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Between illiberalism and hyper-neoliberalism: competing populist discourses in the Czech Republic

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on Laclau’s theory of discourse, hegemony, and populism to analyse competing forms of populism in the Czech Republic within the discursive context of ‘post-November transformation’ as well as in relation to hegemonic struggles over the construction of social order. It is argued that the discourses of Public Affairs (VV), ANO, Dawn of Direct Democracy, and Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) all feature a populist opposition between the ‘people’ or ‘citizens’ on the one hand and ‘political dinosaurs’, (‘traditional’) ‘parties’, or ‘godfather party mafias’ of both ‘left’ and ‘right’ on the other, while also radicalizing in different ways the exclusionary constructions of ‘work’ in the established discourses of the Civic Democrats (ODS) and Social Democrats (ČSSD). While ANO constructs ‘hard work’ in a populist manner against the (‘traditional’) ‘parties’, VV and Dawn/SPD articulate an exclusion of non-working ‘unadaptables’ that points to a notable interplay of hyper-neoliberal welfare chauvinism and anti-minorities illiberalism.

KEYWORDS

Czech Republic; illiberalism; neo-liberalism; party politics; populism

Introduction

Following weeks of post-election uncertainty, the successful formation of a minority coalition government of Andrej Babiš’s ANO and the Social Democrats (ČSSD) with external support from the Communist Party (KSČM) in 2018 marked the culmination of at least three notable developments in Czech party politics: 1) the rise of ANO to the status of main governing party within seven years of its founding; 2) the confirmed unwillingness of ANO to govern with its far-right populist competitor, Tomio Okamura’s Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), in a ‘populist coalition’; and 3) the inclusion of the Communists in a governing arrangement for the first time since 1990, suggesting a dislocation in the rules of the game that had long defined party politics in the ‘post-November’ period. This paper proposes to unpack the different aspects of this present conjuncture with a discursive approach that not only parses Babiš’s distinctive brand of populism, which has been referred to as ‘managerial’ (Čisáň & Štětka, 2017) or ‘technocratic populism’ (Bušíková & Guasti, 2019) with both an ‘illiberal’ (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Havlík, 2019) and an

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apparently neo-liberal thrust (as seen in the promise to ‘run the state like a firm’), but also situates it both within its discursive context of emergence and in relation to competing forms of populism. To this end, this paper draws on the discourse-theoretical perspective of the so-called Essex School (1996/2007, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001; Laclau, 1990), which has found increasingly widespread application in the study of populism. This discursive approach, broadly in line with the wider genre of ‘ideational’ theories of populism,¹ conceptualizes populism in terms of an antagonistic divide between a popular subject and a power bloc, which can in turn take on a wide variety of constructions (e.g. Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Stanley, 2008). This relatively formal understanding of populism not only allows for analytical distinctions between populism and the likes of nationalism or nativism in terms of how ‘the people’ is constructed (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis, Kioupkiolis, & Siomos, 2017a; see also Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), but can also draw on the ‘methodological holism’ (Marttila, 2015) of a theory of discourse, hegemony, and populism that provides the conceptual tools for situating discourses in relation to hegemonic practices and struggles over the constitution of social order (Palonen, 2009; De Cleen, Glynos, & Mondon, 2018; Nonhoff, 2019).

What follows here is an overview of this theoretical perspective and then a discourse-analytic account of competing populisms in the Czech Republic both diachronically in terms of their emergence from established discursive structurations of post-1989 party politics and synchronically in terms of their competing hegemonic claims over ‘the people’ and the various contents attached to them. As will be seen, the Czech case is notable not least for the early salience of a strongly neo-liberal transformation project that then-PM Václav Klaus famously summarized as ‘market economy without adjectives’ as well as a largely differential and non-antagonistic context of left/right competition, as exemplified in the 1990s Opposition Agreements. It is in the context of dislocations in this hegemonic stability that populist challenges subsequently emerge in the form of Public Affairs (VV), ANO, and Dawn of Direct Democracy as well as its offshoot Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), all of which interpellate the ‘people’ or ‘citizens’ against a power bloc of established forces of both ‘left’ and ‘right’. Yet these populist discourses are also notable for the selective reproduction and indeed radicalization of hegemonic effects from the established discursive context, most notably the exclusionary constructions of ‘work’ that pervade the discourses of both the Civic Democrats (ODS) and Social Democrats (ČSSD) throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. While ANO articulates notions of entrepreneurship and ‘hard work’ in the populist terms of ‘people’ against the ‘politicians’, the discourses of VV and Dawn/SPD radicalize the exclusionary construction of ‘work’ in opposition to ‘unadaptables’ and ‘scroungers’ who supposedly live off the work of others, thus combining a populism directed against established forces with a hyper-neoliberal welfare chauvinism that associates the category of ‘unadaptables’ with entire minorities such as the Roma and ‘immigrants’ and thus also dovetails with an anti-minorities illiberalism, all the way up to SPD’s demand for a ban on Islam in the Czech Republic in the name of ‘freedom’ – closely resembling what has been described as a ‘neoconservative’ position (Vossen, 2011) in the case of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV). The radicalizing dynamic in SPD’s discourse can thus be seen not only *vis-à-vis* earlier neo-liberal discourses, but also in relation to the populist constructions in the competing discourse of ANO.

