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BEYOND BORDERS: UNVEILING THE MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF ZUZANA ČAPUTOVÁ IN CZECH ONLINE NEWS

Martina ŠVECOVÁ

ABSTRACT:

This study underscores the influential capacity of transborder media communication in transcending geographical and political barriers, profoundly influencing political inclinations, voter behaviour, and public sentiment in neighbouring countries. The study specifically evaluates the portrayal of Zuzana Čaputová in Czech online media. Transborder communication between linguistically similar nations can result in distinctive representations of political figures from adjacent countries. Therefore, analysing this communication is crucial for comprehending the dynamics between Slovakia and the Czech Republic. It also contributes to a broader understanding of transregional media narratives in Central and Eastern Europe. The research identified various thematic lines in the media representation of Čaputová, including comparison, fashion, personality, values, expertise, and a line of defenders, where commentators counteract hoaxes. Additionally, the study acknowledges that media framing is not gender-neutral and examines transborder communication from this perspective. The discussion provides a comprehensive overview of Čaputová's media representation and her perceived role in the public and political spheres.

KEYWORDS:

Čaputová, CEE, communication, framing, politics, representation of women in politics, transborder media

<https://doi.org/10.34135/communicationtoday.2024.Vol.15.No.1.11>

1 Introduction

The media landscape has become one global village. The reach of media texts is no longer regional or national, but global. As a result, recipients are exposed to texts about the same events in various contexts that are culturally, socially, and politically influenced. Highlighting the linguistic and political proximity between the Slovak Republic (Slovakia, SVK) and the Czech Republic (Czechia, CZE), the study considers the role of media in shaping perceptions of politics in closely linked countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

Zuzana Čaputová was elected as the first-ever female politician to the presidency. Due to her personality, she became a figure of global significance, which is why I have chosen her as the subject of this study on the representation of a Slovak politician in Czech media. An important factor in this study is that in Czechia, women are more established in high political positions than in Slovakia, yet in its recent history, Czechia has not had a female president. The fact that Čaputová is a female politician also brings the dimension of representing a female politician, into this study, and will be considered.

This study positions the central research question: “How is President Zuzana Čaputová represented in Czech online news portals?” The research sub-question is “Does the fact that Zuzana Čaputová is a female politician influence her media portrayal in any way?” The observed period covers the years 2018, 2019, and 2020. The primary objective of this research is to unravel the media narratives about Čaputová in the Czech online press. By doing so, this study aims to offer insights into the transnational media dynamics between Slovakia and Czechia, providing an analysis that contributes to the understanding of transregional media narratives in the CEE region.

2 Cross-Border Media Influence in CEE

Cyberspace has revolutionised the landscape of media interactions, facilitating rapid and dynamic exchanges across borders, and introducing unprecedented mechanisms for transmitting content. This digital access potentially transforms not only the nature of communication but also the stakes involved (Choucri & Clark, 2018). Borders are now conceptualised as unearched, no longer strictly bound to geographical constraints. This shift in perspective has opened doors for exploring how borders are socially (re)constructed phenomena, varying significantly in their representations, interpretations, and meanings across different contexts (Van Houtum & Ver, 2002), playing a crucial role in the construction of narratives and collective identities (Paasi, 1998). This shift from physical to imagined borders fosters a unique space for transborder dialogue, significantly influencing neighbouring nations.

A pertinent example of this phenomenon can be found in the regions of Croatia bordering Serbia. The findings confirmed the causal relationship between exposure to Serbian public radio and an increase in anti-Serbian sentiments among Croat participants (Dellavigna et al., 2011). The Russian cable television broadcast through Ukraine reinforced the existing beliefs of pro-Russian Ukrainians, while also mobilising and further polarising the voters (Peisakhin & Rozenas, 2018). Another study demonstrates that expenditures on goods advertised through commercials from West German television stations were higher in the Eastern German regions within the broadcast reach after 1990, compared to regions where the broadcast was not accessible. The research confirmed the impact of long-term exposure to advertising on the purchasing behaviour of consumers in East Germany, specifically in regions that were within the reach of West German television broadcasts (Bursztyń & Cantoni, 2016). The exploration of transborder media influence in this section underscores the potent capacity of media to transcend geographical and political boundaries, significantly shaping political leanings, voter behaviour, and ethnic sentiments in adjacent nations. These instances underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics, as they play a critical role in shaping the political and social fabric of nations in our interconnected world.

Another aspect of the increasing global mediatization of politics is that media frames act as interpretive packages shaping narratives and definitions of events (Yarchi, 2014) and play a crucial role in the portrayal of political figures. *Framing*, as defined by Entman (1993), highlights certain aspects of reality in media texts to promote specific interpretations and evaluations. This process influences public perception and opinion, particularly in political contexts (Schlehofer et al., 2011) and spreads across borders. Importantly, media framing is not gender neutral. Female politicians are frequently subject to gender-biased coverage and stereotypical language, posing challenges for researchers analysing media portrayal quality (see, for example, Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Falk, 2010; Schlehofer et al., 2011).

