

## A CASE STUDY OF AGEISM IN POLITICAL DEBATES: ARE SOCIAL MEDIA A LATENT SOURCE OF GENERATIONAL HATRED?<sup>1</sup>

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This paper discusses how negative stereotypes, cultural conflicts and tensions related to age and generational membership are used in election campaigns. The social media are presented here as a venue where the political values are discursively paired with age and generational membership and perpetuate risks of an increase in ageism and generational conflict in symbolic universes. It presents a case study of YouTube video political campaigning and Facebook site commentaries to draw a picture of negative connotations used to build the “we” versus “them” generational categories which may result in further deepening the ageist moods in Czech society. It further shows, how these discursive practices may influence the perception of intergenerational relations in our society, but it also argues that they may have only limited influence over the actual behaviour of both younger and older in elections and political representations. The conclusion calls for deeper understanding of connections between generational conflict, age, and voting behaviour.

*Keywords:* Intergenerational conflict, politics, social media, media, YouTube, Facebook, voting, elections, age, generations

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## INTRODUCTION

Although it is not easy to quantify (Herlofson & Hagestad, 2011), there is a general belief that longer and somewhat healthier lives brought the historically unprecedented increase in the number of time overlapping generations in both families and societies, at least in the global North. Ageing of the population is considered to be a victory of humanity, providing the unprecedented opportunities of longer lives. However, it also gave rise to concerns about future developments and economical sustainability of (post)modern societies as a consequence of “burden of too many older people to care for”, “too few” children for the national renewal and “too few” economically active persons to provide for both of these presumably dependent groups. The concerns, paradoxically oriented towards today’s older generations instead of towards seniors of the future, not only spill over fiscal policies, public spending, and welfare debates but touch a big share of general political debates as well. Here they materialise in fears from older people being too numerous and too powerful. The “grey power” debate on the issue of (possibility of) increased unwanted influence of rising numbers of older people on the policy making via voting rights and gerontocracy (Guérin & Tavillot, 2017; Kotlikoff & Burns, 2004; Sinn & Uebelmesser, 2003), or by active ageing policies (Hess, Nauman & Steinkopf, 2017) could be stated here as an example. As a result, we may observe “the cultural animus against people on the basis of their years”, as Achenbaum (2010: 30) describes the very core of ageism, spreading over the public discourses. These ageist anxieties are based on disregard of the diversity of older people, their values, needs and preferences, and should be therefore deconstructed and exposed as potentially harmful and socially dysfunctional.

In this paper, we present a case study illustrating how the social media present negative stereotypes, cultural conflicts and tensions in election campaigns, how they monetize, the generational debate over political values and behaviours, and how these are embedded in ageist language and attitudes, possibly reinforcing the ageism prevalence in the Czech society. We discuss the three short YouTube videos issued on the eve of the pre-election political campaigns in 2013, 2017, and 2018 with the declared goal of activating the younger generation to become more involved in the political arena dominated by the higher older voters’ turnout in all levels of elections.

We follow not only the messages conveyed by the videos as such, but mainly the interpretations attached to them by authors and external commentators representing various public stakeholders. The case is represented by age/cohort/generation conflict of ageist origin, connecting the age, cohort or generation with perceived political values, standpoints, and criticism expressed in Facebook group commentaries. We look at age, cohort or generationally related political and social engagement evaluations expressed in posts as a representation of the values and attitudes held by the commentators and publicly displayed with the aim of being shared, seen, and commented on by others. We argue that this material can add to our knowledge on how social media can potentially influence and strengthen intergenerational conflict via the real-world events in the political disputes.

## AGEISM, GENERATIONAL CONFLICT, AND AGE INTERESTS IN POLITICS –POINT OF DEPARTURE

Ageism, defined as “an ideology based on a shared belief in the qualitative inequality of various stages of the human life cycle, manifested through a process of systematic, symbolic and real stereotyping and discrimination against individuals or groups based on their chronological age and/or their affiliation with a particular cohort and/or generation” (Vidovičová, 2008: 113) is believed to have several and interwoven sources in micro, mezzo and macro structures. The media in general and social media in particular are recognised as a platform where minorities and socially excluded groups including older people are underrepresented (Vasil & Wass, 1993) and where stereotypes and oversimplifications about old age and older people are often present (Nelson, 2004; Vickers, 2007; Levy et al., 2014; Kroon et al., 2018). The more positive view on social media as a platform for presenting alternative realities of old age and making use of the new social media in favour of older people are much scarcer (Oró-Piqueras & Marques, 2017; O’Rourke et al., 2011).

