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AUTHENTICITY AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS: THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the relationship between political correctness and authenticity in contemporary political communication, focusing on how deviations from political correctness norms shape public perception and political polarisation. Through a comparative qualitative analysis of selected public statements and media representations of Donald Trump and Zoran Milanović, the study explores contrasting communication styles and rhetorical strategies used to construct authenticity. While political correctness promotes inclusivity and reduces overt conflict in public discourse, the analysis indicates that its perceived constraints may encourage political actors to adopt more provocative and polarising communication styles. Trump's rhetoric is characterised by direct, emotionally charged language, whereas Milanović employs irony, sarcasm, and historical references. In different political and cultural contexts, both approaches function as strategies for visibility and authenticity-building. The findings suggest that departures from political correctness can increase public engagement but may simultaneously contribute to societal polarisation and declining trust in institutions. By situating political communication within broader debates on authenticity and responsibility, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary political discourse and its democratic implications.

KEYWORDS:

authenticity, discourse analysis, political correctness, political discourse, populist rhetoric

<https://doi.org/10.34135/communicationtoday.2026.Vol.17.No.1.12>



1 Introduction

This study examines the relationship between political correctness and authenticity in contemporary political communication, with particular attention to the processes of discursive homogenisation and the perceived “sterilisation” of political messages. While political correctness aims to promote inclusivity and reduce overt conflict in public discourse, it may simultaneously constrain freedom of expression and limit the perceived authenticity of political actors. As a result, some political leaders deliberately deviate from politically correct norms in order to position themselves as authentic, direct, and aligned with “the people” rather than with political elites (Mudde & Rovira, 2017).

Political communication has become a central mechanism for shaping public opinion, mobilising voters, and constructing political identities. In this context, political correctness functions ambivalently: it operates as a normative filter that structures acceptable public speech, while also generating resistance amongst political actors who perceive it as restrictive. This tension is particularly visible in the communication strategies of politicians whose public performances intentionally challenge dominant discursive norms. Digital platforms further reshape political communication by enabling personalised, leader-centred forms of mobilisation that reinforce perceptions of authenticity (Gerbaudo, 2018).

The text focuses on a comparative analysis of the communication styles of Donald Trump, President of the United States, and Zoran Milanović, President of Croatia. Although embedded in distinct political and cultural contexts, both figures employ rhetoric that departs from established standards of political correctness. Trump’s communication style is characterised by directness, emotional appeal, and simplification, whereas Milanović frequently relies on irony, sarcasm, and historical references. Despite these differences, both approaches function as strategies of authenticity construction and contribute to political polarisation. Moreover, contemporary media environments increasingly amplify polarising messages, creating communication dynamics in which provocative rhetoric gains disproportionate visibility (Baybars Hawks & Uzunoğlu, 2019).

The aim of the study is to explore how deviations from political correctness shape contemporary political discourse, influence social relations, and affect trust in political institutions. The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How does polarising political rhetoric influence social cohesion and trust in democratic institutions?

RQ2: What differences can be identified in the thematic focus and tone of communication between Donald Trump and Zoran Milanović?

RQ3: In what ways does deviation from political correctness contribute to political visibility while simultaneously fostering social divisions?

RQ4: What role do communication professionals and mediated contexts play in shaping perceptions of authenticity and responsibility in political messaging?

The study is based on a qualitative comparative analysis of selected public statements, speeches, and media representations of both political actors. Through thematic, rhetorical, and tonal analysis, the text identifies dominant communication patterns and interpretative frames that structure public reception. Rather than seeking causal generalisations, the analysis aims to provide interpretative insight into the discursive mechanisms through which authenticity and political correctness are negotiated in contemporary political communication.

By examining two highly visible and polarising political figures, the study contributes to broader debates on political discourse, populist communication, and the normative boundaries of public speech. In an environment

marked by increasing polarisation, understanding how political rhetoric reshapes trust, legitimacy, and democratic culture remains essential for both academic inquiry and public reflection.

2 Methodology

This study adopts a **comparative qualitative research design** to examine how political correctness and authenticity are constructed and negotiated in contemporary political communication. The analysis focuses on the public communication of Donald Trump and Zoran Milanović, whose rhetorical styles represent distinct yet comparable deviations from politically correct discourse within different political and cultural contexts. Given the interpretative and qualitative nature of the study, the analysis is guided by research questions rather than testable hypotheses. The original hypotheses were therefore reformulated into analytical questions to allow for discourse-oriented interpretation rather than causal testing.