3 Portrayal of Women in Politics

Research consistently demonstrates a global persistence in gendered frames when portraying women in politics, showcasing remarkable stability over time. The prevalent frames characterise women politicians and candidates as lacking in experience, naive, incompetent, excessively emotional, and having deficient leadership skills, ultimately emphasising their difference from the male “norm” in politics (Ross et al., 2020). It constructs binary divisions, placing men in the upper classes, and women in the lower classes, and stereotyped women as passive and confined to the private sphere (Kellner, 2003). The historical division between the public and private spheres has long influenced gender representations in the media, leading to a clear distinction between “hard” and “soft” news topics (Djerf-Pierre & Edström, 2020). In “hard” news categories like politics, international affairs, and business, male figures predominantly take the spotlight, reflecting a societal perception of these fields as being suited for them. On the flip side, topics related to lifestyle, health, education, and human-interest stories, which are generally seen as less prestigious, are categorised as “soft” news, and are often associated with women (see, for example, Van Zoonen, 1998; North, 2016; Djerf-Pierre & Edström, 2020). This gender-typing extends to the roles individuals play in news coverage. Women in authoritative roles are infrequently featured, reflecting a persistent bias in media regarding the credibility and expertise of men and women (see, for example, Niemi & Pitkänen, 2017; Franks & Howell, 2019). This bias becomes evident in political contexts, such as the media coverage of Hillary Clinton during the 2016 campaign. Clinton’s portrayal exemplifies the double standards women often face in politics. Coverage disproportionately focused on her scandals, in stark contrast to Donald Trump, highlighting the challenges female politicians endure in the media landscape (Sides et al., 2018). Another example is Jacinda Ardern, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, whose media coverage during her initial 100 days in office focused disproportionately on her pregnancy and perceived inexperience, despite her substantial political background as a Member of Parliament since 2008 and her role in the shadow cabinet since 2011. The focus on gendered traits serves to undermine the credibility of women politicians, even those with significant political achievements like New Zealand’s former Prime Minister Helen Clark, indicating a broader pattern of gender bias in political media coverage (Ross et al., 2020).

On the opposite side stands Angela Merkel, known for her restrained and unemotional communication style (Janes & Szabo, 2007). She consistently downplayed her gender in the public eye, deliberately keeping her private life, fashion choices, and communication style discreet. Merkel’s role as a woman in politics, both as a symbol and a role model, inevitably impacted the perception and opportunities for women in the political sphere in Germany (Ferre, 2006). The study’s findings from Slovakia confirmed that female candidates, Iveta Radičová and Zuzana Čaputová, were more likely to be associated with communal traits in media coverage than male candidates, aligning with existing research on gender-stereotypical portrayal in the media. However, during Slovakia’s 2019 election, these communal traits were seen positively, linked to the sociopolitical context of low public trust and high corruption perception (Žuffová, 2023). The study by Žuffová contributes to the broader discourse by showing how political contexts can influence media perceptions of leadership qualities, suggesting that in times of political turmoil, traits typically stereotyped as feminine can be seen as advantageous for regional elections. The confirmation

is the study of Dahl and Nyrup (2021) which points to better results of female candidates in regional elections, mostly in less populous regions in Denmark. Another aspect of fair media representation shows the cross-national study of Ross et al. (2020). They demonstrated a positive correlation between the representation of women in politics in news reports and the presence of women in visible political positions. Given the notable presence of influential women in Czech politics, such as Alena Schillerová, Lenka Bradáčová, Miroslava Němcová and others, it is plausible to suggest a significant media visibility for women in the country.

4 Background and Conduct of the Elections

The presidential election in 2019 in Slovakia yielded unprecedented results, as Zuzana Čaputová, a lawyer and activist previously not well-known to the public, clinched victory. She made history by becoming the first female head of state. International media extensively covered her victory highlighting her triumph over her main competitor, Maroš Šefčovič, who had the backing of SMER-Social Democracy (Smer-SD), Slovakia's long-standing ruling party (Zvada et al., 2020). Her win was widely seen as a pushback against the trend of democratic backsliding driven by political elites in CEE (see, for example, Zvada et al., 2020; Bakke & Sitter, 2022). The 2019 Slovak presidential election was markedly influenced by the nation's internal political climate, arguably more than any previous election. Political strains escalated following the brutal murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, on February 21, 2018. This tragedy plunged the country into a deep political crisis, leading to the For a Decent Slovakia movement, which organised the largest protest rallies in several Slovak cities since 1989. Additionally, the significance of the presidential election was heightened by the evident decline in support for Smer-SD (Zvada et al., 2020). The 2014 election of the former President, Andrej Kiska, marked a shift in the political landscape in Slovakia. Coming from a non-political background, he managed to secure the Presidential palace. A parallel narrative unfolded with the ascent of Zuzana Čaputová, as she followed a similar path in her journey to the presidency. Her tenure before her presidential bid provided a foundation for her campaign (Horváth et al., 2021).

Slovakia's presidential election was conducted in two rounds. The first round took place on March 16, 2019, with fifteen candidates initially running. Two candidates withdrew their candidacies: József Menyhárt in favour of Robert Mistrík, and subsequently Robert Mistrík endorsed Zuzana Čaputová. As no candidate secured an absolute majority in the first round, a second round was scheduled for March 30, 2019. In this round, Zuzana Čaputová won with 58.4% of the votes, amounting to 1,056,582 valid votes (ŠÚSR, 2019). The official election results were published on March 31, 2019. The next year significantly echoed the Slovak parliamentary elections held on February 29, 2020. The year 2020 was also marked by the spread of the coronavirus.

5 Methodology and Research Design

The central point of this investigation is to unravel the intricacies of transborder media narratives between linguistically and politically aligned nations, specifically Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Building on the theoretical foundations discussed earlier, this study posits that countries with a history of prominent female political figures likely offer greater media visibility to women in politics. The shared historical and cultural ties between Slovakia and the Czech Republic suggest a keen interest in Slovakia's political scene within Czech online media, further amplified by the significant Slovak community in the Czech Republic. According to the Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ), 117,265 Slovaks were living in the Czech Republic by the end of 2022, with actual numbers possibly higher (ČSÚ, 2022). This demographic aspect highlights the Czech media's role in reaching a broad Slovak electorate, facilitating access to varied information narratives across borders. Highlighting the linguistic and

political proximity between the Slovakia and Czechia, the study considers the role of media in shaping perceptions of politics in closely linked countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

By examining media narratives, this research's overall objective is to illuminate the potential impact of transborder narrative on the political and social discourse within interconnected publics. The aim of the study is to explore the transborder media narrative with a specific examination of Zuzana Čaputová's representation in Czech online media. It seeks to understand the wider ramifications of such portrayals for the media dynamics between linguistically and politically aligned countries like Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The temporal scope of research spanned 2018 to 2020, covering the timeframe leading up to, during, and following Čaputová's presidential tenure. The study posed the primary research question: "How is President Zuzana Čaputová represented in Czech online news portals?" and sub-question is "Does the fact that Zuzana Čaputová is a female politician influence her media portrayal in any way?"

