

**ANALYSIS OF THE DENIGRATING DISCOURSE OF THE
CROATIAN DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY'S OFFICIAL
FACEBOOK POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

IMPRESSUM

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Zagreb, 2023.

ISBN: 978-953-7960-43-8

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1. IMPORTANCE OF CIVILISED DISCUSSION FOR DEMOCRACY

Democracy is not only a political system, but also a system of values and principles, in which the emphasis of politics should be placed on civilized discussion, appreciation of difference, respect for the opinions of others, and the pursuit of compromise. The behavior and actions of state officials, especially the president, prime minister, ministers and members of the parliament, should be in line with the interests of the public, and should act as an example of appropriate political and public communication. Through their actions and communication, they should advocate, promote and strengthen democracy, democratic values, political culture and political pluralism, taking care not to reduce politics to depreciation of opposing opinions, and not to return society to tribalism, conflict, and polarization - all for the purpose of short-term raising of their political ratings.

However, lately we have been witnessing a decline in the quality of political communication of political actors, as their public statements show a trend of distancing from the principles of civilized debate towards uncivilized, defined by a lack of respect (even frustration) for their political rivals. Such communication is characterized by the use of insults, name-calling, verbal conflicts, attacks on the interlocutor's personality, deliberately inaccurate representation of opponents, ridicule, incendiary and polarizing language, belittling and the use of profanity, when commenting on and describing one's political opponents. The rise of this style of communication - both in Croatia and in countries with a significantly longer democratic tradition - has had serious negative implications for democracy, because the exposure of citizens to this style of communication leads to a loss of political trust, a more negative perception of political institutions and actors, and a reduction in perceived legitimacy of politicians.¹

¹ Sarah Sobieraj & Jeffrey M. Berry (2011) From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News, Political Communication, 28:1, 19-41
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10584609.2010.542360>

2. THE GROWTH OF DENIGRATING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN CROATIA

Considering the importance of civilized discussion for democracy, it comes as no surprise that the communication style of the incumbent Croatian president, Zoran Milanović, has been the subject of numerous discussions by citizens and experts for almost three years. Running his 2019 presidential campaign on the slogan "A President With Character", he held his victory speech on January 5th 2020 with a conciliatory, open discourse, in which he, in addition to stopping the audience from booing the then leaving president, Kolinda Grabar - Kitarović, stated the following:

"People differ from one to another, but what I will strive for is not to defeat anyone unnecessarily or intentionally, to be an ear and a head for everyone, and not a shoulder to cry on, to conduct dialogue with awareness that we are different, that there are different views on the world, prejudice, to which I am not immune, because I am just an ordinary human being."²

However, on October 2nd 2020, he showed a completely different presidential character. On that day, he reacted to the criticism directed at him by parliament members Dalija Orešković and Marijana Puljak, due to his involvement in the Janaf corruption scandal, calling them "sanctimonious whiners",³ while also declaring the pro-democratic NGO Gong "scroungers",⁴ and a number of other actors "befuddled and scheming characters". From that moment, Milanović began to "decorate" all critics, as well as actors who called him out for his behavior, with various inappropriate names and descriptions - on October 17th 2020, he called the Croatian Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković, a "flaming badger",⁵ and the NGO

² HINA (2020) VIDEO: POBJEDNIČKI GOVOR ZORANA MILANOVIĆA Tvornica zviždala Kolindi, novi predsjednik ih zaustavio: 'Ne, ne i ne!' Jutarnjilist.hr <https://www.jutarnji.hr/naslovnica/video-pobjednicki-govor-zorana-milanovica-tvornica-zvzdala-kolindi-novi-predsjednik-ih-zaustavio-ne-ne-i-ne-9822757>

³ Klauški, Tomislav (2020) Desnica je na Pantovčaku opet dobila novog Franju Tuđmana. 24sata.hr <https://www.24sata.hr/kolumne/zoki-milanovic-je-probudio-duh-franje-tudmana-na-pantovcaku-719801>