The empirical material consists of a **purposefully selected corpus of public statements**, speeches, and official public appearances made by Donald Trump and Zoran Milanović during periods of heightened political visibility. In addition, selected media articles reporting on and interpreting these statements were included in order to contextualise public reception and dominant interpretative frames. The selection of materials was guided by relevance, visibility, and explicit public reactions rather than representativeness or statistical generalisation.

The analytical framework is based on **discourse analysis** and combines several complementary analytical procedures. First, **thematic analysis** was used to identify dominant topics and recurring motifs related to political correctness, authenticity, polarisation, and institutional trust. Second, **rhetorical and stylistic analysis** focused on linguistic and communicative strategies such as irony, sarcasm, simplification, emotional appeal, and confrontation. Third, **tonal analysis** examined the evaluative orientation of statements (e.g., confrontational, neutral, conciliatory) as an interpretative category rather than a quantitative measure.

In addition to political statements and speeches, selected media articles from Croatian and international online news portals were consulted as contextual material. These included, amongst others, Al Jazeera Balkans, N1, Dnevnik.hr, Jutarnji list, Večernji list, Index.hr, Tportal, and related national and regional news platforms. The media texts were not treated as independent analytical units or scholarly sources but were used illustratively to identify dominant interpretative frames and patterns of public reaction. Their role was to contextualise political communication within the broader media environment and to support qualitative discourse interpretation rather than to provide empirical evidence or generalisable findings. The comparative dimension of the study is structured around three analytical axes:

1. forms of deviation from politically correct norms;
2. strategies of authenticity construction in public communication;
3. discursive effects related to polarisation and the delegitimization of institutions.

Rather than testing causal hypotheses, the analysis aims to **interpret patterns and meanings** emerging from political discourse and to highlight similarities and differences between the two cases. References to media reactions are used illustratively to demonstrate how political statements are framed and interpreted within public discourse.

Methodological Limitations

As a qualitative and interpretative study, the analysis is subject to certain limitations. The selection of statements and media texts does not allow for generalisation beyond the examined cases. Interpretative analysis also involves a degree of subjectivity, particularly in assessing tone and rhetorical intent. Furthermore, media coverage may reflect ideological bias, which can influence the framing of political communication. These limitations are acknowledged as inherent to discourse-oriented qualitative research.

Despite these constraints, the applied methodology enables a systematic and theoretically grounded comparison of two prominent political figures and provides insight into the discursive dynamics of political correctness, authenticity, and polarisation in contemporary political communication.

3 Analysis of Political Correctness and Communication Styles of Zoran Milanović and Donald Trump

Contemporary political communication is increasingly shaped by tensions between political correctness and perceived authenticity. This analysis examines the public communication of Zoran Milanović, President of Croatia, and Donald Trump, President of the United States, as two prominent examples of political actors who frequently depart from politically correct norms. Although operating in different political and cultural contexts, both figures employ rhetorical strategies that generate visibility, mobilise supporters, and contribute to polarisation within public discourse.

Communication Style of Zoran Milanović

Zoran Milanović's communication style is characterised by frequent use of sarcasm, irony, and historical analogies. These rhetorical elements are employed to criticise political opponents, domestic institutions, and broader societal conditions. His discourse emphasises themes of corruption, national sovereignty, and institutional failure, positioning him as a critical observer of the political establishment (Lončar, 2024).

This style contributes to authenticity construction by projecting spontaneity and intellectual autonomy. Simultaneously, Milanović's confrontational rhetoric intensifies social polarisation. Direct accusations of corruption and incompetence against political actors and institutions undermine public trust and raise concerns about political responsibility and Croatia's international reputation. Vuković and Carpentier (2023) found that Milanović's followers perceive his populism – particularly his anti-elite stance – as a key leadership trait, drawing parallels with Trump.

Communication Style of Donald Trump

Donald Trump's communication relies on a populist rhetorical style marked by simplification, emotional appeal, repetition, and the use of memorable slogans. It is evident from Trump's speeches that he employs several language functions. The most obvious is the emotive function, which connects with his audience on a personal level by expressing emotions. The conative function appears when directly addressing audiences, emphasising commitment to people while calling for joint action ("I will fight for you, and I will win for you... Together, we will...") (Hmouma, 2025).

