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MEDIA AND POPULISM IN CENTRAL EUROPE: REVISITING THE CASE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Josef Smolík – Vladimír Ďorđević*

ABSTRACT

There has been relatively little research on the topic of media and populism in the Czech Republic so far, which is in general indicative of the state of the respective scholarship on Central Europe. This part of Europe has in recent years seen a sharp rise of populism, with the current Prime Minister of the Czech Republic heading a government where his populist party wields overwhelming influence. To assess the link between our study of the online media and populism that has so far been left largely unaddressed in academic scholarship, we have analysed the period between January 2018 and March 2020 and inspected how the said media framed and discussed populism in this timeframe. By applying a theoretical and methodological framework based on a three-fold analytical lens, we have approached and examined the issue at hand by, first of all, addressing populism by the online media, then by treating populism through the online media, and, last of all, tackling populism in the form of the so-called citizen journalism. This analysis has allowed us to conclude that populism by the media, chiefly in the form of criticism of the elites, was the most visible in the said period, while, at the same time, only a handful of the media in question engaged in supporting populist platforms and ideas, with likewise and relatively marginal space being dedicated to populist citizen journalism as well.

Key words: Populism, Media, Central Europe, Czech Republic, Democracy

Introduction

Populist politics has been on the rise, particularly in Europe and the United States, for quite some time now. Having joined the EU in 2004 in the biggest

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enlargement to date after more than a decade of successful post-communist transition, Central Europe became part of the European Union (EU) that soon got overwhelmed by the global financial crisis. More than that, illegal immigration problems followed by the ensuing crisis that culminated in 2015/16, additionally coupled with internal problems on the functioning of and future of the Union itself (the East vs. West and big vs. small sort of divisions, among others), have significantly contributed to the development of populist agendas Europe-wide, particularly in more fragile regions such as the Western Balkans (see, for instance, research on BiH by Hasić, 2020). This increase has also been witnessed in Central Europe, particularly so in the last decade, with the case of the Czech Republic being quite interesting in this regard. Although the country has not been an exception to the rise of populism, it nevertheless is important to note that Prague is indeed a late-comer in this respect. **O. Císař** and **V. Štětka** highlighted that populism “has emerged after the 2013 parliamentary elections as a truly major feature of the Czech political system (despite some historical predecessors)” (Císař – Štětka 2017, p. 295). By referring to the anti-elitism of the ruling ‘Action of Dissatisfied Citizens’ party (also known as ANO, which, by the way, also means ‘yes’ in the Czech language) and by depicting domestic political context in respect to the anti-immigration and even anti-EU agendas having become powerful in recent years, these authors paint an insightful picture of the state of populism in the country (Císař – Štětka 2017).

To get more insight on the said issue, one may also refer to authors such as **V. Havlík** (2019), who, while mentioning the years of ‘democratic backsliding’ in Central Europe as discussed by, among others, **I. Krastev** (2007) and **J. Rupnik** (2007), characterized the Czech case of illiberalism in the light of the country’s populism being essentially ‘technocratic’, thus referring to the specific political style of the current Czech Prime Minister A. Babiš. The major exponent of Czech populism, in **Havlík’s** opinion, has been the PM’s governing ANO, which became the ruling party in late 2017, with the party being often described as having traits “of anti-corruption and anti-elitism as the defining feature” (Havlík, 2019, p. 380). Besides ANO, there are currently other political subjects, for instance Party of Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), and partly Czech Pirate Party (ČPS), that have had populist agendas, particularly so in their election campaigns (Charvát – Just, 2016; Kopeček et al. 2018). Nevertheless, the Czech case confirms an unwritten rule that, as far as Central Europe is concerned, populism is generally seen (and consequently presented by media) as essentially right-wing, chiefly in respect to

the so-called anti-system political parties (cf. Mudde, 2007; Kluknavská – Smolík, 2016; Kubát 2010; Danics 2016). Quite novel and fairly recent research on Czech populism has been done by **S. Kim** (2020), who furthers the respective discussion on the said issue by examining the nature of ‘competing populist discourses’ as being posited in the space between illiberalism and hyper-neoliberalism, thus shedding light on an interesting interplay between the two.