⁴ Otvoreno.hr (2020) Milanović nastavlja verbalni sukob: Hoće li reagirati pravobraniteljica ili to opet moram ja? Kakvi su to standardi? [Milanović nastavlja verbalni sukob: Hoće li reagirati pravobraniteljica ili to opet moram ja? Kakvi su to standardi? - Otvoreno.hr](https://www.otvoreno.hr/milanovic-nastavlja-verbalni-sukob-hoce-li-reagirati-pravobraniteljica-ili-to-opet-moram-ja-kakvi-su-to-standardi/)

⁵ Jutarnjilist.hr (2020) 'On je narikatelj, paž i plameni jazavac. Prijetnje? Ako nisi u stanju živjeti s tim pritiskom, idi mami!'

association B.A.B.E. "forgettable Hollywood actresses"⁶ on February 7th 2021 - becoming the leader of a style of political communication that better resembles the rhetoric of anonymous internet discussions, rather than the official communication of a high state office holder.

Milanović justified his behavior by claiming that he "has an attitude", and this "attitude" did not excessively harm his public popularity - although he lost some support among left-oriented citizens who vote for SDP (Social Democratic Party) and Možemo (We Can, progressive green party), he gained support among those who vote for HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union, center-right party) and Domovinski pokret (Homeland Movement, nationalistic and patriotic right-wing party).⁷ Therefore, despite the incendiary rhetoric and scandalous statements⁸ - which the public notes to be his defining characteristic - Milanović remains the most popular politician among the Croatian public, enjoying the support of 55% of respondents in August 2021, 52% of respondents in early 2022⁹, and 48% of respondents in early 2023.¹⁰ And that this form of communication (and the potential popularity that accompanies its use) did not end with Milanović, but rather continues to spread throughout the Croatian political scene, is also visible in the decline of the political communication quality between Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and Zoran Milanović, regarding various political topics, issues and events.¹¹ However, such communication by HDZ is not limited to just one politician, but instead represents the strategic communication direction of the

<https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/on-je-narikatelj-paz-i-plameni-jazavac-prijetnje-ako-nisi-u-stanju-zivjeti-s-tim-pritiskom-idi-mami-15025906>

⁶ Index.hr (2021) Milanović napao BABE: Imaju glupo ime, one su poput zaboravljenih holivudskih glumica. <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/milanovic-napao-babe-imaju-glupo-i-neduhovito-ime-one-su-kao-zaboravljene-glumice/2252578.aspx>

⁷ N1 Info Zagreb (2021) Predsjednika Zorana Milanovića podržava gotovo svaki drugi birač HDZ-a. <https://n1info.hr/vijesti/predsjednika-zorana-milanovica-podrzava-gotovo-svaki-drugi-birac-hdz-a/>

⁸ Jutarnji.hr (2022) Istraživanje: Milanović po popularnosti samo iza Tuđmana, ljudima je draži od Mesića i Josipovića. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/istrazivanje-milanovic-po-popularnosti-samo-iza-tudmana-ljudima-je-drazi-od-mesica-i-josipovica-15160098>

⁹ Mihaljević, Josip (2022) Crobarometar: Milanovića i Vladu najviše podržavaju stariji od 60 godina. Mirovina.hr <https://www.mirovina.hr/novosti/crobarometar-milanovica-i-vladu-najvise-podrzavaju-stariji-od-60-godina/>

¹⁰ 24sata (2023) Novi Crobarometar: Milanović je najpozitivniji političar, HDZ daleko ispred SDP-a i Mosta... <https://www.24sata.hr/news/novi-crobarometar-milanovic-je-najpozitivniji-politicar-hdz-daleko-ispred-sdp-a-i-mosta-893891>

¹¹ HINA (2021) GRBIN O SVAĐI PLENKOVIĆA I MILANOVIĆA: 'Njihova komunikacija odavno je prešla granice'. <https://net.hr/danas/hrvatska/grbin-o-svadi-plenkovica-i-milanovica-njihova-komunikacija-odavno-je-presla-granice-a119f132-b998-11eb-9e88-02383fd6dc89>

entire party, which is notably visible in the political communication of the HDZ party on their official Facebook page. Not ones to lag behind Milanović in uncivilized communication, HDZ often belittles the opposition in language more appropriate to anonymous internet trolls on its Facebook page, so in February 2022 they called the Most party "tragicomical scoundrels", Možemo "We can't and we don't know", and president Zoran Milanović a "vermin".¹² The tone and content of such communication is below the acceptable level in a democratic society, far from constructive discussion and mutually stimulating political rivalry; despite this, so far there has not been much discussion or mention of it in the Croatian public sphere.