The study employed a combined research approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The primary focus was on qualitative analysis, which concentrated on dissecting media narratives within Czech online news portals, particularly concerning the portrayal of Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová. Although quantitative research played a foundational role, it primarily served to supplement and support the qualitative findings. Creswell (2007) advocates for the employment of qualitative methods when a nuanced and intricate comprehension of the subject matter is required. In this vein, the narrative portraiture method was selected for its capacity to address questions related to context and relational dynamics, aiming to accurately document the unfolding process (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). The research methodology was structured into six stages, adhering to Creswell's (2007) guidelines for conducting qualitative studies: data collection, initial analysis, coding leading to category formation, data abstraction, theme interconnection, and a final stage of reflection and iteration. The coding phase was developed according to the methodology designed for narrative portraiture by Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs (2020). This iterative process ensured a thorough and systematic examination of the data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of Čaputová's media representation and its broader implications for transborder media dynamics between Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Data was sourced from articles archived in Newton Media, focusing on outlets recognised by the Independent Journalism Foundation [Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, NFNŽ], which evaluates media outlets in the Czech Republic as of October 2022. Not all online media evaluated by NFNŽ were accessible via Newton Media archive via Charles University access, so the final list of media sources represented an intersection of listings in NFNŽ and availability in the Newton Media archive. The keyword "Čaputová" was used to search for articles. All articles retrieved with this keyword were reviewed, and those that featured Zuzana Čaputová as the main protagonist or mentioned her in a significant or expert role, or related to the development of the Čaputová narrative, were manually selected for analysis. Some articles focused on other protagonists but had Čaputová playing a significant role, such as being a source of comparison or inspiration. The primary selection criterion for articles in 2018 was the focus on the development of the Slovak presidential candidacy, as there were no articles exclusively about Zuzana Čaputová. With the increased coverage in anticipation of the presidential election, only 13 significant articles were chosen for analysis in 2018. In 2019 and 2020, articles where Čaputová was either the main protagonist or mentioned in a specific role were selected for further analysis.

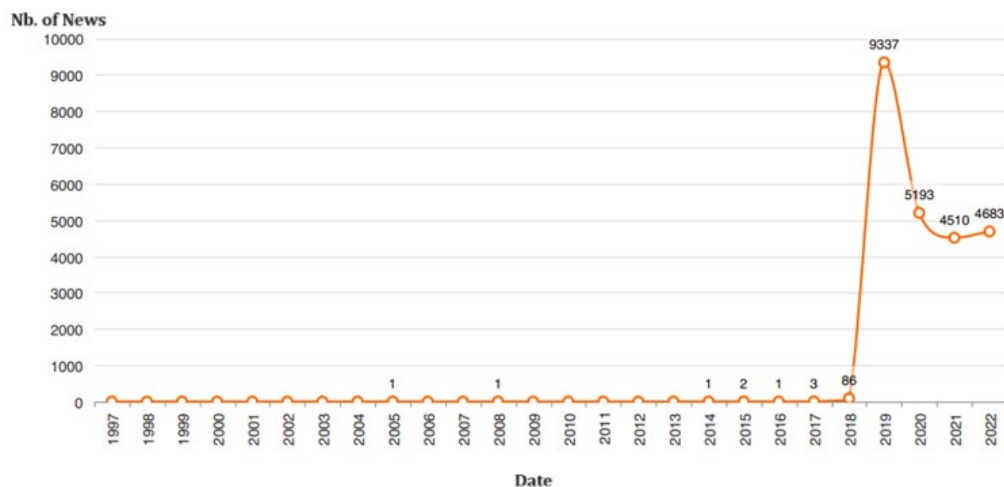


Figure 1. Development of all news stories with the keyword “Čaputová” from October 31, 1997, to October 31, 2022
 Source: Database available throughout paid access of Faculty of Social Sciences, at NewtonOne (2022)

The year 2019 saw the peak in media attention, with 690 articles, while 2020 experienced a decline, yet was still substantial, with 345 articles. This trend indicates the Czech media’s keen interest in the Slovak political scene. The quantitative research consistently engaged with the entire corpus of articles for each year, comprising 13 articles for the year 2018, 690 for 2019, and 345 for 2020. Conversely, in the qualitative study, for the year 2018, the same set of 13 articles were analysed, representing the full corpus due to the limited number of significant articles. For the subsequent years, 2019 and 2020, qualitative analysis was conducted on 20 articles for each year, selected as a representative sample through a random number generator.

Table 1. The relevant webpages

Selected Articles and Counts				
	Indexation NFNZ	2018	2019	2020
ahaonline.cz	B-		9	2
aktualne.cz	A	2	42	29
blesk.cz	B		142	52
denik.cz	B+	1	39	15
denikN.cz	A		37	8
e15.cz	B	2	27	12
echo24.cz	B+	2	50	45
euro.cz	A		17	2
expres.cz	C		11	7
extra.cz	B		18	4
forum24.cz	B+		28	10
idnes.cz	B+	1	33	3
info.cz	B+		23	4
irozhlas.cz	A		60	32
novinky.cz	B+	1	50	20
parlamentnilisty.cz	B-	3	216	45
refresher.cz	B+		41	18
seznamzpravy.cz	A-	1	27	29
tn.cz	B+		13	8
word count		8 946	575 119	234 060
Total		13	690	345