In respect to the said studies, **O. Císař** and **V. Štětka** (2017) pointed out that Czech populism has been increasingly treated in academic scholarship only in recent years, since it is a relatively novel phenomenon in the country’s politics, as additionally exhibited by studies authored by **S. Hanley** (2012a, 2012b, 2014), **V. Havlík** (2015), and **V. Havlík** and **V. Hloušek** (2014). In addition to this, it is worthy of noting that few other studies on populism have appeared in the meantime: for instance, those authored by **M. G. Bartoszewicz** (2019), **A. Roberts** (2019), and **P. Maškarinec** (2019). Last but not least, there is an older study dating back to 2007 and discussing Czech populism through the lens of the first European elections that Czech citizens took part in, which was produced by **M. Pitrova** (2007). The body of the scholarship mentioned here discussed the phenomenon of Czech populism from several different vantage points, that is either by describing its major characteristics, the organizational structure of respective parties and the role of its leaders, or, last but not least, by treating its main ideological points, programs, and the discourse of populist actors. It is only the aforementioned work by **O. Císař** and **V. Štětka** (2017) that presents somewhat of a short overview of both Czech and international scholarship on the topic at hand, very briefly touching upon the topic of media and populism, and providing to a somewhat larger degree information and conclusions on Czech populism as a specific political communication style. In that respect, it may be concluded that the said link between media and populism has not been addressed to any significant degree in any study so far, at least not to the best of our knowledge, signalling a need for this void to be filled, as already highlighted in a 2017 edited volume by **T. Aalberg**, **F. Esser**, **C. Reinemann**, **J. Strömbäck**, and **C. H. de Vreese** (2017). Interestingly so, the same point was made by **D. Albertazzi** and **D. McDonnell** (2008) in their edited piece on the 21st Century populism that, unlike the volume by **T. Aalberg** et al., does not cover the case of the Czech Republic but addresses Western Europe instead. Generally speaking, it is only **O. Císař** and **V. Štětka** (2017, p. 294) who provided “an initial mapping of this still largely uncharted research territory” of media and populism, thus

inviting more research to be done in this respect. Hence, our article may be considered an answer to this particular call.

As already mentioned, the main purpose of the article is to address the online media's (articles published on respective news portals) role in respect to populism in the contemporary Czech Republic. By this we mean the online media articles reporting on populism (respective ideas, platforms, and politicians) as well as constructing and disseminating populist discourses themselves. As previously noted, the scope of our analysis is limited only to the period between January 2018 and March 2020, that is the period following the 2017 October parliamentary elections, when the centrist populist party of ANO posited itself as the major political force in the country (New York Times, 2020). For the sake of our argument here, in the period of March-through-May 2020, the said populist party enjoyed great public support, with public polls estimating it to be as high as 34.5% (Radio Prague International, 2020). Our analysis includes all online media content in the Czech language in the form of online articles in the said period according to the Google search in the Czech language conducted by using two terms: 'populism, (the) Czech Republic.' Additionally, we used WordStat, which is a content analysis and text mining tool, that was highly useful not only search-wise but also analysis-wise, allowing us to get an insight into the language used in the given media as well as providing us with an opportunity to import and handle the online media content without any restriction.¹ Last but not least, we also checked the relevance of our word search by referring to the Czech National Corpus page, where information on the mode of usage of a word is presented alongside short information on where it is used the most,² allowing us to fully direct our attention to news articles. As a result, we arrived at the body of 186 articles to be analysed. Furthermore, the content that addresses, for instance, book reviews related to the said topic as well as various encyclopaedia-type information on populism was disregarded and hence not included in our analysis. We have paid attention to the way the language is used in the given articles when reporting on populism, according to a three-fold theoretical lens of populism, which will be explained further down. We are, nevertheless, fully aware that, as with every research method, ours also has limitations stemming from the

¹ This software is a very powerful content analysis and text mining research tool. For more info, see <https://provalisresearch.com/>

² See <https://www.korpus.cz/slovo-v-kostce/>

approach in handling the chosen articles, influencing us to make claims only in respect to the analysis we present in this article.