Given that HDZ is currently the ruling party, while also being a member of the European People's Party, the manner in which it conducts its official digital political communication is extremely important for preserving the quality of democracy and encouraging the adoption of democratic values and principles in society. This is precisely why it is necessary to investigate whether HDZ had, since 2020, when the Croatian political system experienced an increase in uncivilized communication by Milanović in the public, accepted and started copying similar rhetoric, and if so, has its use increased over the years? In order to carry out this research, it is important to research whether the official posts from the HDZ official Facebook page contain denigrating discourse, and if they do, which political actors are its targets, how often does it emerge, and has it been successful as a communication style?

In order to answer these questions, we selected HDZ's official Facebook page, "[HDZ - Hrvatska demokratska zajednica](#)", and its posts, for analysis. [CrowdTangle](#), a tool for public insights into the Facebook content of all public profiles, which is owned by Facebook, was used to collect the data.¹³ With it, it is possible to find out when public pages publish their content, how many user interactions they achieve, and how successful individual posts were

¹² Klarić, Jasmin (2022). Premijer se hvali tolerancijom, a stranka mu vrijeđa ljude kanalizacijskom retorikom ultradesnih portala. Telegram.hr <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/premijer-se-hvali-tolerancijom-a-stranka-mu-vrijeda-ljude-kanalizacijskom-retorikom-ultradesnih-portala/>

¹³ The access to the CrowdTangle tool was granted to Gong by the National Democratic Institute, through their cooperation with the Design 4 Democracy coalition.

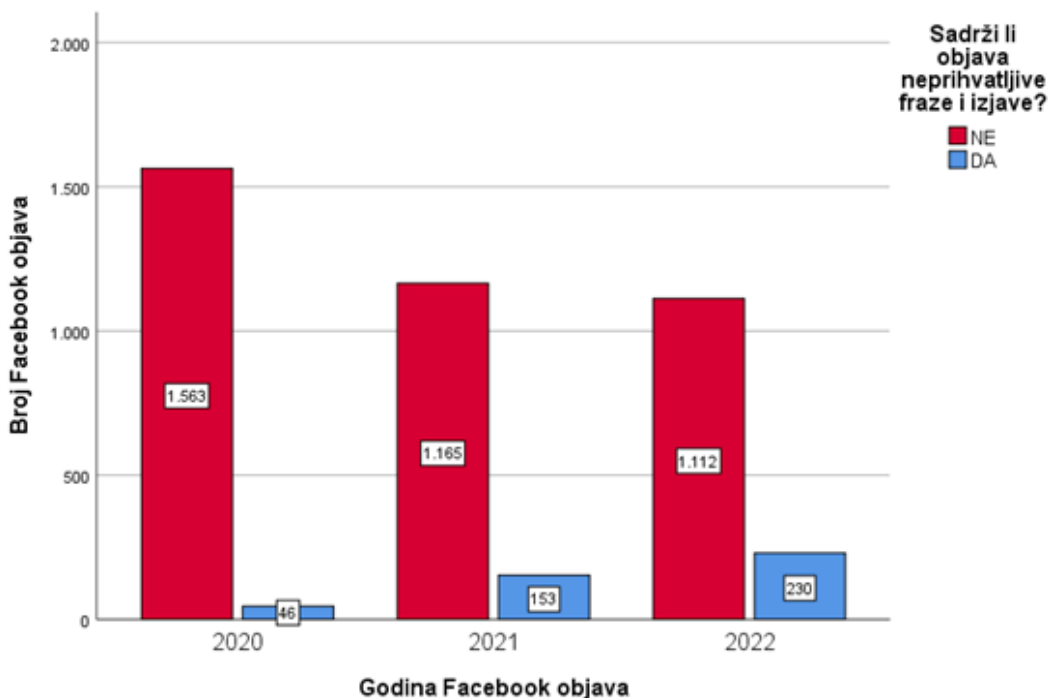
compared to all others from the same page.¹⁴ Using the CrowdTangle tool, 4,269 posts from the time period of January 1st 2020 to December 31st 2022 were extracted from the HDZ official Facebook page: 1,609 posts in 2020, 1,318 in 2021, and 1,342 posts in 2022. The selected period corresponds to the beginning of the presidential mandate of Zoran Milanović, but also to the beginning of the 14th assembly of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, led by HDZ, and follows the development of HDZ's communication style in the context of increasingly pronounced uncivilized rhetoric in the public space. Quantitative content analysis was conducted on the gathered posts, with the aim of identifying the amount of posts that contain denigrating discourse directed at political actors and analyzing them. According to the previously described nature of uncivilized discussion, such discourse includes words and phrases used to comment on other political actors, which are characterized by the use of insults, disparagement, name-calling and ridicule - the toxic and intolerant nature of political communication towards the public, inappropriate for democracy, dialogue and compromise.¹⁵ As for political actors, they are defined as all persons, political parties and organizations who engage in relevant political activity.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE DENIGRATING DISCOURSE IN THE OFFICIAL FACEBOOK POSTS OF HDZ