Source: own processing, 2023

The methodology for analysing narrative portraits and creating codes is proposed to be dissected into five distinct phases, each facilitating the organisation and distillation of data into pivotal categories, themes, and ultimately, narrative insights. The initial phase involves a comprehensive summary of the participants, who are crucial to the analysis. This phase delves into the dynamics encompassed within the entire narrative portrait. The second phase employs a linear analysis that incorporates temporal elements to construct the narrative's framework and to pinpoint the publication timing of the article. The third phase pertains to the spatial context in which the narrative events unfold, thereby structuring the narrative within specific situational parameters. The fourth phase concentrates on pivotal events within the narrative. The final phase encompasses the phenomena of interest, situating them within the narrative's context of characters, time, space, and key events (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). The first coding phase was identification of principal actors commenced during the initial phase, employing a pilot quantitative analysis as delineated in the preceding section. This analysis entailed a thorough review of all articles to select actors who significantly influenced the narrative surrounding Zuzana Čaputová in researched online media. Actors were categorised and differentiated based on their relevance to the narrative's context. The subsequent phase involved organising the articles chronologically to identify the initial instances of mentions alongside the involved actors. During this phase, key events were coded and associated with the actors, revealing unique dimensions. This stage resulted in the coding of five elements: actors of greater and lesser importance, relevant events, pertinent sentences, and the main thematic connections. The final phase entailed the exploration of phenomena related to the previously coded elements. Initially, the focus was on phenomena emerging from theoretical research, such as competencies, stereotypical portrayal, and personality depiction. However, it became evident that journalists and columnists also played a crucial role as significant actors, particularly in the narratives of gratification and defence concerning Zuzana Čaputová. Consequently, the criteria for determining the importance of actors were adjusted to reflect their impact on the Czech Republic's internal political dynamics rather than a global perspective. This process and its underlying rationale are elaborated upon in the subsequent analysis.

Throughout this research stage, emerging findings were categorised and analysed in relation to the extant body of literature, particularly within the context of Central and Eastern European (CEE) politics. As novel insights surfaced, they were seamlessly integrated into the existing analytical framework, complementing the qualitative data with quantitative methodologies to refine and expand upon the prevailing theoretical frameworks. This comprehensive approach facilitates a deep and nuanced comprehension of the dataset. It enables a transition from the rough details of Zuzana Čaputová's portrayal in the Czech media to broader interpretations concerning the intersection of gender and politics. Moreover, it extends to the exploration of transborder narratives and the depiction of political figures in media, offering valuable perspectives on the dynamics of media representation in political discourse.

6 Analysis

The qualitative analysis revealed that the narrative surrounding Zuzana Čaputová gradually evolved from her being an unknown figure, to whom journalists gave little attention, through surprise as she rose in the election polls, to cover when she became President. This study was initially focused on examining three key aspects as identified by scholars in the narrative of women in politics: their competences, their portrayal as objects of stereotyping, and their depiction as personalities. However, the research evolved to reveal two additional narrative lines: one where Zuzana Čaputová was compared with Czech political figures such as the President and Prime Minister, and another emphasising the gratification of Čaputová through the lens of values.

Competence Line

In the Competence Line narrative, an interview with Štefan Hríb is particularly relevant because it opens the frame of Slovak president in the context of the successor of President Kiska: "František Mikloško, an excellent

lawyer Zuzana Čaputová, and prominent scientist Robert Mistrík.” He adds that any of these candidates succeeding Kiska would be a good continuation of his story (Nouzová, 2018). President Kiska also mentioned Čaputová at the Pohoda festival, highlighting her legal work and vice-presidency in the Progressive Slovakia (PS) party. Commentator Eugen Korda quoted in the same article paraphrased that these candidates are “decent and competent people amidst many charlatans” (Vosáhlo, 2018). Branislav Fábry’s blog post (2018) presented the only negative portrayal, criticising the treatment of non-mainstream journalists and an incident at Čaputová’s press conference where it was implied that she supported violence against a journalist and the freedom of speech. Čaputová’s narrative in 2018 framed her as competent for the role.

By 2019, the narrative around the candidate Čaputová became more detailed. The media highlighted her “clean record” and lack of ties with SMER-SD. She was also portrayed as a potential saviour: “Who is this woman set to save Slovakia?” (Jeřábková, 2019). Awareness of her previous environmental activism expanded to include her support for the vulnerable, seniors, abused children, and adoption by homosexual couples, as well as her opposition to Mečiar’s amnesties, confrontation with Kočner and SMER-SD. Coverage also touched on the appointment of Robert Fico as Prime Minister, highlighting her emphasis on the public’s will, and her role in judicial appointments as part of her political agenda. Support from Miloš Zeman, expressed to a SMER-SD candidate, was not seen as influencing her presidential relationship to diplomatic relations with the Czech Republic. However, Czech politicians expressed concerns about her stance towards the Visegrad Group (V4), fearing her pro-European views and support for a European superstate might challenge traditional V4 values. A discussion emerged about PS not being a coalition party, leaving the President isolated. This issue continues towards the end of the year, in the context of the Slovak government’s efforts to extend the electoral moratorium. There was a discussion about the weak position of the presidency within the Slovak Constitution. Despite this, she continued to exercise all legal options available, especially when disagreeing with parliamentary resolutions particularly in instances opposing citizens’ rights: “...unacceptably restricting the right of everyone to freely seek, receive, and disseminate information without censorship” (Jadrná, 2019). Also, her legal expertise during a visit of Kroměříž for a conference on ethics and law was emphasised.

In 2020, the president was included in a Pew Research Centre survey assessing the trustworthiness of politicians in the Czech Republic. This inclusion placed her among the global political elite, such as Angela Merkel, Vladimir Putin, and Emmanuel Macron, mostly because the article shifts focus to another survey in which Zuzana Čaputová was rated as the most trustworthy politician, surpassing the aforementioned figures. The emphasis of the editorial on her winning in a different study reflects a positive attitude towards her. Her competencies were further underlined in her ability to respect the judicial process outcomes involving Marián Kočner, with her response being described as a “textbook reaction” (Malecký, 2020).

The Values Line

The Values Line started in 2018 with the battle against the Pezinok landfill, representing ecological values. Media sources commend Čaputová’s courage in addressing problematic issues and fighting for the rights of the vulnerable. They highlight her commitment to justice, lack of ties to SMER-SD, decency, and efforts to understand people, respecting their opinions. She is recognised for her respect towards those who have fought for similar values, for people in general and embodying the principle of “serving, not leading” (see, for example, Jeřábková, 2019; Mii, 2019).