Last but not least, in respect to the aforementioned scholarship we fully acknowledge the fact that there are no “causal links between the media and the spread of populism. Nonetheless, if we examine the processes of media-driven representation and the symbolic construction of favourable opinion climates – and of populist leadership, credo and action – we find that the media provide a significant degree of support for the rise of populist phenomena” (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 50). In other words, media frames and presents populism-related topics in a certain way, and, while “mainstream news media do not deliberately serve as platforms for populism, and most of them would strive not to actively engage in populist discourse,” there are but numerous online attempts even in already established media outlets to “leave space for readers’ blogs, many of which are not only populist in the general sense but often actively incite hatred” (Císař – Štětka, 2017, p. 292). These arguments point the way to understanding the logic of the need for this article, particularly when an additional aspect of the overall political and social context of Central Europe is taken into consideration. The recent rise of populism ‘catering to the needs of many’ via media and reflected in a growing number of illiberal discourses has come to, among other things, openly question the Central European place in the EU and is increasingly aimed at discrediting democracy as an accepted political order, even to the point of instituting some quite bizarre ideas stemming from, for instance, revived meta-nationalist ideologies such as Pan-Slavism. In that respect, **M. Suslov** wrote about the vagueness of the said ideology and its somewhat peculiar role in contemporary Russian and East European politics (Suslov, 2012). Hence, it is important to note that “the media do not only provide information about populist actors; they continue to be the most important source of information about the status quo in a society, about its problems, achievements, and perspectives. The way the media select, present, and frame their information is crucial for the way citizens perceive what is important in a society, who is responsible for problems and their solutions, and what should be done to solve the issues at hand” (Reinemann – Matthews – Sheaffer, 2017, p. 389). In that regard, this article may prove useful not only in better presenting a picture of the state of the relationship between media and populism in the contemporary Czech Republic but also as means of pointing to several wider political and social problems in the said country that are very much related to our research issue and that warrant solution as such.

To finish with, it is necessary to mention that we fully acknowledge that ownership of media may influence the way that very media portray and address certain topics, particularly so if their owners are politically or socially active as such. For instance, Czech PM has often been mentioned in the context of its media empire and his supposed influence in this regard, with Czech media largely owned by domestic actors³ in the market showing tendencies of domestic “oligarchization” (Transparency International 2019). Hence, we are aware that that media ownership may indeed result in tendency *not* to tag and/or label their politically and/or socially active owners as, in our case here, populists, but this is not in any way the object of our own study.

1 Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Populism, as in the case of many other -isms, has a rich history (Lukacs, 2006), and studies conducted to the 1990s largely discussed it by associating it with uncivic/undemocratic political ideologies, such as fascism, Nazism, or communism (Hloušek – Kopeček, 2010). Ever since that time, this politically and emotionally charged term has become increasingly researched by being characterized in both ideational (conceptual) and realizational terms (Císař – Štětka, 2017).

Ideationally speaking, the term broadly refers to defending ‘the (sovereignty of) the people’ and their ‘will’, ‘needs’, and ‘rights’ against those who do not belong to that particular category (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Rosůlek, 2012). These, essentially speaking, ‘outsiders’ are either represented as ‘the (ruling) elites’ and ‘the establishment’, being in most cases characterized as amoral, cynical, and corrupted, or simply as ‘outcasts’ by virtue of not being members of the same ethnic, religious, or any other such group (Grzymala-Busse, 2017; Pirro, 2015). The said approach reflecting divisions is very much based on essentially dualistic (and thus rather simplified) view of society in terms of ‘good vs. bad’ (Bornschieer, 2017). Therefore, the said term builds on the concept of virtue and goodness of ‘us, the people’ resisting ‘them’ as the often-demonized enemies, who are alienated from ‘us, the people’ with ‘our values and culture’ (Laclau, 2013). It is this antagonism that contributes to the process of societal polarization that is essentially an inherent part of the said relationship between ‘us, the people’ vs. ‘them’ (‘the corrupted elites,’ ‘outsiders’ of all kinds, etc.) (Mudde, 2004). In that