The media are perceived as a specific case because they are a platform where stereotypes can live and be replicated, be both source and perpetuators. Media have physical structures and feature identifiable social actors, authors, editors, owners, advertisers, readers, and consumers of the media content, who may to a greater or lesser extent play a role in the ageist discourse’s production, maintenance, or deconstruction. But there are other important sources of ageism which do not have such tangible structures. Intergenerational conflicts and intergenerational wars are example of these (North & Fiske, 2013; Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018). The intergenerational conflict theory is one of the meso level theories trying to explain the origins of ageism in the society: if the society has only a limited amount of scarce resources and prestigious roles available, such as jobs available or roles related to executive or political power, and if they are allocated and acquired based on age criteria or generational allegiance, age or generation rivalry may arise. In such a situation, disadvantaged groups are instigated to claiming more power, and privileged groups answer with stronger efforts to protect their privileges. The clash becomes ideological (Vidovičová, 2008). As a result both symbolic and real conflicts between generations and/or age groups may arise. On the symbolic levels the (social) media and intergenerational conflict as sources for ageism meet (cf. Petrášová, 2010).

The generational conflict may be motivated by generational inequalities (Preston, 1984; Thomson, 1989) affecting a general debate on the future of welfare states under the condition of ageing populations (cf. Binstock, 2010 for the debate overview). The dispute over the scarce resources raises questions of whether the state can sustain the rising costs of pensions and healthcare provision (Attias-Donfut & Arber, 2000) and how should different resources be prioritised between the various social groups covered by different policies (Bengtson et al., 2002; Bonoli & Häusermann, 2009; Brunner & Balsdon, 2004; Epple, Roman & Sieg, 2011; van Oorschot, Arts & Halman, 2005; Suito & Pillemer, 1988). The majority of the decisions made in these areas are subject to political representations and political values and stands. Part of these disputes are based on the “mentality of scarcity” holding that the public policies and goods are finite and support of one (i.e. older) group will inevitably leave the other (i.e. younger) group harmed (cf. Cattaneo & Wolter, 2009). The political power represented by votes and interests is counted here as well. The theories further hold

that people exercise individual motivations in their policy and political preferences, and their choices are driven by their generational interests and values (Iversen & Soskice, 2001; Huddy, Jones & Chard, 2001; Logan & Spitze, 1995).<sup>2</sup> Typically, older voters are believed to be more conservative with inclination to left-wing parties, reflecting their early political socialization during the Communist regime (Linek, 2008), while young voters are often underrepresented in the active voting groups (Linek, 2011, 2013). As epitomized by a recent article title in a similar context: “Too young to have an opinion, too old to innovate”.<sup>3</sup>

The notions of an older generation being powerful, because of numerous and disciplined voters, yet too much looking back, dwelling on the past and hindering the needed development puts them into the position of those who stand in the way of progress and better, because different, future. Their political views can be used as a tool for distinction between not only two competing political views (left vs right) but also two generational groups themselves (old vs young). Each group is symbolically and discursively assigned a political stand or a typical action (or non-action in the case of the younger generation) and is expected to act as a “typified representation” of those particular views and/or actions. The description of an example of how these processes are constructed, presented and reproduced through social media will be presented in the following sections.

## METHODS USED

In the following part of the text we will present a case study of three distinct yet related events in campaigns 2013 and 2017 general elections, and 2018 presidential elections in the Czech Republic. These examples help us to understand particular features of intergenerational conflicts’ discursive construction, mirroring the social practices and structures of socio-political contexts, thematising both politics and age and politics and generations, displaying the ageist language and pointing, both directly and indirectly, to generational conflict as a war over resources and political power. We use a mixed method integrative approach to draw the picture of how the

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2 Results of empirical studies trying to find an answer to the question whether there is or isn’t a generational war over different resources are indecisive (Fullerton & Dixon, 2010). The research findings can be divided into three main groups. The first group consists of studies that have found some evidence of intergenerational conflict reflecting significant differences in preferences as to how the welfare state should operate. They found that the life stage of a given individual will be an important predictor of his or her preferences. But the results differ not only by generations but tend to be culturally specific and vary across countries as well (Busemeyer, Goerres & Weschle, 2009). The second group of studies looks at specific types of policies, such as educational policies, over which generational conflicts may occur. However, these results do not provide clear assurances of their assumptions without attention to other variables (Ladd & Murray, 2001). The third group of studies denies the existence of the intergenerational conflict in their conclusions (Attias-Donfut & Arber, 2000; Emery, 2012; Guérin & Tavoillot, 2017). Esping-Andersen and Sarasa (2002) or Silverstein et al. (2000) talk about the so-called new generational conflicts that renew the power and social functionality of particular (age) ideologies. The fight for scarce goods in post-material, post-industrial societies continues, changing only the shape or form of such goods (Petrušek, 2006), such as prestigious jobs, political offices etc.