A value frequently mentioned is Čaputová’s diplomacy, particularly in cooperation with the Czech Republic. Czech media understandably notice this value, as seen in her knowledge of the Czech Republic, where she regularly vacations, and her admiration for Czech personalities and alignment with Václav Havel’s legacy.

Iveta Radičová also highlights values in an interview, stating that there’s no need to be a “mother to the entire nation” and that “some children deserve a scolding” (Klimeš, 2020). In 2020, authenticity and consistency emerged as additional values. Trust in the justice system is strongly presented in the context of the political developments in Slovakia.

The Personality Line

The Personality Line extends from the previous two lines. A key observation here is that many articles, not directly related to her, mention her name in various contexts. This could be partly because she is active on social media, making her statements easily accessible to journalists. Another aspect is the acceptance of Zuzana Čaputová by journalists as a personality competent to comment on various, especially global, or social, issues, leading to the publication of her words. The year 2018 is not significant in this line.

In 2019, one article titled “Slovenská prezidentka Čaputová: Migrace je problém i zemí, kam uprchlíci nemíří” [“Slovak President Čaputová: Migration is a problem even for countries not targeted by refugees”] (Deník.cz, 2019) explains Čaputová’s position on migration, urging all countries to engage in dialogue, even those that are transit rather than final destinations for refugees: “We must be among the countries seeking a solution, even if refugees do not head to our country. It is true that in our region this is a sensitive issue because we are not accustomed to diversity, other cultures, other people.” The article likely follows her official visit on July 25, 2019, to Paris, where she met Emmanuel Macron. Its inclusion in the Czech media was a deliberate choice by the editorial team. Another selected article from that year discusses how Zuzana Čaputová and Andrej Babiš (in this order) attended a climate conference in New York (Simao, 2019b). The mere ordering of Čaputová before Babiš is significant. Even if the editorial decision was based on “courtesy,” it still conveys a message.

The year 2020 saw a series of interviews, like those with Iveta Radičová (Klimeš, 2020) and Milan Kňažko (Pešek, 2020), where Čaputová was admired as a personality. In the article highlighting her encouragement of Slovak voters to participate in elections, Čaputová’s statements are preferred over other politicians like Pellegrini and Danko who played secondary roles in the same article (iRozhlas.cz, 2020). Půra’s (2020) commentary on the parliamentary elections implied that Čaputová’s election benefitted from the presence of extremists, suggesting her liberal stance could take votes from Kotleba. The mention of Čaputová in this article was random and not necessary because it was not related to the main topic. An interview titled “My dream is to peek into President Čaputová’s wardrobe, says Veronika Ruppert”, featuring only one sentence about Čaputová’s wardrobe out of 1,714 words in total, was enough for her to feature prominently in the headline (Daňková, 2020).

Articles reviewed her first year in office and demonstrated that she is the most credible political in Slovakia, with a section publishing 17 fashion-style photos (Žena.cz, 2020) followed by an article on the title page featuring comment by Grigorij Mesežnikov about her ability to reach out people (Aktuálně.cz, 2020). Another headline declared, “Americans need someone like Zuzana Čaputová...”, referring to Slovak Eva Putzová’s candidacy for the U.S. Congress. In the article, Čaputová is featured in the title as a symbol of a successful Slovak politician, yet her mention within the article is brief and indirect. The last three articles in 2020 depict Čaputová as a personality, publishing her comments or examples during the COVID period.

These three lines of the narrative about Čaputová prove that she is considered competent and skilled to speak from a position of authority on various “hard” topics in the selected articles.

Table 2. The most frequent words related to values and personality

Word	2018			2019			2020		
	Freq.	%	Rank	Freq.	%	Rank	Freq.	%	Rank
blízké/nearby	0	0	0	40	0.01	1,745	8	0.00	3,566
bojovat/fight	0	0	0	61	0.01	1,171	10	0.01	2,886
církev/church	0	0	0	33	0.01	2,078	0	0	0
cítí/ (she, he, it) feels	0	0	0	36	0.01	1,905	14	0.01	2,052
člověk/human	3	0.03	514	168	0.03	364	48	0.02	551
člověka/ human (Accusative)	0	0	0	72	0.01	977	26	0.01	1,092
Děkuji/ I thank you	0	0	0	41	0.01	1,702	11	0.01	2,629
dobré/ good	5	0.06	299	108	0.02	647	36	0.02	759
důstojnosti/ (to, of the) dignity	0	0	0	37	0.01	1,861	3	0.00	7,954
důvěru/ to be trusted (also trust - Accusative)	0	0	0	77	0.02	911	43	0.02	631
generace/generation	0	0	0	56	0.01	1,270	22	0.01	1,311
hodnot/ (of) values	0	0	0	106	0.02	655	21	0.01	1,373
homosexuálními/ (with) homosexual	0	0	0	57	0.01	1,258	0	0	0
klimatu/ climate (Related to climate)	0	0	0	44	0.01	1,604	17	0.01	1,696
slušné decent (middle gender)	3	0.03	514	51	0.01	1,408	12	0.01	2,398
slušnost/decency	0	0	0	56	0.01	1,270	5	0.00	5,317
služby/services	0	0	0	38	0.01	1,826	26	0.01	1,092
sociálních/social	0	0	0	127	0.03	520	84	0.04	278
společně/together	0	0	0	116	0.02	591	31	0.02	901
společnost/society	0	0	0	160	0.03	390	76	0.04	315
společnosti/ (Genitive, Dative)	7	0.08	198	334	0.07	160	126	0.06	172
spolu/together	3	0.03	514	153	0.03	419	125	0.06	175
spolupráce/cooperation	0	0	0	94	0.02	736	24	0.01	1,189
spolupráci/cooperation (Dative, Accusative)	0	0	0	93	0.02	744	46	0.02	577
spravedlnost/justice	0	0	0	78	0.02	893	45	0.02	589
svobody/ freedoms (also of liberty)	0	0	0	105	0.02	659	29	0.01	971
symbol/ symbol (icon)	0	0	0	44	0.01	1,604	5	0.00	5,317
tradice/tradition	0	0	0	47	0.01	1,513	6	0.00	4,591
tradici/tradition (Accusative)	0	0	0	91	0.02	755	4	0.00	6,403
tradiční/ traditional (also conventional)	0	0	0	89	0.02	772	23	0.01	1,253
vnímá/ (he, she, it) perceives	0	0	0	62	0.01	1,148	20	0.01	1,440
vnímám/ I perceive (also sense, see)	0	0	0	79	0.02	878	10	0.01	2,886
vraždě/ murder (Dative)	8	0.09	164	125	0.03	525	47	0.02	566
vraždy/murder (Genitive, Local)	4	0.04	373	88	0.02	780	176	0.09	118
zájem/interest (also concern)	0	0	0	87	0.02	791	42	0.02	650
závidět/envy	0	0	0	53	0.01	1,343	4	0.00	6,403