Discourse, hegemony, populism: an overview

Laclau's (2005) theory of populism is grounded in a theory of discourse and hegemony (Laclau, 1990; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001, 1996/2007) that posits the discursively constituted nature of social reality through logics of *difference* and *equivalence* as well as the primacy of the political *qua* antagonism as the instituting moment of this reality (Marchart, 2007, 2018). To take a schematic example: the identities of discursive elements such as 'freedom' and 'equality' are differential in relation to each other, but can also be articulated equivalentially in common antagonistic demarcation from a *constitutive outside* (e.g. 'dictatorship' or indeed 'communism'); this *chain of equivalences* can be extended further ('freedom', 'equality', 'higher wages', ...) to generate an *antagonistic frontier* against the common outside and define the social space in terms of this division. Hegemony, then, is this operation of organizing and reproducing a set of meanings into a system of differences – in other words, constructing a certain version of 'society' – around *nodal points* that equivalentially link differential elements (e.g. 'democracy' linking 'freedom', 'equality', etc. against 'dictatorship').² Yet the contingent nature of social identities means that other nodal points could likewise perform this function of partial fixation around new oppositions (e.g. 'the nation' linking 'freedom', 'equality', etc. against a 'dictatorship' deemed to be 'foreign'); the hegemony of a particular discursive construction is thus always the contingent result of a political contestation and constantly subject to *dislocations*, or interruptions in the structured production of meaning (e.g. the claim that actually existing 'democracy' has not fulfilled the promise of 'freedom' and/or 'equality').

Laclau (2005) suggests that if the basic unit of discourse is conceptualized as a *demand* ('freedom', 'equality', 'higher wages', ...) that calls upon some locus of power for its fulfilment, it becomes possible to identify two basic modes in which politics as a struggle for hegemony takes place: a primarily differential, or *institutionalist*, articulation of demands treats each demand in its particularity – with the result that politics is understood as a field of differences without an antagonistic frontier dividing it – whereas a primarily equivalential, or *populist*, articulation constructs a chain of equivalences of unfulfilled (or dislocated) demands generating an antagonistic frontier between a 'people' as the collective subject of demands and a power bloc supposedly blocking their realization. Seen this way, populism becomes another name for the political – leading to Laclau's (2005, p. 154) controversial claim to this effect – insofar as any construction of a collective subject through a logic of equivalence would be populist to some extent; yet it is also clear that not every equivalential articulation of demands takes onto itself the name of a 'people' or is addressed to 'power' (Stavrakakis, 2004). Subsequent work drawing on Laclau's theory emphasizes – in a similar vein to the likes of Mudde (2007, pp. 15–26) – that populism is distinguishable from the likes of nationalism or nativism depending on the 'discursive architectonics' of *how* 'the people' and its outside are constructed (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Stavrakakis et al., 2017a; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014). Populism thus becomes conceptually distinguishable from institutionalism on the one hand and the likes of nationalism or nativism on the other in terms of the degree and type of antagonistic division, respectively: institutionalism entails a non-antagonistic construction of the relationship between the addressers and addressees of demands, whereas populism constructs a popular underdog subject against a power bloc (e.g. 'elite', 'oligarchy') – as opposed to a national subject against a national Other (nationalism) or external

immigrants (nativism). These logics are, of course, combinable but conceptually distinct (e.g. ‘the people’ against *foreign* powers pointing to a joint articulation of nationalism and populism), making it possible to identify what Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) refer to as ‘exclusionary populism’, which excludes ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities in addition to ‘the elite’. In identifying a particular *discourse* as primarily populist and/or nationalist, the key question is what nodal point(s) takes on the recurrent structuring function of equivalentially linking the different elements and thus holding together an ensemble of signifying practices.

The ‘methodological holism’ (Marttila, 2015) of Essex School or post-foundational discourse analysis (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Marttila, 2015; Nonhoff, 2019) consists in drawing on the aforementioned discourse-theoretical categories as analytical concepts for the study of discourses in terms of the formation and displacements of *antagonistic frontiers*, the *differential* or *equivalential* articulation of demands, and their structuration around *nodal points* against *constitutive outsides*. Insofar as the overarching framework is one of discourse and hegemony theory, the discourse analysis is also a form of hegemony analysis (Nonhoff, 2019) that examines discursive practices both diachronically in their hegemonically structured contexts of emergence and synchronically in terms of competing hegemonic claims. Following this line of inquiry, the following analysis begins with the established discursive context of ‘post-November transformation’ in the Czech Republic and identifies signifiers that cross-cut competing party discourses synchronously and/or over time, suggesting hegemonic effects that are reproduced across the discursive space of party competition. The analysis then works its way through the different populist discourses with a particular focus on their constructions of the people/power frontier as well as hegemonic effects traceable back to the established discursive context. In line with an expansive theoretical understanding of discursivity as encompassing all signifying practices, the analysis seeks to triangulate between numerous forms of source material ranging from party programmes, leaders’ speeches, and published interviews to electoral campaign slogans and billboards.