Trump frequently employs hyperbole, attacks the media, and frames political opponents and immigrants as threats to national security and social order. Populist political communication is commonly defined through the construction of antagonistic divisions between "the people" and "the elites", a framework that remains central to contemporary analyses of populism (Mudde & Rovira, 2017).

This communication form constructs authenticity through directness and emotional intensity. By presenting himself as unfiltered and oppositional to political elites and media, Trump reinforces a dichotomous "us versus them" narrative. Scepticism against the power elite constitutes a core element of populism. Trump transformed his 2016 political inexperience into a performative asset, denying politician status during his campaign by claiming a businessman identity. While effective in mobilising supporters, such rhetoric contributes to social division and erodes trust in democratic institutions, particularly the media repeatedly labelled "the enemy of the people".

Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (2024) discusses populist authenticity as one of the defining features of Donald Trump's communication strategy. Trump's informal, grammatically imperfect, and often improvised speech does not represent a communicative deficiency; on the contrary, it functions as a deliberate rhetorical resource. Although Trump is far removed from the social position and everyday realities of his voters, he seeks to identify with them through his manner of speech. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen notes that empirical research has demonstrated how strongly people are inclined to form deeply personal, social, and even moral assumptions about others solely on the basis of their manner of speech. The human voice reveals a great deal about the speaker. While Trump cannot legitimately claim to share the lived experiences of the "ordinary person", his use of voice presents him as a genuine man of the people. His informal voice enables the expression of populist rhetoric and renders his claims of identification with the people convincing.

Key Themes and Patterns of Communication

Despite stylistic differences, the communication of Trump and Milanović reveals several shared patterns. Both leaders rely on polarising rhetoric as a mobilisation strategy, framing political conflict in moral and emotional terms. Trump frequently uses apocalyptic imagery and delegitimises the media, while Milanović focuses on institutional criticism and corruption, often employing irony and historical metaphor to underscore his arguments.

These strategies function as tools for constructing authenticity and reinforcing political identity, but they also contribute to heightened polarisation and reduced social cohesion. As Aalberg et al. (2017) note, polarisation inherent in populist communication can gradually erode trust in democratic institutions.

Tonal Tendencies in Political Communication

The analysis of tonal orientation indicates that both leaders predominantly employ confrontational and negative tones in their public communication. Trump's rhetoric tends to be more aggressively confrontational, whereas Milanović demonstrates greater tonal variation, occasionally adopting a more neutral or reflective stance. These tonal tendencies are not treated as quantitative measurements but as interpretative indicators that support qualitative analysis of communication style.

Similarities: Polarisation as a Strategic Resource

Both Trump and Milanović employ dichotomous rhetoric that divides society into opposing camps. Supporters are positioned as representatives of "the people", while opponents, institutions, or the media are framed as corrupt, incompetent, or hostile. This rhetorical division strengthens emotional identification with political leaders while simultaneously delegitimising alternative viewpoints. In his earlier appearances, Milanović was not a populist, but later his public appearance took on that characteristic as well. Because of his rhetoric, vocabulary and anti-EU discourse, he has been referred to as the "Croatian Trump" (Vuković & Carpentier, 2023).

Attacks on the media are a shared feature of their communication. Trump explicitly delegitimises journalism as an institution, while Milanović criticises domestic political and media actors as extensions of entrenched power structures. In both cases, media criticism serves to reinforce narratives of authenticity and opposition to elites.

Differences: Political and Cultural Contexts

The differences in communication strategies reflect the distinct political environments in which Trump and Milanović operate. Trump's rhetoric is oriented towards global visibility, national identity, and mass mobilisation through simplified messages and emotional appeal. Milanović's communication is embedded within a national context and relies more heavily on intellectual framing, historical references, and irony.

While Trump's style is designed for broad appeal and rapid dissemination, Milanović's rhetoric often requires interpretative engagement and is directed more towards politically attentive audiences. These contextual differences shape how authenticity and political correctness are negotiated in each case.

Illustrative Use of Media Examples and Visual Materials

Examples from political statements and media coverage demonstrate recurring themes and rhetorical strategies illustratively. Graphical representations of key terms and tonal tendencies serve as descriptive tools supporting qualitative interpretation rather than statistical generalisation. Their purpose is to visualise dominant discursive patterns and facilitate comparative analysis.