Source: own processing, 2023

The Comparative Line

The Comparative Line of Zuzana Čaputová's portrayal transitions into comparing her with Czech politicians, particularly President Zeman and Prime Minister Babiš. Early in 2020, an article on a Pew Centre survey headlined "Komu věří Češi? Nejdůvěryhodnějším světovým lídrem je pro ně Putin" ["Who do the Czechs trust? Putin is the most trusted world leader"] (Euro.cz, 2020) was released. The survey aimed to clear Czechs from supporting Putin, who emerged as the most trusted among five international political figures. The editors used another, older research and the result is the comparison of Čaputová with Zeman: "Surveyors from CVVM found that for Czechs, the most trustworthy is Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová, trusted by 54 per cent of people, followed by Czech President Miloš Zeman with 46 percent..."

Čaputová maintains strong support without "offering benefits", solely based on shared values, unlike the current Czech president. She differs from Zeman in her attitude towards demonstrators against prime minister Babiš, understanding and appreciating the peaceful nature of demonstrations, while Zeman dismisses them as utterly useless (Simao, 2019a). Another article from the series of demonstrations states.

In a situation where a significant part of society realises its home is infested with rats and alligators, the head of state can behave in two ways. One is shown by the Slovak president, who stands with these citizens. The other we experience when the president stands against his people, who in large numbers demonstrate that something is rotten in the state of Czech. (Mitrofanov, 2019)

The foreign policies of both presidents are also a subject of comparison. While Čaputová managed eight official visits and nationwide regional trips within three months of inauguration, Zeman, during the same period, visited only Serbia, Poland, and the Vysočina Region. The headline states: “Three months of Čaputová: Foreign trips, important meetings. Incomparable to Zeman” (Hovorková, 2019). The article about Čaputová’s visit to the climate conference in New York contrasted statements of both politicians: while Czech Prime Minister Babiš was quoted criticising Greta Thunberg for “scaremongering about the apocalypse”, Čaputová was mentioned for not commenting on the young activist but emphasising the need to address climate issues. The article also noted that Babiš brought his daughter and his wife, suggesting his possible disinterest in the event (Simao, 2019b). While Slovak politicians (Čaputová and Matovič) spoke on the Romani Holocaust, Zeman remained silent, and Babiš went on vacation (Polák, 2020). Čaputová’s work ethic was also compared to other politicians: “While many Czech and Slovak politicians are on vacation, Čaputová is still actively fulfilling presidential duties. She used her free time to show people around the Slovak presidential palace” (Mii, 2019). In Michal Půra’s (2020) commentary, Čaputová is likened to Barack Obama in having a similar story and media support, though without the backing of a strong party. She is also warned not to “finish” as President Kiska, who was “isolated like a pole in a fence” with applause only from abroad. Čaputová was also likened to Chuck Norris, as someone capable of achieving the impossible, like her “rocketing rise” in candidacy: “Even Chuck Norris couldn’t gain the preferences of Zuzana Čaputová. Hers grew from 10% to 52% in just a few days” (Ščeblykin, 2019).

Table 3. Comparative Line

Word	2018			2019			2020		
	Freq.	%	Rank	Freq.	%	Rank	Freq.	%	Rank
Babiš (CZE)	0	0	0	193	0.04	321	85	0.04	271
Blaha (SVK)	5	0.06	299	73	0.01	963	50	0.03	525
Bugár (SVK)	22	0.25	29	55	0.01	1,290	0	0	0
Fiala (CZE)	0	0	0	60	0.01	1,191	4	0.00	6,403
Fico (SVK)	10	0.11	127	234	0.05	250	87	0.04	256
Harabin (SVK)	11	0.12	109	285	0.06	194	5	0.00	5,317
Havla (CZE)	0	0	0	136	0.03	479	16	0.01	1,794
Kotleba (SVK)	26	0.29	20	140	0.03	463	38	0.02	720
Kováče (SVK)/Genitive, Accusative	11	0.12	109	33	0.01	2,078	0	0	0
Kuciaka (SVK)/Genitive, Accusative	10	0.11	127	215	0.04	283	183	0.09	109
Macron (GLOBAL)	0	0	0	76	0.02	927	15	0.01	1,909
Matovič (SVK)	4	0.04	373	9	0.00	6,547	335	0.17	51
Merkelová (GLOBAL)	0	0	0	36	0.01	1,905	29	0.01	971
Putin (GLOBAL)				35	0.01	1,946	18	0.01	1,610
Schwarzenberg (CZE)	0	0	0	68	0.01	1,038	12	0.01	2,398
Sorose (GLOBAL)/Genitive, Accusative	0	0	0	53	0.01	1,343	6	0.00	4,591
Trnka (SVK)	0	0	0	3	0.00	14,666	24	0.01	1,189
Trump (GLOBAL)	0	0	0	83	0.02	834	45	0.02	589
Zeman (CZE)	0	0	0	738	0.15	70	156	0.08	130

Source: own processing, 2023

The table of names reflects a temporal shift in the media’s focus. In 2018, coverage predominantly centred on controversial politicians. By 2019, there was a notable shift towards Czech and international political figures. In 2020, while the focus on Czech politicians persisted, it showed a slight decline, with an increased emphasis on developments in the Slovak political arena.