Populism in the Czech Republic: a discourse and hegemony analysis

‘Post-november transformation’ as hegemonic formation

In a 1995 speech at the Brno University of Technology, then-Prime Minister Václav Klaus (1995) proposed that

the post-November transformation of our country, which is still in progress, is a transformation of the system and by no means of people. [...] If we want to alter the limitations on human life and human freedom, and this was precisely the goal of our transformation process, then it is clear that our goal had to be the creation of new conditions for our lives and our mutual societal interactions [...].

Perhaps no syntagma better captures the condensation of an entire imaginary of transition in the discursive space than the notion of ‘post-November transformation’: ‘post-November’ referring to the imagined break of November 1989 that inaugurates the transformation of an entire system of social relations, whereby basic categories such as ‘state’, ‘citizen’, ‘economy’, and ‘society’ are re-signified as nodal points instituting a new ‘post-November’ reality. ‘Post-November transformation’ can be understood, in a wider sense,

to designate a *hegemonic formation* within which competing party discourses, such as those of the Civic Democrats (ODS) and the Social Democrats (ČSSD), presented differential constructions of these signifiers while situating themselves within a common horizon of transition (e.g. shared commitment to ‘market economy’ or ‘Europe’, but with variations on the meaning) – from Klaus’ ‘market economy without adjectives’ to the ČSSD’s ‘socially and ecologically oriented market economy’. If Václav Havel’s Civic Forum (OF) had instituted ‘Europe’ as one of the nodal points of transition with its 1990 election campaign centered on the slogan ‘Back to Europe’, the ODS (1992, p. 1), positioning itself as the ‘main heir’ (Pšeja, 2005) to the OF, took this up with the claim that ‘the path to Europe is a path to home’ and the conservative articulation of a return to the ‘basic values of European Christian civilization’ – whereas the ČSSD (1996, p. 2) appealed to ‘the European social model’ and advocated in social-democratic terms ‘the entry to European institutions with their social, ecological, economic, and moral standards’ as a process of ‘the Czech Republic join[ing] the main current of European thought’.

A key feature of this hegemonic formation, then, was that such competing constructions could be articulated in largely differential and non-antagonistic terms: while the ODS and the ČSSD, as the two dominant parties emerging from parliamentary elections between 1996 and 2010, articulated moments of antagonistic division in the context of electoral competition – such as Klaus’ recurring defence of ‘freedom’ against ‘socialism’ and the ČSSD’s 1996 and 1998 election slogan ‘Humanity against selfishness’ – these antagonisms could be defused into differences whenever the stability of the ‘post-November’ order as a whole was at stake. This was illustrated in exemplary fashion by the so-called Opposition Agreements of 1996 and 1998, whereby the ČSSD agreed to tolerate Klaus’ ODS-led minority government following the 1996 elections (in exchange for ČSSD chairman Miloš Zeman’s election as president of the lower chamber) and the ODS returned the favour following the snap 1998 elections (this time in exchange for Klaus’ election as president of the lower chamber). In the latter instance, the two parties concluded a written agreement justifying the compromise in the following terms:

The above named parties, in awareness of the threat of political instability and in the interest of the preservation of basic democratic principles, aware of the responsibility given to them by the voters, aware of the responsibility for the securing of long-term political stability in the Czech Republic and for the continuation of the economic and societal transformation initiated in November 1989, and aware of the further responsibility for the standing of the Czech Republic in the world, conclude between themselves this agreement on the creation of a stable political environment in the Czech Republic (ČSSD & ODS, 1998).

It becomes possible to speak of a hegemonic formation precisely in this sense of an ensemble of institutionalized practices (such as the formalized toleration of minority governments) capable of reproducing itself across a certain timeframe by stabilizing antagonisms into differences – the ODS and ČSSD as representing simply *differential*, rather than mutually exclusive, paths ‘to Europe’ and a ‘market economy’ within a common post-1989 horizon – and thus overriding left/right divisions in defining the two main parties’ positionings at key post-electoral junctures in the 1990s. This system of differences, in turn, was constituted by a founding exclusion in the form of the *cordon sanitaire* placed on the Communist Party (KSČM) and the far-right Republicans (SPR-RSČ) by all other parliamentary parties.³ This was exemplified by the ČSSD’s Bohumín congress resolution of 1995,

which affirmed 'the impermissibility of cooperation by social democracy with extremist political parties' and 'rule[d] out political cooperation' with a list of parties including the SPR-RSČ and KSČM. The ČSSD thus circumscribed the extent to which it could enact a left/right divide on the level of government formation and, in effect, left itself no other option than a deal with the ODS (which it made in 1998) or a coalition with smaller centre-right parties such as the Christian Democrats (which it formed in 2002) in the absence of an outright majority.