Selected graphical representations and media examples further support the qualitative interpretation of communication strategies. These visual materials do not constitute statistical evidence but visualise dominant discursive patterns, thematic emphases, and tonal tendencies identified through qualitative discourse analysis. They facilitate comparative interpretation of Donald Trump and Zoran Milanović’s communication styles while enhancing analytical transparency.

Visualisation of Dominant Themes and Key Terms

The graphical representation of key terms highlights differences in thematic priorities between the two political actors. The visualisation illustrates that Donald Trump’s communication is strongly oriented towards themes related to the media, national security, immigration, and political confrontation, with frequent emphasis on expressions such as “fake news” and references to external and internal threats. In contrast, Zoran Milanović’s rhetoric more frequently foregrounds issues of corruption, institutional dysfunction, and national sovereignty, reflecting his focus on domestic political critique.

These visual patterns support the qualitative findings presented in the textual analysis, demonstrating how each leader constructs political relevance through distinct thematic framings shaped by their political contexts and communication objectives.

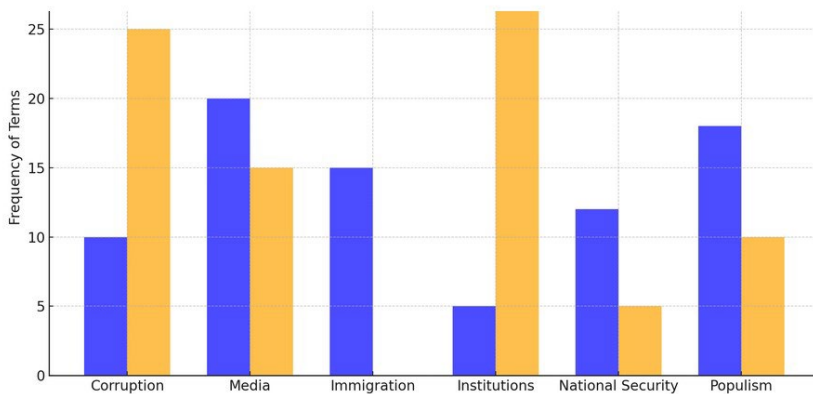


Figure 1: Illustrating the dominant thematic emphases identified in the public communication of Donald Trump and Zoran Milanović

Source: Own processing, 2025

Tonal Tendencies in Political Communication

Another set of graphical materials illustrates tonal tendencies in the communication of Donald Trump and Zoran Milanović. The visual comparison indicates a predominance of negative and confrontational tones in both leaders’ communication. Trump’s rhetoric appears more consistently aggressive, with lower presence of neutral or conciliatory elements, whereas Milanović’s communication demonstrates slightly greater tonal variation.

These tonal distributions serve as interpretative indicators rather than numerical measurements, reinforcing qualitative observations regarding the confrontational nature of contemporary political discourse and its role in fostering polarisation and emotional engagement.

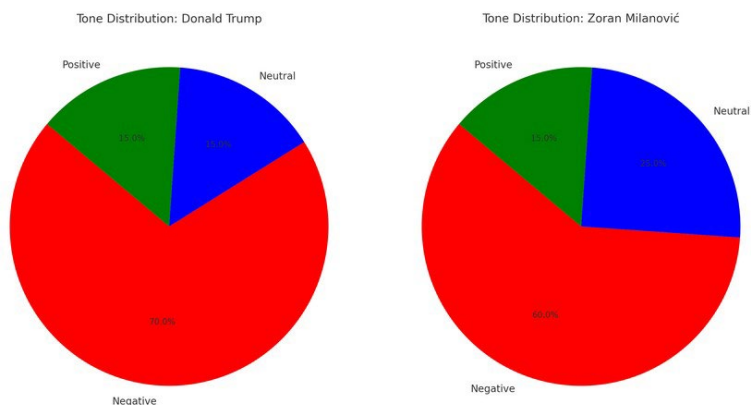


Figure 2: Visualising tonal tendencies in their rhetoric, indicating a predominance of confrontational tones
 Source: Own processing, 2025