Čaputová as a Woman

The visibility of the two female candidates in 2018 could be debated as being lower due to their gender and the unexpected nature of their election or because they were relatively unknown. However, when betting agencies suggested Čaputová had a chance of winning, she began to receive more media attention. The only article that could be perceived as stereotypical is originally titled “Blondýna Čaputová slovenskou prezidentkou? Zaujala bojem proti skládkám i amnestiím Mečiaru” [“Blonde Čaputová as Slovak president? She impressed with her fight against landfills and Mečiar’s amnesty”] (Blesk.cz, 2019). The word “blonde” has been removed by publisher and is no longer present in the title. Nonetheless, the article itself is very positive. Another description of her is as a “charming woman in her forties” (Jeřábková, 2019). Iveta Radičová’s commentary, advising Čaputová not to be the “mother of all” (Klimeš, 2020) might be seen as slightly ironic stereotyping, though it’s debatable whether advice from one woman to another qualifies as such.

Fashion as a topic regarding Čaputová appeared rarely and covered her sense of style. The description, “Čaputová definitely knows what suits her curves”, accompanying a photo in a series showing her as a well-dressed politician, was more of a flattering remark. The same article also describes her appearance as “elegant and feminine” (Žena.cz, 2020).

Her personal life, being a single mother and her romantic relationships, were mentioned several times but it appears that, at least according to the reviewed articles, the Czech media treated Čaputová very respectfully.

Table 4. Čaputová as a woman line

Word	2018			2019			2020		
	Freq.	%	Rank	Freq.	%	Rank	Freq.	%	Rank
atraktivní/attractive	0	0	0	9	0.00	6,547	0	0	0
blondatá/blonde (adv)	0	0	0	5	0.00	10,369	0	0	0
blondýna/blondie	0	0	0	6	0.00	9,070	0	0	0
dáma/lady	0	0	0	42	0.01	1,674	10	0.01	2,886
dekoltu/of neckline	0	0	0	4	0.00	12,070	0	0	0
image	0	0	0	15	0.00	4,255	14	0.01	2,052
kostým/ women's suit	0	0	0	7	0.00	8,011	0	0	0
lodičky/pumps	0	0	0	6	0.00	9,070	3	0.00	7,954
náhrdelníkem/ by necklace	0	0	0	4	0.00	12,070	0	0	0
sluší/suits	0	0	0	17	0.00	3,797	6	0.00	4,591
styl/style	0	0	0	40	0.01	1,745	31	0.02	901
stylu/of style	0	0	0	37	0.01	1,861	15	0.01	1,909
sympatická/likeable	0	0	0	16	0.00	4,017	0	0	0
šatech/ (in) dress	0	0	0	30	0.01	2,271	11	0.01	2,629
šatů/dresses	0	0	0	29	0.01	2,328	25	0.01	1,138
šaty/dresses	0	0	0	78	0.02	893	47	0.02	566
ženská/feminine	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0.00	4,016
ženskost/femininity	0	0	0	5	0.00	10,369	0	0	0

Source: own processing, 2023

Throughout the research on the portrayal of Čaputová as a woman, a “protective” line emerged, and the author classified it as a sub-line because it is not a long-term trend. This was observed particularly in political commentaries during the presidential election year. Ščeblykin (2019) wrote a commentary on conspiracy theories and slanders against her, pondering their real impact and describing her team’s fight against falsehoods. Despite media attention to her being divorced with two daughters, the context is positive, portraying her as a strong woman: “I encounter various attacks, implying that a woman living without a partner is of lesser value. Yet there are many strong women, just as there are men. ... I simply live alone with my daughters” (Jeřábková, 2019). Another commentary defends Čaputová’s unofficial visit to Prague before her inauguration, highlighting it as an act of decency, unacceptable to

opponents of democracy and liberalism (Besser, 2019). Mitrofanov (2019) responds to negative comments about the Slovak president being a woman by highlighting her stand against the mafia.

The quantitative analyses based on ranking of the word from all selected articles in the researched period confirms the findings.

Table 5. The schedule of the twenty-five selected words in 2018

nb.	Word 2018	Freq.	%	Rank
1.	prezidenta/ president (Genitive, Accusative)	57	0.64	4
2.	strany/parties (or Genitive in singular)	51	0.57	5
3.	Kiska	42	0.47	6
4.	slovenského/Slovak	37	0.42	10
5.	Slovensko/Slovakia	29	0.33	17
6.	Slovensku/ Slovakia (Dative)	28	0.31	18
7.	Kotleba	26	0.29	20
8.	prezidentské/presidential	25	0.28	23
9.	strana/party (political) or also side	24	0.27	25
10.	Bugár	22	0.25	29
11.	kandidovať/run (for office)	21	0.24	31
12.	novinárov/journalists (Genitive, Accusative)	19	0.21	35
13.	parlamentu/parliament (Genitive, Dative)	19	0.21	35
14.	roce/year (Local)	19	0.21	35
15.	Slováků/Slovaks (Genitive)	19	0.21	35
16.	státu/state (Genitive, Dative)	18	0.20	40
17.	Česko/Czechia	17	0.19	45
18.	Čaputová	16	0.18	52
19.	politický/political	16	0.18	52
20.	prezident/president	16	0.18	52
21.	Roberta/ Robert (Genitive, Accusative)	16	0.18	52
22.	volby/election (in plural or Genitive in singular)	16	0.18	52
23.	Fica/Fico (Genitive, Accusative)	15	0.17	63
24.	kandidáty/candidates (Accusative)	15	0.17	63
25.	občanů/citizens (Genitive)	15	0.17	63