A key line of differentiation within this hegemonic formation from the early 1990s onwards consisted in competing constructions of the state and its relation to the citizen. Here, the ODS's discourse was centered on an opposition between the 'individual' and his/her activity in the 'free market' on the one hand and the 'state' whose function must be confined to 'the protection of private property and of freely concluded contracts' on the other (ODS, 1992, p. 13):

Right now the decision is between a prosperous market economy built on the initiative of the individual or the hopeless inefficiency of a state-controlled economy (ODS, 1992, p. 1)

The basis of economic prosperity is not the state, but the individual as the carrier of economic activity and initiative (ODS, 1992, p. 13).

The ODS is convinced that the basis of the prosperity of society is the free decision and activity of the individual and the basis of economic policy is the free market (ODS, 1996, p. 24).

In this neo-liberal discourse, the 'individual' as the building block of economy and society was linked to a set of specific characteristics: in its self-definition as a 'civic' party, the ODS (1998, p. 1) affirmed that it 'is oriented toward hard-working, enterprising, and responsible people'. The category of the 'individual', then, was instituted in the ODS discourse through an exclusion: only the 'hard-working, enterprising, and responsible' could live up to the function of 'the individual' as 'the basis of economic prosperity'. Indeed, in response to the electoral rise of the ČSSD and the latter's call for a 'society of solidarity', the ODS sought to re-articulate the signifier 'solidarity' in an explicitly delimited sense, in line with its exclusion of the non-'enterprising' and non-'responsible':

The ODS is also the party of solidarity between people. It starts from the premise that a *responsible* person, whether of old age, weak, or disabled, has an unquestionable claim to the solidarity of others, *while the lazy and dishonest can have no such high claim* (ODS, 1998, p. 1; emphasis added).

In the ODS discourse, therefore, 'work' took on the function of an exclusionary criterion that set apart those actually interpellated by the nodal point 'the individual' from those who were not. In the ČSSD discourse, too, however, the nodal point 'work' – which, as a counterpart to the ODS signifier 'the individual', took on the privileged function of designating the basic driver of economy and society – was equivalentially constituted in terms of an exclusion, with the qualifier 'honest' work serving to exclude those with ill-gotten gains:

In its electoral program, Czech social democracy upholds the values of honest work, which is the sole source of the actual wealth of society. We therefore want to address labourers, technicians, agricultural workers, service workers, doctors, teachers, artists, academics, and entrepreneurs. We do not address fraudsters or those who became wealthy through abuse of their functions (ČSSD, 1996, p. 24).

We want to live in a society in which it is possible to become wealthy only through honest work and where each member can develop under dignified living conditions (ČSSD, 1998, p. 4).

Our goal is a modern solidaristic society and prosperity for all honest people (ČSSD, 2002, p. 2).

Already in the 1990s and early 2000s, the predominantly institutionalist discourses of the two main parties were constituted by exclusions – ‘*honest work*’ and ‘*hard-working, enterprising, and responsible individuals*’ – that would later prove to be fertile ground for challenger discourses that would radicalize these nodal points in different ways by extending the exclusionary scope. In the case of the ODS, there was a clear tension between the neo-liberal exclusion of non-‘enterprising’, non-‘responsible’ individuals on the one hand and a political liberalism that recognized the inalienable rights of *all* individuals and even the collective rights of ‘disadvantaged groups’ on the other:

Liberalism means the recognition of the sovereignty of the individual, the securing of his rights and freedoms, and also the rights of disadvantaged groups – social, religious, national, and political (ODS, 1992, p. 5).

[The ODS] is a liberal party because it honours the individual as the main carrier of basic rights and freedoms (ODS, 1998, p. 1).

This equivalential link between economic and political liberalism would subsequently be decoupled with a vengeance in far-right discourses that deny the rights of ‘unadaptable minorities’ such as the Roma who supposedly live on welfare benefits without working.

In this context, the ODS (1998, pp. 9–10) also presented a vision of a ‘cheap state’ with the citizen as its ‘customer’ in opposition to the ‘populist’ welfare promises of ‘left-wing parties’ – a continuation of an anti-populist strategy (seen in previous ODS election campaigns) of associating ‘populism’ with ‘the left’ and its ‘social demagoguery’. The ODS (1998, p. 11), in contrast, promised a low-tax state with a flat income tax as well as an ‘orientation toward the citizen as a customer’. In the 2006 campaign, ODS PM candidate Mirek Topolánek went still further, opening his preface to the party’s electoral programme with the statement: ‘I would wish our state to be like my office: small, functional, and friendly’ (ODS, 2006, p. 3). In the 2010 campaign, the ODS (2010, p. 4, 6) called for a ‘cheap and safe state’ and, in an extension of its neo-liberalism, claimed that ‘the state is like a family’ that must cut its expenses and learn to live within its means in order to avoid a sovereign debt crisis: ‘The Hungarians, the Latvians, and now the Greeks have learned for themselves. It is very irresponsible to claim that this doesn’t threaten us.’ The hegemonic effects of this anti-debt discourse could be seen in the manner in which the ČSSD (2010, p. 4, 6), in the same 2010 elections, acknowledged the priority of a ‘rational budgetary policy against indebtedness’ with the goal of reducing the deficit to below three per cent of GDP by 2013, while affirming that ‘[t]he citizen is a customer of the state’ insofar as the state’s role is to ‘ensure the citizen’s equal access to quality services’.