3 Source: <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/young-opinion-old-innovate-lifting-lid-ageism-advertising/1463016> (Accessed 24.5.2018)

chosen discourses reproduce and/or resist social and political inequality (Angermuller, 2014; Woodak & Meyer, 2009). We rely on publicly available social media production, such as YouTube videos, news, commentaries, blogs and Facebook feeds as a data source. These were identified by the keyword searches in Google search and the media archive of Newton Media featuring the title of the respective video. The numerical results are given below and in footnotes where relevant. The four main examples (YouTube's Persuade your grandma, Your first time, Generation with opinion, and Lumpencafé on Facebook) were chosen on the line of the snowball evolving from the top featured video. Further, we take advantage of analysis of the survey Ageism 2012 to describe the perception of the message and its age-based differentiations in the Czech adult population.<sup>4</sup>

## THE CASE: PERSUADE YOUR GRANDMA, YOUR FIRST TIME, GENERATION WITH OPINION, AND LUMPENCAFÉ ON FACEBOOK

### *Persuade your grandma*

It will not be an over exaggeration to claim that it all started with the pre-election video directed by Petr Zelenka, called "Persuade your grandma,"<sup>5</sup> which has become a cultural icon of intergenerational conflict debates from 2010 onwards.<sup>6</sup> The almost four minute long video spot was uploaded on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010 on the web movie platform YouTube. The overall idea and script is a direct (some even claim "stolen", Kupka, 2010), but culturally fitted quotation of influential Sara Silverman's YouTube video, trying to convince the young Jews to persuade their grandparents "living in Florida" to vote for president Obama.<sup>7</sup> The protagonists of the CZ clip, young actors Jiří Mádl (\*1986) and Marta Isoová (\*1981), standing in a retro-style furnished living room with a brown sofa open the video with the question: "*If you know that you can*

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4 For the assessment of the perception of the video "Persuade your grandma" we use analysis of representative survey Ageism 2012. The survey field work was conducted by the Focus - Centre for Social and Marketing Analysis in the form of standardised personal interviews with the support of computer (CAPI) in respondents' homes. The respondents were selected using quotas to reflect the age, gender, education, size of place of residence and region composition of the Czech adult population aged 18 to 80 years. In total 1640 interviews were available for further analysis. The survey is based on previous studies described elsewhere (Vidovičová, 2008), however the issue addressed here was not previously followed and we present unique analysis of this particular data here. We present two-dimensional descriptive analysis which sufficiently supports purposes of this study.

5 Originally: Přemluv bábu. The Czech expression "bába" is a slightly negatively connotation variant of a "babička" - the grandmother, granny.

6 The debates over generational conflict in the social media have risen even before. Already in April 13th Petrášová (2010) covered in the news feed on the very prominent portal iDnes the existence of the Facebook (FB) group called „Jejich revírem je Kaufland, jejich tempo je vražedné - důchodci!“. The title is parody on the opening in the German TV series Cobra 11 and the group, with around 330 thousand members, featured commentaries on how older people stay in the way in the public transport or in the supermarkets, but included also some very harsh commentaries like "Kill them all. Gang on them!". The referral to Schirmmacher's (2005) notion of generational wars are quoted here as one possible scenario of future development. As this FB group itself had many members and was also present in the public debates outside the FB platform, it could be that it has in some way prepared the field for the events to come with the Persuade your grandma video. However, as it does not feature the political line of argument, we took it out of our analysis here.

7 Available from: <https://youtu.be/AgHXX9R4Qtk>; Published on Sep 25, 2008; 2,349,943 views as May 2018.

*change the destiny of this country by visiting your grandparents, would you drive over to visit them? Of course, you would! Unless you are total... (peep sound)".* Subsequently the video features various symbolic visual and linguistic shortcuts, addressing young viewers, urging them to discourage their grandparents from voting the left-wing parties with emphasis on the communist party: *"because if in the next elections the left wing wins it will be the fault of the old people because these are the people who vote the left and that could be people from your family ... and they usually live in the countryside, how is that possible?! ... have they forgotten how this country looked like during the 40 years under the Communist ruling?... well older people have selective memory, they remember their first kiss but not the process with Milada Horáková (note: a victim executed in politically motivated process with the communist party opponents in 1950's) ..."* (0:32–0:56).

As of May 2018, the "Persuade your grandma" video has over 890 000 YouTube views, almost 2 000 mentions in the newspapers and TV or radio broadcastings, and the Google search generates more than 55 200 results.<sup>8</sup> The video clip was broadcasted and/or covered in news pieces by most of the printed and audio-visual national media, gaining also high visibility in general public discussions.<sup>9</sup> Even after two years more than a quarter of the respondents of the Ageism 2012 study were able to comment on the content of the video: 11% of the respondents remembered seeing the whole clip, a further 7% saw it at least partially, and 9% did not remember seeing the clip, but recalled its content. There is an obvious age gradient, with 33 % of those recalling the video in the age group 18–29 years, 28 % of those in their forties and fifties, and only 15% in the age group 70–80 years old. However, taking into account the time difference between the first appearance of the video online and the survey, and the fact that only about 35 % of those in the 65+ age group are active users of the Internet (Český statistický úřad, 2017), this is quite remarkable penetration of the cultural product into the consciousness of the population.