Out of a total of 4269 posts, 429 of them contained denigrating discourse, which makes up 10.04% of HDZ's total communication on Facebook since 2020. Observed over the years, there is a clear increase in the presence of this communication style, especially since 2021 - while in 2020 "only" 46 posts of this nature were published (2.94% of posts that year), 153 of them were published in 2021 (11.61 % of posts that year), culminating in 230 posts of this nature in 2022 (20.68% of posts that year).

¹⁴ The CrowdTangle tool calculated the [success](#) of individual posts by gathering 100 posts of the same type, which preceded the current one, removing 25 posts with the least, and highest, amount of user interaction. The remaining 50 posts have their arithmetic mean of achieved user interactions calculated on several different time intervals (15 minutes, 1 hour, 5 hours etc.). The results are then used to control the number of user interactions of the newest post - if the number exceeds the control number, the success of the post goes beyond 1.0, and if it does goes below the control number, the success goes below 1.0.

¹⁵ Sarah Sobieraj & Jeffrey M. Berry (2011): From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News, Political Communication, 28:1, 19-41
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10584609.2010.542360>



Graph 1: Comparison of posts in their inclusion of denigrating discourse through the years. Y axis measures the number of posts, X axis represents the year in which the post was published. The colour red signifies posts which do not contain denigrating discourse, while the colour blue indicates posts which did contain it.

It is clear from the data that the transition from 2020 to 2021 represented a change in the style of HDZ's communication, which, interestingly, coincides with the increasingly pronounced inappropriate and inflammatory rhetoric of President Zoran Milanović. While the content of HDZ's posts was of a more moderate nature before October 2020 (although even then there were posts with inappropriate, but still milder, phrases), a change in HDZ's communication style becomes visible between October 2020 and March 2021, which begins to stand out through a harsher and more extreme description of other political actors. The turning point was in March 2021, when HDZ, while commenting on the Crobarometer results (national popularity poll for politicians and parties), for the first time addressed political opponents not by their names, but with insulting descriptions - SDP was called "the ones who tumbled", and Peđa Grbin (leader of SDP) a "courier". From that moment on, such rhetoric, just like in the case of Milanović, is present in an increasing number of posts, becoming harsher and harsher, with no signs of easing.