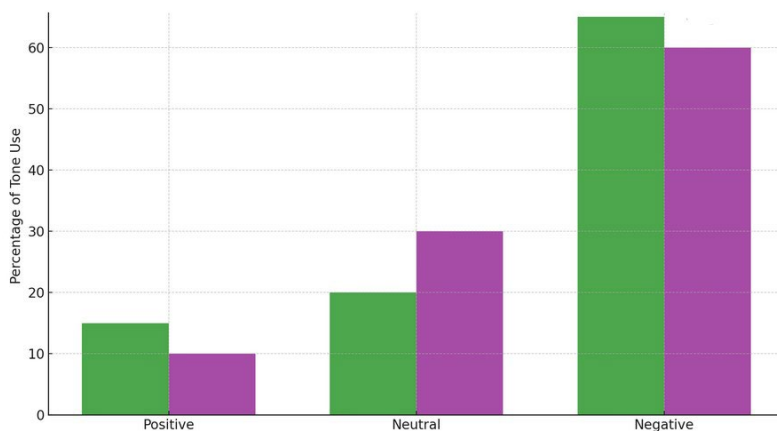


Figure 3: Illustrative representation of tonal tendencies in the public communication of Donald Trump and Zoran Milanović
 Source: Own processing, 2025

The figures illustrate dominant tonal tendencies: confrontational and negative tones prevail in both cases, though Trump’s rhetoric shows more consistent aggression while Milanović’s includes greater tonal variation with neutral expressions.

Media Examples as Contextual Illustration

Selected examples from media coverage contextualise how political statements are framed and received within the broader media environment. Statements such as Trump’s repeated attacks on the media as “the enemy of the people” or Milanović’s sarcastic critiques of domestic institutions illustrate how provocative rhetoric is amplified through media narratives and contributes to public meaning construction.

These examples demonstrate how political communication extends beyond original statements, entering mediated discourse where it is reinterpreted, contested, and symbolically reinforced. Media texts illustrate dominant interpretative frames rather than serving as independent analytical material. The mediatisation of political communication is evident in the way political actors’ public performances are shaped by media logics, as demonstrated by Tanta and Lesinger (2015), who show that Zoran Milanović’s communication had already been characterised by a strong interplay between political messaging and media framing in the earlier stages of his public career.

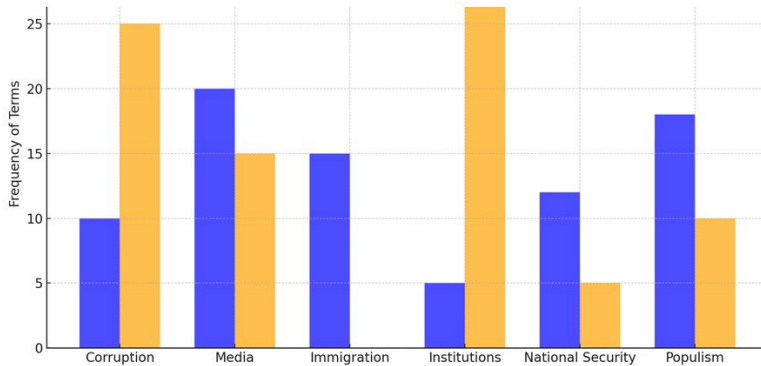


Figure 4: An illustrative overview of media framing patterns following controversial statements
 Source: Own processing, 2025

Interpretative Value of Visual Materials

Taken together, the graphical representations and media examples function as complementary tools that enhance the qualitative analysis. By visualising dominant themes and tonal orientations, they support comparative interpretation and make discursive patterns more accessible without implying statistical generalisation. Their illustrative role aligns with the qualitative and interpretative methodological framework of the study and contributes to a clearer understanding of how political correctness, authenticity, and polarisation are negotiated in contemporary political communication.

Political Communication and Its Discursive Impact

The communication strategies of Trump and Milanović demonstrate how departures from political correctness can enhance visibility and reinforce perceptions of authenticity. At the same time, such strategies carry significant risks, including increased polarisation, weakened trust in institutions, and the normalisation of confrontational political discourse.

By examining these dynamics, the analysis highlights the broader implications of political communication practices in contemporary democracies. The findings underscore the need to balance authenticity with responsibility in political discourse, particularly in media environments that reward visibility and provocation.