In the meantime, however, the ‘post-November’ hegemonic formation had begun to unravel in the context of the 2006 elections and their aftermath. One aspect of this was that the ODS, in 2006 (after eight years in opposition), 2010, and 2013, repeatedly ran anti-communist electoral campaigns accusing the ČSSD of secretly planning a coalition with the KSČM, thereby also positioning itself as the sole guardian of the post-1989 order and suspending the common horizon of ‘post-November’ transformation as one

existing above and beyond – indeed, capable of incorporating – left/right differences. This anti-communist discourse notably emphasized the newness of the alleged threat coming jointly from the ČSSD and KSČM; Topolánek wrote in his preface to the ODS's 2006 election programme: 'For the first time since November 1989 there is the real possibility of a breakup of the democratic consensus and the return of the communists to running state affairs' (ODS, 2006). Following the 2006 elections, the failure of talks between the ODS and ČSSD on an Opposition Agreement-like arrangement and the Topolánek minority government's subsequent defeat in a confidence vote – the first such instance after 1989 – constituted a major dislocation in the 'post-November' hegemonic formation and its capacity to defuse left/right divisions in reproducing the conditions of 'political stability' that the 1998 Opposition Agreement had referred to. The ODS-led coalition government that did win a confidence vote seven months after the elections (thanks to two ČSSD rebels) fell just two years later when the ČSSD-KSČM opposition succeeded in its fifth attempt at a motion of no confidence; early elections were scheduled for October 2009 under a caretaker government headed by non-politician Jan Fischer, but had to be delayed due to a last-minute Constitutional Court ruling, followed by the ČSSD's decision to withdraw support for early elections (after a constitutional amendment to comply with the ruling had already been passed).

Enter populism: from Public Affairs to SPD

The May 2010 elections thus took place in a context of protracted breakdowns in the hegemonic stability that had been a recurring promise of the 'post-November' order. Against this background, the Public Affairs (VV) party stormed into parliament with nearly 11 per cent of the vote on the back of a strongly populist discourse pitting the 'people' against the 'political dinosaurs' of both 'left' and 'right' who had run the country since 1989. As VV chairman Radek John put it in a pre-election interview:

We are the only post-communist country that still has not replaced the political generation of post-November politicians with the young generation. So as a general definition, [political dinosaurs] are people who were in all these corruption scandals involving privatization, restitution, army purchases of Gripens, Pandurs, and more.

[...] [T]his is not a personal attack against dinosaurs. They carried out their work and should step down. When they are here longer than two electoral periods, it smacks of a big risk because a politician loses contact with the normal lives and normal problems of people (Danda, 2010).

VV articulated this antagonistic frontier against 'dinosaurs' not only in terms of corruption, but also in terms of the left/right logic that this populism now sought to displace, as VV campaign manager Vít Bárta stated in another interview:

The classic example of dinosaurs of politics is a strict right-left perception of society. This is the view of a past political generation that is gone. This perception of the world has unleashed dissatisfaction in our country, has ceased to work, and this is why the call for change is being heard. There is also a centrist ideology, an ideology of correct solutions. This is what I subscribe to (Buchert, 2010)

The VV discourse – which Havlík and Hloušek (2014) have referred to as 'centrist populist' – thus dislocated the promise of established party discourses to deliver the goods of 'post-

November' transition in their 'left' and 'right' variations; the counter-hegemonic move, then, was to displace the frontier defining party competition from left/right to 'dinosaurs'/non-'dinosaurs' or indeed newness/oldness (Sikk, 2012). This was also reflected in the party's coalition signalling strategy, with John denouncing individual politicians across the party spectrum as 'dinosaurs' – most notably the ODS ex-PMs Mirek Topolánek and Václav Klaus, TOP 09 co-founder Miroslav Kalousek, and especially ČSSD PM candidate Jiří Paroubek – while explicitly accepting ODS PM candidate Petr Nečas as a non-'dinosaur'; following the elections, VV would join a Nečas-led coalition government with the ODS and TOP 09.