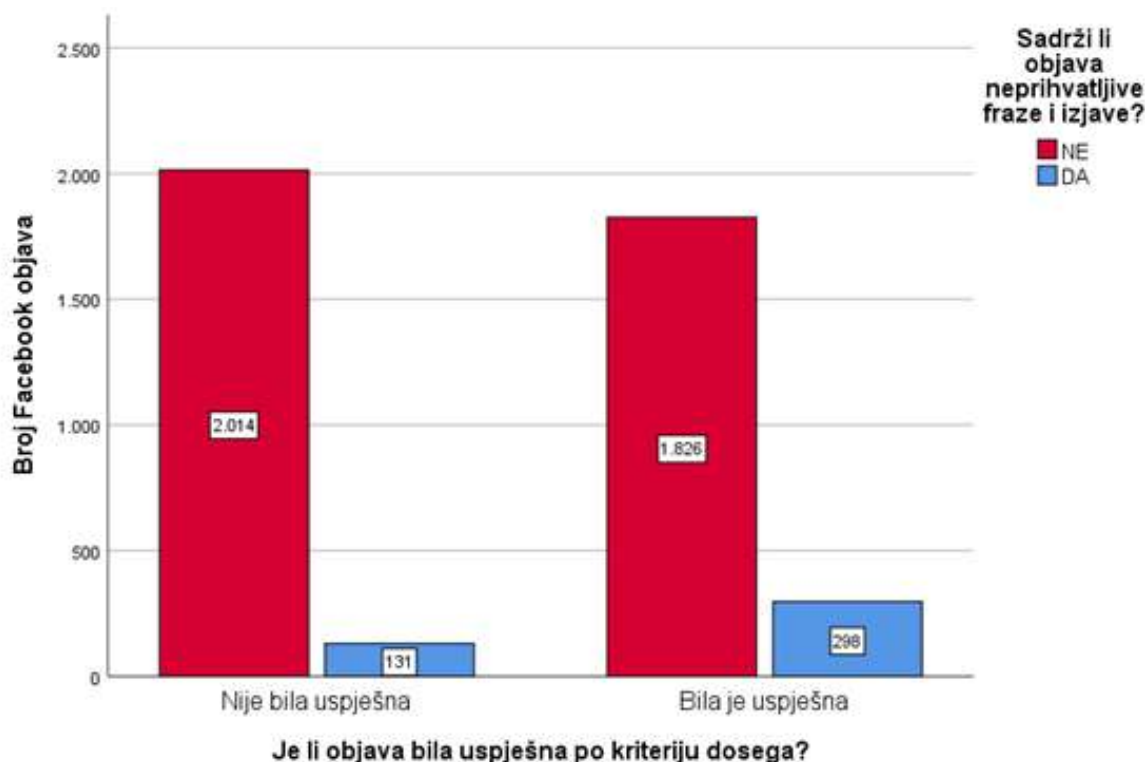
When looking at the political actors who appeared in 429 posts with denigrating discourse, the three most common targets stand out - the opposition (every politician and party who is not HDZ), Zoran Milanović, and SDP - followed by Možemo, Most, and parliament members Peđa Grbin, Davor Bernardić, Nikola Grmoja, Mirela Ahmetović, and Nino Raspudić. Although the HDZ described all these political actors on several occasions with various names, such as "hypocrite", "powerless", or "destructive", they were also assigned personalized descriptions, which seem to have the role of reducing the entire political and personal persona of the political actor to one singular, degrading, concept. Thus, Milanović is called "Tito's Honor Guard" and "Kremlin Boy", the opposition a "circus", Možemo "We can't", Grbin "Gargamel", Most "Milanović's little ones" and "tragicomical scoundrels", Ahmetović "LNG commissar", and Nino Raspudić "Milanović's Errand boy". Although the descriptions are different, they all share the imposition of a description that belittled and relativized HDZ's political opponents, in order to present them to the public as a group of incompetent, dangerous and ultimately destructive actors, whose coming to power would cause great harm to Croatian citizens.

Rank	Political actor	Number of descriptions	Unique descriptions	3 most common descriptions (and their total number)		
1	Opposition	158	40	Powerless (25)	Destructive (18)	Circus (15)
2	Zoran Milanović	140	75	Vermin (15)	Nervous (7)	Kremlin Boy (6)
3	SDP	72	37	The tumbling ones (23)	Destructive (8)	Malicious (3)
4	Možemo	68	14	We can't (39)	We can't and we don't know (10)	Destructive (4)
5	Peđa Grbin	63	26	The tumbling one (27)	Courier (9)	Gargamel (3)
6	Most	58	30	Little ones (14)	Hypocrites (8)	Destructive (3)
7	Davor Bernardić	45	27	Lost (4)	Ignorant (3)	Incompetent (3)