Source: own processing, 2023

Table 6. The schedule of the twenty-five selected words in 2019

nb.	Word 2019	Freq.	%	Rank
1.	Čaputová	4,583	0.94	4
2.	Čaputové (Genitive, Dative, Locative)	1,630	0.33	11
3.	Zuzana	1,556	0.32	14
4.	Slovensku/Slovakia (Dative, Locative)	1,289	0.26	22
5.	Slovensko/Slovakia	1,284	0.26	23
6.	prezidentka/president (female)	1,071	0.22	31
7.	Česko/Czechia	1,061	0.22	32
8.	jsem/I am	1,045	0.21	33
9.	Šeďovič	924	0.19	40
10.	voleb/elections (Genitive)	898	0.18	44
11.	prezidenta/president (male; Genitive, Accusative)	886	0.18	49
12.	Čaputovou (Accusative)	858	0.18	52
13.	státu/state (Genitive, Dative)	843	0.17	54
14.	strany/parties (Nominative, Accusative in plural or Genitive in singular)	786	0.16	59
15.	její/her	781	0.16	61
16.	první/first	774	0.16	63
17.	prezident/president	749	0.15	67
18.	jsme/we are	747	0.15	68
19.	Zeman	738	0.15	70
20.	prezidentských/presidential (Genitive, Locative)	717	0.15	72
21.	volby/elections (Nominative, Accusative)	675	0.14	76
22.	Slovenska/Slovakia (Genitive)	652	0.13	77
23.	kole/round (Locative)	642	0.13	79
24.	Kiska	552	0.11	91
25.	řekla /she said	547	0.11	92

Source: own processing, 2023

Table 7. The schedule of the twenty-five selected words in 2020

nb.	Word 2020	Freq.	%	Rank
1.	Čaputová	1,344	0.68	4
2.	prezidentka/president (female)	591	0.30	14
4.	Zuzana	475	0.24	24
5.	Slovensko/Slovakia (Nominative, Accusative)	459	0.23	28
6.	Česko/Czechia	433	0.22	31
7.	bude/will	414	0.21	33
8.	Slovensku/Slovakia (Dative, Locative)	413	0.21	34
9.	jsem/I am	410	0.21	35
10.	vlády/governments (or Genitive in singular)	351	0.18	42
11.	Matovič	335	0.17	51
12.	Čaputové (Genitive, Dative, Locative)	334	0.17	52
13.	státu/state (Genitive, Dative)	310	0.16	59
14.	strany/parties (Nominative, Accusative in plural or Genitive in singular)	291	0.15	61
15.	lidí/people (Dative)	286	0.14	65
16.	jsme/we are	267	0.13	71
17.	slovenské/slovak (neuter/middle genus)	267	0.13	71
18.	Slovenská/ Slovak (feminine genus)	259	0.13	75
19.	první/first	254	0.13	77
20.	lidé/people	252	0.13	78
21.	řekla/she said	220	0.11	86
22.	řekl/he said	213	0.11	91
23.	její/her	211	0.11	92
24.	volbách/election (Locative)	194	0.10	102
25.	Kuciaka (Genitive, Accusative)	183	0.10	109

Source: own processing, 2023

In 2018, “Čaputová” was the fifty-second most frequently used word, while the male form “President” ranked fourth. Notably, the Slovak female equivalent “prezidentka” was not mentioned at all. In 2019 and 2020, “Čaputová” climbed to fourth place, and “prezidentka” reached fourteenth spot in 2020. The word “jsem” [“I am”] ranked thirty-third in 2019 and thirty-fifth in 2020, indicating a slight decrease in direct quotations. The term “řekla” [“she said”] appeared 547 times in 2019, ranking ninety-second, with a similar frequency in 2020. The prominence of “Čaputová”, “prezidentka” and “Zuzana” in the articles emphasises her significant media presence. The ranking of “Czechia” improved from forty-fifth in 2018 to thirty-first in 2020, surpassing “Slovakia”, which was ranked thirty-fourth in 2020. This shift indicates that “Čaputová” appeared in context of Czech events. The word “lidé” [“people”] rose from ninetieth position in 2019 to seventy-eighth in 2020, reflecting a media focus on the societal impact of politicians. The article concludes by noting the thematic evolution in word usage over these years. In 2018, coverage centred on candidates and key events such as controversies and the murder of Jan Kuciak. In 2019, words like “envy”, “perception”, “dignity”, “humility”, and “change” emerged, reflecting the values and character traits attributed to Čaputová. Fashion terms were infrequent, often linked to image and style articles. In 2020, the focus shifted to Čaputová’s expertise and views, especially regarding parliamentary elections and the pandemic, with “justice”, “society”, and “social” gaining prominence. COVID-19 related terms were excluded as they did not directly relate to the primary topic.

7 Conclusion

This study illustrates that female politicians like Zuzana Čaputová can attract substantial media attention. Her positive reception in Czechia mirrors trends in Slovakia, moreover with Czech columnists showing a protective and supportive stance. The shift towards gender equality in political representation in transborder dialogues could influence transborder public perception and encourage more women to engage in political roles, gradually shifting traditional gender norms. Moreover, the trend in one country of CEE could prompt media outlets in other regions of CEE to reflect on their portrayal of female politicians, potentially leading to more balanced and less gender-biased reporting. Given the shared cultural and historical ties within CEE countries, the way one country’s leader is portrayed in neighbouring countries’ media can significantly impact regional political dynamics and public opinion, mostly in the countries with language proximity.

The study underscores the importance of value frameworks in political portrayal, suggesting that politicians with highly esteemed values can positively influence their country’s international image. Such transborder representation elevates the international stature of both the politician and their country and shows that the politics’ persona with high value framework may be a potent model for comparison and improvement of the political scene, which is basically important for CEE countries based on the political involvement and inclination to authoritative politics (Wiatr, 2018). Positive media representation across borders can foster better political relations and collaboration among CEE countries, contributing to regional stability and integration. In transborder dialogue engagement on social networks emerges as crucial for successful transnational communication as the journalists are not personally present in the country. By highlighting the importance of equitable media representation, the study supports the broader democratic values of fairness and equality in political discourse within the CEE region.

Acknowledgement: Financial support for this article was provided by a grant from the Grant Agency of Charles University (GAUK) under the project number 298522. I also extend my deepest gratitude to Prof. Jan Jirák for his support and insightful recommendations during the development of this study. His guidance has been instrumental in shaping the research and enhancing its academic rigor.

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