Yet VV also took up elements of the aforementioned ODS and ČSSD discourses – namely, the exclusionary construction of '*responsible people*' and '*honest work*' – and radicalized them by extending the exclusionary scope: those who enriched themselves by dishonest means now suddenly encompassed the entire 'post-November' political class; the problem with the welfare system did not consist in isolated non-'responsible' individuals, but in an entire class of 'scroungers' and 'unadaptables' (*nepřizpůsobiví*). In its election programme, VV (2010, pp. 14–15, 26–27) headlined its social policy with the slogan 'Social benefits: for the needy yes, for scroungers no' and called for 'an end to the misuse of social benefits', pointing to security issues in 'neighbourhoods with unadaptable citizens' – including certain 'unadaptable minorities' (referring, of course, to the Roma) – and proposing solutions such as 'the uncompromising resettlement of chronic tax dodgers and unadaptables'. Here, the neo-liberalism that the VV broadly shared with the ODS was radicalized into a hyper-neoliberal welfare chauvinism directed against 'scroungers', which in turn (in contrast at least to the earlier ODS) linked up with an illiberalism directed against 'minorities' – with the signifier 'unadaptable' serving as a nodal point equivalentially linking both categories of undesirable citizens.

Less than a year after VV's entry into government, however, a leaked strategy paper from 2008 revealed Bárta's intentions to use the party as a 'political power base' for his private security firm, prompting the replacement of the VV cabinet ministers and amounting to a massive dislocation of the party's populist discourse directed against corruption and shady business links. In 2013, the ODS-led coalition suffered an even bigger scandal involving spying and abuse-of-office allegations against cabinet officials in Nečas' inner circle, leading to the collapse of the government and early elections (after a caretaker government failed to win a majority). The 2013 elections thus took place in a context in which VV had already faded into irrelevance, yet the dislocatory context of the latter's emergence had only become magnified (partly by VV's own doing). The mantle of a populism directed against the class of 'politicians' of both left and right was now taken up and indeed radicalized still further – albeit in different directions – by Andrej Babiš's ANO and Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy. ANO contested its first parliamentary elections in 2013 with a populist discourse that pitted the 'people' against the 'politicians' and the 'parties', including its famous election slogan 'We are not like politicians. We work hard.' ANO's discourse thus instituted an exclusion of the entire class of 'politicians' and 'parties' from the established virtues of 'hard work' and non-corruption, which ANO claimed to represent precisely by virtue of its identity as a 'movement' and not a 'party' as well as Babiš's identity as a 'businessman' and not a 'politician'. Asked in an interview why ANO chose to call itself a movement rather than a party, Babiš replied:

Because we didn't want to be a party. All those who governed here the last 23 years are parties and I don't feel like a politician. I don't want anyone to say I am a politician because I am a businessman. And I actually see the despair here in this country under the direction of these classical political parties, so it's basically a declaration that we don't belong with them (Šváb, 2013).

At a campaign rally in Plzeň in September 2013, Babiš declared:

If anyone says the state is not a firm, then I say that it is a firm and you are shareholders of that firm. [...] This state – those commentators can say what they want – is a firm, one that is indebted with incompetent management that steals on top. [...] If you [*turning to the audience*] were to come to me and tell me 'I'll give you 100 million, but I don't want to be listed online,' then I'll say to you, 'Dear sir, thank you, I don't want it.' Nobody will buy me off, I have enough (Šváb, 2013).

In addition to the central people/politicians opposition, then, Babiš's identity as a 'businessman' and not a 'politician' who, therefore, would not steal and would run the state competently like a firm played a key structuring function as an additional nodal point, making the ANO discourse a specifically *entrepreneur* populism. In contrast to the ODS's 'cheap state', Babiš's 'state as a firm' construction thus emphasized managerial competence as opposed to small size, even allowing for an active role of the state in ANO's policy priority of 'giv[ing] people work':

We are convinced that the state has to invest in times of crisis and save in times of growth. We will revive employment with state investments in the construction of infrastructure, highways, railways, and waterways (ANO, 2013).

Babiš, in effect, took up the ODS's emphasis on entrepreneurial initiative while displacing its neo-liberal ideology onto a 'managerial' (Císař & Štětka, 2017) or even 'technocratic' (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019; Havlík, 2019) one perfectly compatible with a Keynesian counter-cyclical fiscal policy – under the premise that only a 'businessman' possessed the requisite know-how, immunity from corruption, and 'hard work' ethic for taking these necessary measures, as opposed to the 'politicians' (this being the element of populism).

In the same 2013 elections, the discourse of Tomio Okamura's far-right Dawn of Direct Democracy was based on a strategy of radicalizing a similar opposition between the 'citizens' and the 'godfather party mafias' onto more far-reaching demands and exclusions (e.g. direct election of chief executives at every level of government, recall mechanisms against officeholders, harsher criminalization of corruption in order to curtail 'the enrichment of godfather party mafias' in the public sector) (Úsvit přímé demokracie, 2013). The discourse of Dawn also took up established signifiers such as 'work' and 'honest work' by denouncing a 'social system' that supports 'people who have no interest in working', calling instead for a 'system supporting all decent people' that 'restores the meaning of "fair" entrepreneurship and honest work'. Also notable was a targeted radicalization of the key ANO demand 'work to the people' by articulating this demand in nativist terms against the threat of 'immigrants' taking away jobs, as seen in the slogan 'Support to families, not to unadaptables. Work to our [people], not to immigrants'. The discourse of Dawn thus went farther than that of VV in adding a nativist dimension to this combination of hyper-neoliberal welfare chauvinism and anti-minorities illiberalism, equivalentially extending the exclusion of 'unadaptables' onto the perceived threat of 'unadaptable immigrants' and 'Islamic religious fanatics'.