8	Nikola Grmoja	32	17	Machine Gun with blanks (6)	Ivermektin (5)	Grmuljator (4)
9	Mirela Ahmetović	25	9	LNG Commissar (12)	Bomber (2)	Ventriloquist (2)
10	Nino Raspudić	23	16	Head clown (4)	Little Kremlin Boy (3)	Milanović's Errand Boy (2)

Table 1: List of ten most common political actors targeted by HDZ's denigrating discourse in their Facebook posts

Given that the key focus of digital communication is to reach the audience (that is, the virality of the content), it is important to determine whether posts with denigrating discourse have proven to be more successful than those that do not contain it. When we look at the posts according to the success criterion - defined as the total number of user interactions with the post, that is greater than the average number of interactions with the posts that preceded it - it is possible to conclude that posts containing denigrating discourse were more often successful than those without it. While the percentage of successful posts that did not contain denigrating discourse was 42.77% (out of a total of 4269 posts), out of 429 posts with offensive discourse, 69.46% of them were successful.



Graph 2: Post success in relation to the inclusion of denigrating discourse. Y axis shows the number of posts, while the X axis differentiates between unsuccessful posts on the left side, and successful posts on the right side. The colour red is used to signify the number of posts which did not contain denigrating discourse, while the colour blue shows the number of posts which did include the denigrating discourse.

Although at first glance it seems that the inclusion of denigrating discourse results in more successful posts, a comparison of the average performance reveals a different story. In cases where the post was unsuccessful, the inclusion of denigrating discourse did indeed lead to better results: with it, the average success rate of posts was -1.45, while without it it was -1.62. But in cases where the post was successful, posts with denigrating discourse recorded a lower average success rate (1.74) than posts without it (1.95).¹⁶

¹⁶ It is important to note that these results show only the descriptive analysis of the connection between the successfulness of posts and the inclusion of denigrating discourse in them, without taking into consideration the potential influence of the topic with which the posts deal with, as well as many other factors. Therefore, it is imperative to expand upon this analysis in the future, so as to determine the influence of these other factors.

4. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DENIGRATING DISCOURSE ON THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

The research results clearly indicate an increase in denigrative discourse in the official digital communication of the HDZ on Facebook, which shows no signs of abating, and which, in its nature, is becoming increasingly harsher and extreme. At the same time, the use of this communication style is chronologically linked to Milanović's "sharpening" of his own communication style, which indicates the possibility of an attempt at imitating the "success" he achieved with it. In terms of content, the fundamental point of contact between these two communication styles is the use of specific descriptions for political actors, through which' repetition one tries to create and cultivate a negative image of other political actors, while simultaneously establishing a positive image of the sender of such messages. The purpose of such communication is to create an impression in the public that the sender of such messages is a firm, determined, unwavering and committed political actor, while all other political actors are weak and indecisive - all in order to weaken the effect of criticism they receive on their work and ensure political supremacy. In doing so, the use of such rhetoric often goes beyond the democratic norms of political communication, because other political actors are not presented as political rivals, who represent different interpretations of the problems and needs of society, but as existential enemies - actors of low abilities and morals who would be destructive to the state and society if they come to power.

Although this research did not take into account the entire corpus of HDZ's communication - focusing its analysis exclusively on the way in which they describe political actors (which represents only part of their rhetoric) - as well as the communication of other politicians and political parties, the results nevertheless point to a worrying trend declining democratic quality of communication from the very top of the political system. Namely, the way HDZ communicates with the public is not an issue that only concerns HDZ and its ratings, because it can have far-reaching consequences for society. Instead of encouraging constructive debate and rivalry in democracy - which brings positive effects for the public - HDZ, together with the Croatian President, communicates in a way that is below any level in a democratic society, showing at the same time no signs of easing. Such communication from the political

top normalizes insults and disparagements in the public space, which narrows the space for reasoned discussion of relevant social and political issues, and encourages intolerance and stigmatization. Calling your political rivals "pests" and "destructive" for the sake of the race for likes can only lead to the collapse of the entire democratic culture in the country, and further danger to the democratic society - especially in moments of permanent insecurity and fear due to the pandemic, inflation and the war in Ukraine.