarity; underrepresentation positive antisystem and positive fragmentation

Note: N total = 240 (80 per theme). α = 0.05. V Cramér reported as a measure of effect size. For "Frame x Tone (3 levels)" some expected frequencies < 5 (min = 1.837); the main interpretation is based on the collapsed variant with two tone levels, where the test assumptions are met (min ≈ 9.012).

Qualitative anchors. A purposive sample of 15 comments clarifies mechanisms: (1) on migration, siege metaphors and us-them nominations push discourse toward non-solidary registers (fragmentation/antisystem); (2) on the European Union, anti-institutional

invective aligns with de-legitimation but does not uniformly induce intra-camp splits; (3) on Russia, coexisting justificatory and critical cues create a contested space where solidarity and fragmentation co-occur-consistent with the mixed descriptive profile.

Overall, independence cannot be rejected for frame-based pairs, while Tone x Cohesion exhibits a medium-large effect; the proximal mechanism of cohesion appears to be emotional valence.

6. Discussion

Cohesion is organized by emotional valence, not content: the tone x cohesion association is strong, with positive → solidarity overrepresented and positive → (antisystem/fragmentation) underrepresented (see Table 4). By contrast, frame x tone and frame x cohesion are statistically compatible with independence, implying theme differences arise from each theme's internal mix of tones/cohesion, not from frames per se. Topic profiles are asymmetric: migration is predominantly negative and tilts non-solidary; the European Union is strongly antisystem without uniform intra-camp splits; Russia is contested, combining highest fragmentation with highest relative solidarity. Analytically, frames are contextual backdrops; tone proximal correlate content → cohesion. Substantively, positivity catalyses solidarity; negativity yields only modest drift toward non-solidary outcomes; neutrality clusters near independence.

Siege metaphors and us-them nominations (migration) push toward antisystem/fragmentation; anti-institutional invective (the European Union) sustains delegitimization without automatic schisms; on Russia, the same resources produce divergent effects-consistent with its mixed profile. Hence, compare by theme, not only by frame.

Sparse positive tone, a one-month window, and lexical frame labelling may constrain generality (mitigated via residual checks and expected-frequency diagnostics). For theory, prioritize valence-centred log-linear/multinomial models (theme x tone). For practice, positive formulations raise solidarity odds; de-escalatory moderation can reduce non-solidary drift, likely theme-dependent. In policy communication, Russia remains the most contested; tensions between proclaimed sovereignty and perceived accommodations can fuel intra-camp fissures, even when anti-Brussels/anti-migration cues mobilize identity.

7. Impact Statement

The study bridges discourse analysis and affective-polarization research, showing that cohesion is organized chiefly by emotional valence; frame labels act contextually, not as proximal drivers. This invites theme-comparative, valence-centred models and a reappraisal of monolithic accounts of populist mobilization. It provides a reusable protocol: a transparent multilingual frame codebook, human coding for tone/cohesion, and a minimal, auditable χ^2 workflow (standardised residuals, Cramér's V) with scripts for low-overhead replication across languages/time.

The results can power monitoring tools: (1) share of positive messages as an early signal of solidarity (by theme/window); (2) a negativity-to-fragmentation risk ratio; (3) curated term lists/cohesion markers for newsroom/NGO/moderation dashboards with simple

alert thresholds. They help policymakers distinguish legitimate antisystem contestation from trust-eroding dynamics and support media-literacy exercises.

Note and next steps: indicators are associational, the data span one month and one language, and the frame coding is lexical. It is recommended that multi-lingual, longer-series replications and log-linear/multinomial models be used to test tone mediation and theme interactions.

8. Conclusions

This study examined whether populist discourse in Hungarian user comments on X relates to cohesion. On a balanced corpus (N=240) coded with satisfactory reliability ($\alpha \approx .81-.84$), frames are independent of both tone and cohesion, while tone x cohesion was strong (Cramér's $V \approx .39$): positive tone aligned with solidarity, and negative tone drifted only modestly toward non-solidary arrangements (with positivity being rare, $n=21/240$). Thematically, migration concentrates negativity with antisystem/fragmentation, the European Union stream sustains antisystem sentiment, and Russia remains the most contested-high fragmentation coexisting with the highest relative solidarity-signalling intra-camp fault lines. Conceptually, frames supply semantic context: affective evaluation is the proximal mechanism of cohesion. Methodologically, a transparent mixed-methods protocol is reusable but time-bounded. Future work should extend in time and platforms and test tone mediation explicitly. Practically, positive identity-affirming formulations appear more likely to foster solidarity than blame-centric rhetoric, guiding both platform design and communication strategy.

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