After ANO entered into a coalition government with the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats following the 2013 elections, a key displacement occurred in its discourse: Babiš defined himself and ANO in opposition to ‘traditional politicians’ and ‘traditional parties’ (especially the ČSSD as its larger coalition partner), respectively, as well as the various ‘power groups’ supposedly connected to them,⁴ while the signifier ‘hard work’ took on the structuring function of a nodal point that set Babiš and ANO apart from the ‘traditional’ politicians and parties. As Babiš wrote in the preface to ANO’s 2017 election programme:

Our movement emerged as a protest against the corruption of traditional political parties that played the game of left and right. [...] After everything we experienced in government and parliament, we are not so naïve anymore. We know that the government is actually not led by the premier, but by all sorts of behind-the-scenes groups, lobbyists, and advisors. [...] But that changes nothing in our basic program, which remains the same and which is totally foreign to traditional politicians. We won’t lie, we won’t steal, we will fight against corruption and inefficiency and we will work for the people and our country (ANO, 2017).

ANO’s election campaign again featured dichotomous messaging that, this time, pitted especially the ‘hard work’ that ANO stood for against the ‘babble’ of ‘the traditional parties’, as seen on posters with slogans such as ‘Fight for the capable and hardworking. And not babble.’ This discourse thus de-emphasized the technocratic function of ‘the businessman’ as the solution to corruption and mismanagement, emphasizing instead the ‘hard work’ ethic common to ANO and the common people. Babiš (2017) even altered his ‘state as a firm’ thesis to this effect in his book *What I Dream About When I Happen to Sleep* (which was published and distributed by ANO as electoral campaign material):

They often criticize me for saying that the state should be run like a firm. Well, maybe I should say it’s better to run the state like a family firm, or even better, that the state should function to some extent like a family. The greatest wealth, whether of a family, of a firm, or of a state, is people, though it’s often forgotten. [...] People should go into politics who have proven something in their lives, people who understand politics as a service and a calling, people who have some kind of vision.

In contrast to the ODS’s earlier construction of the state as a family to justify an anti-debt and austerity agenda, Babiš (2017) articulated the equivalential link between ‘state’ and ‘family’ in terms of a people-centric image of the state (against the power bloc of ‘traditional politicians’), forging a wide-ranging equivalential chain of such ‘people’ who belong to politics more than the politicians themselves:

We have so many smart craftspeople, teachers, doctors, academics, self-employed people, entrepreneurs, paramedics, athletes, police officers, firefighters, and other professions. Maybe some of them could help society in politics as well because our country needs their help. I cannot come to terms with the notion that decent people cannot be in politics.

If a key shift in ANO’s discourse from 2013 to 2017 was the privileging of ‘hard work’ as a nodal point in order to set itself apart from the ‘traditional’ parties and politicians, Okamura’s Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD; a spin-off of Dawn following a split) once again played along and radicalized the signifier ‘hard work’ by extending its exclusionary scope. The party again combined a populist opposition between the ‘citizens’ and the ‘godfather party mafia’ with a hyper-neoliberal welfare chauvinism pitting ‘decent people’ against ‘people who have no interest in working’ (SPD, 2017) – with Okamura

railing against ‘unadaptables’ and ‘parasites’, defined as ‘someone who is capable of work but does not work long term’, and calling for taking away their benefits in favour of ‘the decent and the working’ (Janoušek & Janouš, 2017). This time, a new element of the party’s discourse – organized around the nodal point ‘freedom’ – was the demand to outlaw Islam in the Czech Republic: in a line of argument uncannily similar to that of Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom (PVV), Okamura argued for viewing Islam ‘not as a religion, but as an ideology’ – a ‘hateful ideology’ that ‘propagates intolerance, superiority over others’ – and for banning it precisely in the interest of ‘freedom’ (Janoušek & Janouš, 2017). With this pro-‘freedom’, anti-‘Islam’ position, which has been referred to as ‘neoconservative’ (Vossen, 2011, pp. 183–84) in the case of Wilders, the radicalizing dynamic in the joint articulation of hyper-neoliberalism and illiberalism has reached the point of not only denouncing entire minorities as ‘unadaptables’ and linking this in nativist terms to the supposed threat of external migrants, but also demanding the banning of an entire religion as a supposed threat to freedom.