Discussion: Communication Styles and Their Impact

The comparative analysis of the communication styles of Donald Trump and Zoran Milanović demonstrates that, despite operating in different political and cultural contexts, both political actors share a common strategic departure from the norms of political correctness. This departure functions as a mechanism for constructing authenticity, increasing visibility, and mobilising political support, while simultaneously contributing to polarisation within public discourse.

The political styles of both presidents can be characterised as populist. Moffitt (2016) argues that populism functions as a political style characterised by performance, emotional appeal, and the dramatization of crisis, elements clearly visible in the communication of both Trump and Milanović. Trump’s communication style is rooted in populist rhetoric characterised by simplicity, repetition, and emotional intensity. Frequent attacks on the media, immigrants, and political opponents, combined with slogans such as “Make America Great Again” and the recurring use of expressions like “fake news”, create a clear and emotionally resonant narrative. This strategy facilitates direct identification with supporters and strengthens perceptions of authenticity, yet it also reinforces antagonistic divisions and undermines trust in democratic institutions, particularly the media.

In contrast, Milanović’s communication relies on a more complex and intellectually framed rhetorical style. This finding is consistent with previous research on Zoran Milanović’s communication style on social media, which

highlights his use of direct, personalised, and confrontational discourse as a means of constructing political authenticity and bypassing traditional institutional mediation (Paša, 2021). His frequent use of sarcasm, irony, and historical analogies allows him to criticise domestic political elites, judicial institutions, and broader societal conditions. While this approach positions him as an autonomous and outspoken political actor, it also intensifies internal political divisions and contributes to the erosion of institutional trust. Although stylistically distinct from Trump's populism, Milanović's rhetoric similarly operates through confrontation and symbolic boundary-making.

Across both cases, deviations from political correctness emerge as a strategic resource rather than an incidental feature of communication. By challenging dominant norms of acceptable public speech, both leaders enhance their visibility and reinforce narratives of authenticity. However, these communicative gains are accompanied by significant societal costs, including heightened polarisation, delegitimization of institutions, and the normalisation of confrontational discourse. The analysis thus illustrates how authenticity-driven communication strategies can simultaneously strengthen political appeal and weaken democratic cohesion.

4 Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between political correctness, authenticity, and political communication in the contemporary media environment through a comparative analysis of Donald Trump and Zoran Milanović. The findings highlight the complexity of political discourse in an era shaped by constant media exposure, emotional engagement, and heightened political polarisation.

With regard to the research questions, the analysis demonstrates that communication strategies deviating from political correctness enhance perceptions of authenticity while simultaneously intensifying polarisation and undermining institutional trust. The findings further indicate that public reception of such rhetoric is shaped by political and cultural context, as well as by mediated framing, highlighting the role of communication professionals and media environments in constructing authenticity and responsibility.

Political correctness plays an inherently ambivalent role in public communication. While it contributes to inclusivity and social stability by regulating acceptable forms of speech, it may also encourage resistance amongst political actors who seek to present themselves as authentic, unfiltered, and oppositional. The communication strategies of Trump and Milanović demonstrate how deviations from politically correct norms can function as tools for visibility and identity construction, particularly in polarised political environments.

At the same time, the analysis underscores that authenticity and responsibility in political communication are not mutually exclusive. Although provocative and confrontational rhetoric may generate short-term engagement and political visibility, it carries long-term risks for social cohesion and institutional trust. Persistent polarisation, attacks on media credibility, and the delegitimization of political institutions can undermine democratic culture and weaken the foundations of public dialogue. As Wodak (2015) notes, right-wing populist discourse often relies on the politics of fear, constructing symbolic threats that intensify social divisions and mobilise supporters.

The practical implications of this research suggest that political leaders and communication professionals face a critical challenge: balancing authenticity with responsibility in a media landscape that often rewards provocation over deliberation. Constructive political communication requires not the abandonment of authenticity, but its integration with ethical considerations, institutional accountability, and respect for democratic norms.

In conclusion, contemporary political communication demands a nuanced understanding of the interplay between authenticity, political correctness, and societal impact. By analysing the communication styles of Trump and Milanović, this study contributes to ongoing academic debates on political discourse and provides insight into the broader consequences of rhetorical strategies that shape public perception, political legitimacy, and democratic stability.

Acknowledgments: This scientific paper is part of the JEKOS project of the Faculty of Education. The project is co-financed by the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF; source 581-institutional research projects) within the framework of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Croatia, funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU. The views and opinions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held responsible for them.

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