The messages conveyed by the content of the video were at least ambiguous, as the protagonists later said: we knew we were "on the edge", but they thought of the hyperbole and edgy humour as purposeful.<sup>10</sup> The important point to be made here is that the main target of the irony and sarcasm were not the seniors, but the left-wing parties and the legacy of Communist party. The authors point out series of harm done by the communist party during their ruling, older voters are being criticised "only" for "having the selective memory". However, the massive critic, by some commentators called "an avalanche" that followed the streaming of the video concentrated on the age and generational aspects, rather than on the political

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8 It should be noted that both penetration of the Internet use, as well as the social media usage, which typically generate the quantity of impact of particular piece, was probably below today's levels.

9 In the first 30 days, the Newton media archive recorded 500 news pieces mentioning the title of the video, in May 2018 the count was almost 2000 in total. Marek Prchal, member of the production team and the author of the political campaign of the last election winner party "ANO", claims that this was the most popular viral video of 2010 and gained about 30 million CZK (approx. 1,2 mil EUR) of media space worth in the follow up coverage. (Source: [https://www.slideshare.net/marek\\_prchal/premluv-babu](https://www.slideshare.net/marek_prchal/premluv-babu); accessed: 12.5.2018).

10 The final part of the video features a "promise" to those who will take on the action, underling the hyperbolic discursive features: "we will tell you where to find on the Internet the very best and totally free animal anal porno video featuring the female member of the Italian parliament, Rocco Siffredi and eel" (3:39–3:53).

messages. The video was labelled by various public stakeholders, including celebrities, politicians, NGO representatives, academics and other opinion leaders as *gerontophobic, ageist, pathetic, stupid, primitive, vulgar, and tasteless*. (Česká televize 24, 2010a; Blogy a Názory, 2010; Deník Referendum, 2010). The political scientist Jiří Pehe, one of the first commentators of the video for national television, talks about social-Darwinist nature of the video message: “... when I saw it, I was a little bit horrified. There is the right of everyone to engage politically. It is, of course, totally fine, to slightly exaggerate. But unfortunately, the clip struck me with its social Darwinism, with its approach to the old people. ... “You are an old lost generation, so do something for us, a young right-wing generation – it seems a little out of place,” says Pehe. ...First of all, the fact that the whole left is thrown into one bag is a basic problem. And the second problem is that I find it vulgar when young people who were barely born before 89 want to explain to the old people who lived in it, how they had mess up these forty years and become lazy.” (Česká televize 24, 2010b)

We do not have any data reflecting the general public opinion which would be collected immediately during these events, but from the Ageism 2012 survey, it seems that perception of the video content slightly differed from the medialized selective pool of opinion leaders (see Table 1).

Table 1. Perception of the Clip “Persuade your grandma” by its Audience (in %)

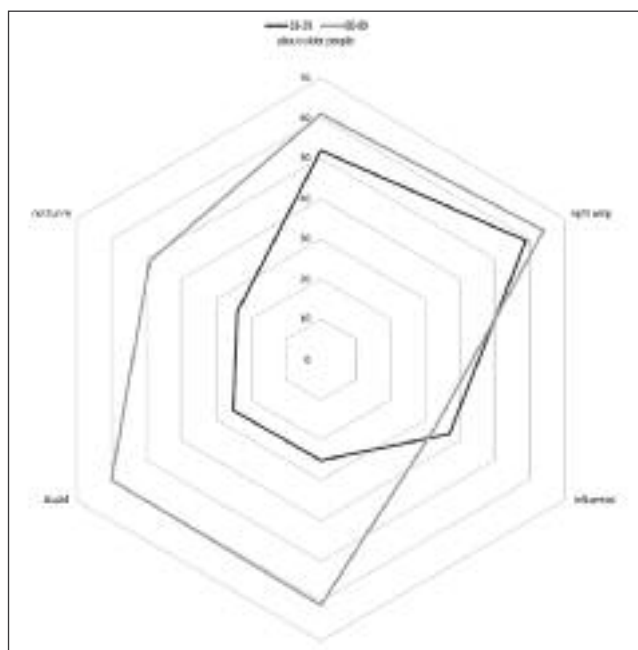
	Grades 1+2	Grade 3	Grades 4+5	
about youth	19	29	52	about seniors
smart	28	31	41	stupid
funny	40	22	39	no joke
influential	36	38	26	insignificant
right-wing	64	31	5	left-wing
helpful	27	33	40	harmful

Question: “I have here on the card several pairs of words and I ask you to tell me the number that you think best describes the contents of the clip.” Items in the questionnaire were rotated.