It is worth noting in this context that ANO’s discursive strategy *vis-à-vis* SPD consisted in formal demarcation coupled with a differential incorporation of demands: in pre-election interviews, Babiš repeatedly ruled out a coalition with SPD and denounced the latter’s ‘absolutely unreal program’, while acknowledging that ‘we have the same opinion that it is necessary to stop migration, on the accountability of politicians, or on direct democracy ... Why not? But that’s the only thing’ (Leinert & Srnka, 2017). Babiš thus sought to rein in the populist (and partly also the nativist) dimension of SPD’s discourse as elements already represented on ANO’s agenda, while otherwise rejecting SPD as a partner and portraying it as the radical, irresponsible foil to ANO – Okamura, after all, ‘is trying to spread fear among people, although we do not have and will not have any migrants’ (Leinert & Srnka, 2017). In the months of uncertainty following the elections, ANO voted together with SPD on certain parliamentary committee posts but otherwise avoided rapprochement on the issue of government formation, ultimately forming a coalition with the ČSSD with confidence-and-supply backing from the KSČM following a similar logic of differential incorporation on issues such as minimum wage rises and taxation of restituted church property. Babiš justified the controversial move of obtaining KSČM support by articulating an equivalence against the outright refusal of the ODS, in particular, to cooperate:

This situation came about only thanks to the ODS. With them we had 103 votes [out of 200 in parliament]. [...] Everyone says: the oligarch, the big businessman, and the communists. But they behaved in a state-constructive manner and made the formation of the government possible. Why didn’t the ODS do this? (Kolář, 2018).

Babiš thus interpellated the ODS – the party that had long positioned itself as the guardian of the ‘post-November’ order – as responsible for the dislocation in the anti-communist consensus that had defined the rules of party competition, thus implicitly justifying this dislocation in terms of restoring the institutional stability that had eroded since 2006.

Conclusion

A discursive approach to populism yields numerous insights into the discursive roots, contexts of emergence, and differing iterations of populism in the Czech Republic. Party politics in the 1990s and early 2000s played out in the context of a hegemonic

formation whereby competing discourses of 'left' and 'right' articulated differential variations on the meaning of 'post-November transformation'. Populist challenges subsequently emerge from the dislocations in this hegemonic formation and its recurring promise of institutional stability;⁵ yet the ODS's and ČSSD's decidedly non-populist but moralizing and exclusionary constructions of 'hard-working, enterprising, responsible individuals' or 'honest work' – muddling the conceptual lines *vis-à-vis* those ideational approaches that emphasize moralism as a defining feature of populism (see also Stavrakakis & Jäger, 2018) – are also selectively taken up in later populist discourses. The ODS's neo-liberal discourse of entrepreneurial initiative feeds into the entrepreneur populism of ANO, which, however, articulates the function of Babiš the 'businessman' in the populist terms of representing the 'people' against the mismanagement of the state by 'politicians' and 'parties', while not taking up the ODS's construction of a small state tied to neo-liberal fiscal policies. ANO's later populism (after 2013) becomes less technocratic and more people-centric while emphasizing 'hard work' in its construction of the 'people', but once again in a populist manner against the 'traditional parties'. It is in the discourses of VV and Dawn/SPD, by contrast, that exclusionary constructions of 'work' are radicalized both in hyper-neoliberal fashion against 'unadaptables' in the area of social policy and as an illiberal category encompassing 'unadaptable minorities', 'unadaptable immigrants', and eventually 'Islam' – a radicalizing dynamic relative to both the ODS's prior construction of 'work' as an exclusionary criterion for defining 'individuals' worthy of social support and ANO's increasing emphasis on 'hard work' to set itself apart from the 'traditional parties'. The hyper-neoliberalism of VV and Dawn/SPD thus links up with an illiberalism that denies the rights of entire minority groups, all the way up to SPD's call for banning an entire religion in the name of 'freedom'. In this grey area between illiberalism and hyper-neoliberalism, SPD's discourse constantly follows ANO's like a shadow, pointing to and activating the dark potential undersides of a discourse increasingly centered on the valorization of 'hard work'.

Notes

1. Except, notably, on the issue of moralism as a defining element of populism (see Conclusion).
2. The concept of 'empty signifier' is omitted from the analysis here (in favor of the broader category of 'nodal points') out of space and simplicity considerations.
3. The discourse of the SPR-RSČ combined elements of populism with an anti-communist nationalism, albeit with its populism coming to the fore in the immediate period of transition in the early 1990s (pitting 'ordinary people' and the 'will of the majority' against a wide-ranging power bloc of 'communists and their cooperators' who allegedly staged the Velvet Revolution to stay in power; see also Hanley, 2013).
4. Consider the following claim by Babiš in a 2015 interview, which recurs in very similar form in the 2017 election program statement: 'Power groups have rather changed. Today, they can be various lawyers or marketing agencies. And they still exist behind the backs of traditional political parties. Moreover, some controversial ex-ministers still exert influence in their former portfolios' (Koutník, 2015).
5. Unlike Palonen's (2009) analysis of competing populisms in Hungary, competing populisms in the Czech Republic emerge from the breakdown of a system of 'bipolar hegemony' rather than sustaining the latter.

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