Four to five out of ten respondents perceived the content as being right wing, about older people, stupid, not funny and harmful, which closely copies the media discourse present in the follow up coverage. However, these evaluations are not unanimous as quite a large share of respondents chose the middle, more neutral or indecisive category, or even went for more positive stands. Taken together, these two variants actually represent a majority of the answers. The agreement with the opinion leaders was reached in attitude that it was rather about older people (52%), or both generations (29%), less so about younger generation, which was meant to be addressed by the original script. If we compare the 18–29 age group attitudes with the 60–80 year olds, they both agree that it was a politically right-wing clip, in other aspects, however, seniors are much more critical. The younger group of respondents were slightly more convinced of its social significance (influential), and they perceived it less as a testimony about seniors, they understood this video was talking “to them” by higher share of recorded answers. We find these results quite interesting in the way they illustrate how one message can be variably “read” by different age groups, and we argue that the follow up negative framing of the video in the print media and on television has significantly produced the “ageist” perception of the

discourse; something, which was not present in the video as such. We may even hypothesise that the “media hysteria” could have been prevented with an alternative interpretation, for example, if the clip was presented and framed as a “call for intergenerational dialogue.” Instead, it was and still is until today supporting the negative effects related to panic from demography and grey power critique.

*Figure 1. Perception of the Content of the Clip According to the Age of the Respondent - Edge Ages (in%)*



The influence of the Persuade your grandma (hereinafter PG-video) has decreased but is not really diminishing. First, it has shown that “these things work”, i.e. such agenda setting spins attention and, gets further coverage and at the same time the age is a meaningful characteristic and generational membership can be mobilised for political purposes even in the younger generations and first-time voters (i.e. people aged 18 and older).

None of the campaigns that followed from 2010 onwards was missing a kind of disclaimer “we are not Persuade your grandma, we are different”, trying both to distance themselves from the PG-video, and yet capitalise its previous success in both the online and offline world. The avalanche of critique aimed at the Persuade your grandma has made followers also slightly more cautious. The direct references to right wing, or any other specific preferences for that matter, as well as references to generational differences has become less pronounced in these later youth voter campaigns. However, it does not mean they have really disappeared.



### *Your first time*

The YouTube campaign “Your first time!” (Tvoje poprvé!) featuring a selection of young Czech celebrities was issued in 2017 by the Political Marketing initiative. The visual aspects were inspired by the US initiative “Important. Save the day. Vote”<sup>11</sup> with the following rationale: “*The Czech political parties are not paying attention to the young people in the campaign because this group does not vote very often, and it is more interesting for the parties to focus on older people. The elections are also for young people and therefore we have chosen to positively motivate the generation of the youngest voters,*” says co-author of the project Alžběta Králová from the Institute of Political Marketing (Zwrtková, 2017). Králová in this quote makes an indirect statement towards the Persuade your grandma, by stressing the “positive motivation” aspect, while both the headlines and the body of the text by Zwrtková (2017) make the direct reference, seeing this (and probably any other future initiative) as a direct PG-video follow up: “*The Persuade your grandma is back. Klus, Mišík and other celebrities urge juniors to go to elections*”<sup>12</sup>. The script of the video makes indirect references to the start of a sexual relationship (“your first time”) by providing answers on an unspoken question “how did it feel?”. In one particular point one of the male celebrities says: “*I was surprised by the number of old age pensioners present*” (0:36).

### *Generation with an opinion*

Similarly, in 2018 a pre-election video “Generation with an Opinion” (Generace s názorem) was streamed. Prominent influencers of younger generations, such as actors, athletes, singers and YouTubers were once again encouraging young people to think about the current political situation and cast their votes in the Presidential elections. The clip has 1.1 million YouTube views, 19,117 people shared the clip and the clip range is 1.8 million people.

This campaign was initiated by four students with the rationale to impress upon their generation (Facebook, 2018b). The authors claimed to be motivated to produce this video by the situation during the presidential election in 2013, where 58% of people aged 19–29 did not come to vote, while this share was “only” 36% in older age groups (Median, 2013). The urge employed in this particular video was built around the argument that “*if you don’t vote, somebody else will decide about you, and you may not like it*”. While this could be already understood as a hint about possible conflict of interests between the generations, more direct reference is presented in an “explanatory” statement that follows: “*It is something like you are getting a tattoo, but you let your grandmother to choose it.*” (0:19–0:22) on which the actors shake their heads disapprovingly.

### *Facebook group “Lumpenkavárna”*

The impact of such rhetoric can be followed on social media platforms, which have already been identified as a semantic space of negative symbols of old age and ageing

11 Available from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRp1CK\\_X\\_Yw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRp1CK_X_Yw) uploaded 21.9.2016; 8 505 913 views by May 2018. Notably, the US initiative makes no claims related to age or youth, but the issues of race is mentioned on two occasions.

12 Available from: <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/premluv-babu-se-vraci-klus-misik-a-dalsi-zpevaci-premlouvaji-v-klipu-juniory-aby-sli-volit-38210>; Original video was uploaded 9.10.2017; 17 924 views by May 2018.

(North & Fiske, 2012). The “Prague Café” label as a symbol of right wing sympathisers and intellectuals is often referred to by members of the Facebook group called “Lumpenkavárna” (Lumpencafé). The group has 35 thousand members and represents a rather coherent social group with a clear political agenda featuring many debates related to current political events (Facebook, 2018a). The Presidential elections in 2018 were only the second presidential election in modern Czech history based on a direct vote from the people, so the individual dis-likes as well as individual characteristics of the candidates, including their age, were frequently aired and commented upon on Facebook.

Just before the elections, from the 1st of December to 31st of December 2017 we found only seventeen posts featuring the keyword “senior(s)” in the Lumpencafé commentaries.<sup>13</sup> At least eight in ten contributions were pointing to older people as voters of Mr. Miloš Zeman, which was perceived as a choice worthy of criticism or even disgust for the members of this group, who declare to follow the legacy of former president Vaclav Havel as a high moral and intellectual standard. In the following month, where both rounds of the election took place, the frequency as well as the negativity of comments rose. In January 2018 the number of commentaries featuring the search key word “senior(s)” multiplied almost seven times and can be separated into three general types. In more than half of the 54 commentaries found, negative attitudes and comments were explicitly present. Words such as “evil” („zlo“) or the label “*silly old people*” („naivní starší lidé“) were used on several times. The comments were mocking older people for their votes for Miloš Zeman (ex-leader of Czech Social Democratic Party and prime minister in 1998 – 2002) as a vote for the hero and symbol of their youth. Older people were discursively homogenised in these comments by claims that this particular candidate is *their only possibility they see*. To a lesser extent, other contributors (28%) were expressing the stand that older people “*know what to do*”, supporting the older voters’ choices on their behalf (cf. the criticism of Persuade your grandma as being inappropriately instructive, which echoes here). Only 19% of the contributions were published by older members of the group themselves, taking a strong stand with pronounced agency defending the older people as a group, as those who are *not all silly, have own opinion and know more about the situation in society than younger people* (again, the echo of the “Generation with an opinion” video argumentation can be traced here). An interesting example can be taken from Mrs. Z. I. – a greyed hair lady’s commentary in the group: “*Please do not write and not speak of me as Mr. Zeman’s voter. I am part of a group of seniors, whether I like it or not!! I am a pensioner and I will not vote for Zeman. Not because he ... is drinking alcohol and smokes but because he cheats ... and pulls us to the East. He is a very bad example for anyone (not only for children). The vote for him is the worst thing! I will vote for Mr. Horáček because he is courageous, determined and hardworking. He is willing to sacrifice his property (a great rarity in our country) ... for everything that has enriched us so far (his musical composition). He knows we*

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13 The word search in the commentaries in a particular FB group is limited. There were 211 commentaries visible to us, but according to the administrators over five thousand comments were posted in this period. This discrepancy can of course have influence on the numerical results we have obtained. However, we hypothesise that the linguistic tools used, and negative connotations encountered may be a stable feature. After all, our view of the discussion may be a simulation of “an average” user or group member and his/her experience.

*have to be in the bundle in which we are, otherwise, we are only “a cane in the wind”.* (Facebook, 7. 1. 2018a - “Lumpenkavárna”)

Her account illustrates several lines of the argument: firstly she is not distancing herself from the “old age group”, she is not a pro-age activist either (*whether I like it or not*), but she does not take on the potentially ageist approach of dismantling her old age status, rather she confirms it twice by referring to the socioeconomic status of old age pensioner. Secondly, she makes a very strong case for pointing to other commentators’ incorrect evaluations: when you say something about older people you are talking about me as well (discouraging the in-group/out-group distancing), but I do not fit into your homogenising, stereotypical expectations about older people’s behaviour (i.e. voting for Mr. Zeman). Thirdly, she provides an explanation of her political preferences as not being based on age of the candidates (as it was often the case and would be expected in an age-sympathy vote within age-in-group) or their personal lifestyle, but to be rooted in her genuine political values (right wing, “not to be pulled to the East”). The Facebook was here therefore used as a useful platform for the expression of the agentic position along several lines important for this social actor. This post by Mrs. Z. I. we argue, was provoked as a reaction to a previous action, i.e. repeated and long-term push to both directly and indirectly present older people as “them”, “distinct from the young”, implying their “unfavourable” political opinions and actions, usurping and almost stealing the political space for themselves.

There was considerable social and financial capital and know how invested in the production of the videos and in its maintenance in the media spotlight for a considerably long period (Prchal, 2011). The victimised group, if we apply this point of view, has only limited possibilities how to counteract such massive agenda. The majority of the reactions we found in the related materials brought to our attention by the online search, were given “on behalf” of older people, not by older people themselves. The two or three attempts to fight back by the same means, e.g. YouTube videos featuring older people and making direct references to the original spot as (“Persuade Jirka, persuade Marta” or “Persuade Grandma. The Green party”<sup>14</sup>), were not even closely as successful as the original, having on average 40 thousand views (i.e. 5 % of the original). However, it has also become clear that age is indeed a relevant characteristic for the political debates in the social media arena for many social actors and therefore, the ageism may flourish on their soil. The indirectness of the messages of the latter videos in comparison to PG-video have somehow decreased the level of follow up reactions, however, one should still ask if they are that much different. While their scripts to some extent employ different strategies (persuade older people not to vote for the left-wing parties vs. participate in the elections), the latter, subtle messages use the discursive power of the PG-video to build up on its marketing power. The fact that is done by openly distancing itself from it makes the case, in our view, even stronger.

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<sup>14</sup> Accessible from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfVd3IgkZ4E&t=1s>, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ghvkK\\_Ijxc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ghvkK_Ijxc)

## DISCUSSION

Case studies help to single out and explore actual phenomena in depth in their context of real life (Mareš, 2015; Yin, 2009). The strength of case analysis is in the possibility to enhance our understanding of other similar cases (Hendl, 2005; Mareš, 2015). In the picture we have drawn above we have shown examples of how the social media discourses thematise the age and generation groups as owners of homogeneous political stands which may get into conflict over the scarce resource of electoral victory, resulting in presenting older people as conservative, backward thinking, nostalgic, not being able to orient themselves in the today's world and selfish in their votes, which should be preferably overtaken by masses of activated younger generations.

Indeed, age, birth cohort and generation membership can be associated with particular tendencies in terms of political preferences, but the political attitudes as well as voting behaviour will be dependent on many other aspects beyond plain chronology, including education, socioeconomic status, place of residence, gender, the type of elections and others. As a result, old age pensioners (in Czech language frequent synonym for older people) are not a big monolithic "civilian army of voters" (Binstock, 2010; Walker, 1996), rather they tend to differ in economic and social status, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, education, marital status and other characteristics, which may have the same or even stronger power in explaining the political preferences than generational membership (Sinn & Uebelmesser, 2003; Binstock, 2010; Persson & Tabellini, 2000; Phillipson, 1996).

In the context of the Czech Republic the prevalent idea that older people are rather conservative and leftist is based on relatively higher preferences for the parties like Czechoslovak Social Democracy Party (ČSSD) and Communist Party (KSČ) in higher age cohorts, reflecting their early political socialization in times of communist ruling since 1948. According to the 2017 voting model proposed by Median (2017), these two parties were to be chosen by 34% of those in age group 55–64 and 32% of those aged 65+, but only 16 % of those in 35–44 age group and 25–34 age group, decreasing to negligible 4% in the youngest eligible voters (18–24) in the last parliamentary elections. However, the same information could be presented in a way that the majority, 70 per cent of people aged 55 and older voted for other than these leftist parties. These figures give us confidence to say that to talk about older people as left wing parties voters has the quality of an overgeneralising stereotype. Our argument is further supported by the fact that there is more than four times higher preference of young voters aged 18–24, as opposed to those aged 65+, for the controversial Party of Direct Democracy (Strana přímé demokracie – SPD) which has not been scrutinised either by public or by media. So it is the higher age of the individual combined with his/her left wing political stand which sets the media agenda and therefore may support the animosity between age groups or generations in political debates. The generations in these debates are often personified by (unintentional, internalised) disregard for internal heterogeneity between members of a particular generation and overstressing the societal general formative processes present during the formative periods of any given birth cohort and resulting common features or tendencies. These processes enable the use of the "we" vs. "them" distinctions to the point of latent conflicts, fully expressing the ageism in Achenbaum's (2010) understanding quoted above.

Further, different groups can have altruistic or selfish motives, but that does not necessarily predetermine the results and impact of their behaviour. For example, Huddy, Jones, and Chard (2001) argue that the long-term personal interest of the younger generation in secure retirement will be reflected in increased pension income also for the present generations of older people. Older generations may, on the other hand be motivated to vote in favour of the policies that they believe will secure the future of their children and grandchildren, regardless of the immanent impact over their own generation. So the logic of generational vote could be scrutinised from both a political and topical perspective, as the age/cohort/generation may be a weak predictor of either.

In a previous study, we have shown, that about 54% of the Czech adult population agrees with the statement, that people older than 60 years should be not take any political office (Vidovičová, 2008: 172), which is a not only age discriminatory but also violates the very basic principles of democracy. The both elections in 2013 and 2018 were normatively perceived as a “clash” between various dualities: young and old, between Prague as a cultural and intellectual centre (“Prague café”) and “rural Czechs”, between education and backward thinking. The actual impact of social media on the electoral results is now being widely discussed in the social sciences (Lasorsa, 1992; Hunt & Gentzkow, 2017; Sharma & Parma, 2016; Social Media Club, 2017), but it seems clear that the videos we have pointed out here are directly and rather successfully building the generational identity on principles of favourable in-group and negative out-group identities, instead of a more cooperative approach of mutual complementing of skills, experiences, and values, or as Biggs and Lowenstein call it, of “a generational intelligence“ (Biggs & Lowenstein, 2011).

The generational conflict seeded in these social media representations here, is not harming only older generations. The young are subject to homogenisation as well, as the actors of these campaigns are indirectly implying and expecting the young votes significantly differ from those of their parents and grandparents, which in reality is often not the case. Also, results of surveys after the last Presidential elections in 2018 showed that the education, not the age was decisive, although in each age group with a different outcome: “*Milos Zeman had great support especially among people over 50 without a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) ... Mr. Drahoš defeated Zeman among the 50-year-olds with a GCSE. Among the older higher educated people their positions were balanced*” and quite surprisingly after seeing all the effort the young celebrities and YouTube’s influencers put into mobilising of the younger generation, analysts in Median (2018) claim: “*Milos Zeman’s support increased especially among younger people without (GCSE). Milos Zeman managed to mobilize this most passive group for participation and support.*” (Median, 2018). In short, voting behaviour may be, at least to some extent, a function of age, but political preferences are more a function of education and socio-economic status. This is the fact the young voters tend to disregard, overstating the expected and perceived role of the chronological age, and therefore, confirming the relevance of such debates for discussions on ageism and related age discrimination issues.

Throughout the text we used the term “generations” in rather classical understanding of Mannheim’s (1952), who uses the concept as, at least partially, overlapping with the “cohort”, i.e. people born in a particular time period and ageing in given chronological order (Attias-Donfut, Arber, 2000; Kertzer, 1983; Pilcher, 1994). This, like class, locates individuals socially and opens up certain possibilities and

experiences while shutting down others. Generational units provide self-conscious awareness of group identity, but not all generations have a particular style to be associated with. Often, generations come to be associated with political movements or develop in reaction to events or previous generations (Pickard, 2016: 203). Mannheim highlighted the role of class, place, and other cultural and social characteristics in shaping generational units, however, Pickard (2016) continues, “the complexity of this original position tends to get lost in many media representations (and popular views) ... Indeed, whilst stressing the difference *between* generations it over-stresses similarities *within* them” (Pickard, 2016: 204). The hundreds of thousands of likes and shares of the online contents may be impressive but seems to do very little in addressing these issues in more age-inclusive ways. Future studies should be going into depths of conveyed meanings and try to access the level of impact such messages have on actual behaviour in the political arena.

## CONCLUSION

There is an ongoing discussion in what areas intergenerational conflicts are the strongest, under which circumstances the conflict is becoming a war, and who are the aggressors and who are the victims, and for the matter of fact, if they are real or only a methodological artefact (Fullerton & Dixon, 2010). According to recent results of the European Quality of Life Survey by Eurofound (2016), the Czech Republic has above average levels of perceived conflict among old and young people, especially in older and in the youngest respondents. Based on our case study we argue that social media and presentation of pro-youth electoral videos are feeding into it. According to Eurobarometer (2009), the majority of Czechs believe that individual age groups cannot easily agree on what is the best for their society (65 %), “because there will be the higher number of older voters, political decision making will pay less attention to the needs of young people” (47%). Phelan (2018: 561) confirms that “ageism is constructed and legitimised in relation to its condition of possibility in discourse (and)... (media) mediate the social production of valid knowledge. Furthermore, discourse has consequences; it does not occur in an ideological vacuum but permeates societal attitudes, professional practice, policy and legislation and thus, is fundamental to the perpetuation of hegemonic interests.” Interestingly enough, six in ten respondents in this survey seem to perceive that “the media are exaggerating the risk of conflict between generations”. It is an important conclusion, that the social media discursive campaigns may be filtered through personal experiences with positive intergenerational relationships.

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