³ For more information, see <https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2019/03/aktualizovana-mapa-vlastniku-ceskych-medii/> and <https://www.transparency.cz/rozkryvani-majetkovych-struktur-medii/>

respect, populism may be seen as somewhat local attempts at the universal mobilization of masses, expressing popular suspicion of political elites and 'outsiders' (Canovan, 2005; Müller, 2017). Hence, populists always "portray liberal intellectuals as out of touch with ordinary people, and they invoke the racialised Other as a threat to 'our' way of life, while blaming urban elites for ignoring or even indulging this threat, and banishing popular fears about it to the realm of the unsayable. This ideological rhetoric has unmistakable resonances of historical populisms such as fascism" (Vieten – Poynting, 2016, p. 535).

Speaking of realization in terms of political action, populism may be defined as both a particular political communication style and a strategy as such (Jagers – Walgrave, 2007). Hence, it is not only an idea but also an ensuing political practice, as **E. Laclau** pointed out (Laclau, 2013). In that regard, it represents a specific political style, a certain discourse, and a manner of (political) conduct (Mudde – Kaltwasser, 2012). This style is therefore based on the appeals to the above-mentioned ideas in campaigns opposing political rivals, whereby highlighting the interest of 'us, the people' is used as the prime instrument of legitimization of one's views and policies. It is, nevertheless, important to note that this style may at times be used by nearly every politician, political movement, or political party, thus reflecting a premise that democratic societies function on the principle of legitimacy grounded on one's electoral success (Alvares – Dahlgren, 2016; Urbinati, 2018). Hence, populist leaders follow the rule 'the bigger, the better', not only to prove their political appeal but chiefly to show that their main idea of the sovereignty of 'the people', delivered through divisive language, has gained considerable public support granting them legitimacy in the struggle for political power (Todorov, 2007; Dvořáková – Buben – Němec, 2012). In that respect, populism "lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent programme for the solution to crucial political questions" (Stanley, 2008, p. 95), yet its appeal remains somewhat constant. For instance, the proliferation of online media has in recent years had quite an interesting impact on the spread of populist ideas, with respective agendas benefitting from the rise of online communication discussing (not only) domestic issues by mostly appealing to (negative) emotions. This particular process then makes mobilization of voters or adherents to individual populist agendas relatively straightforward, as the language and manner in which these issues are framed and treated is exclusively produced in an emotionally loaded language of the Manichean opposition of good vs. bad (Mudde, 2004).

In respect to our research design and goals based on the fact that “the media play a key role because they serve as important dissemination channels for politicians and important sources of information for citizens” (Esser – Stępińska – Hopmann, 2017, p. 371), we aim to answer the following research question:

- How did the selected online media treat/frame/address populism, that is populist topics, agendas, and actors, in the selected period?

Answering the said question allows us to discuss the situation in the Czech Republic by addressing the connection between the media and populism in applying a three-fold theoretical perspective of “populism by the media, populism through the media, and populist citizen journalism”, as **F. Esser**, **A. Stępińska**, and **D. N. Hopmann** argued (2017, p. 367). In addition to this, it also provides with a glimpse into the way the online media treated the said issue (not only) concerning a somewhat traditional difference of mainstream vs. alternative media.

The first dimension of the aforementioned perspective is “populism by the media”, which “refers to media organizations actively engaging in their own kind of populism”, whereby “the anti-establishment bias”, with constant criticism of certain, usually those of the elites’, political agendas is coupled with catering to the taste of wider audience (Esser – Stępińska – Hopmann, 2017, pp. 367-369). Therefore, in this section we answer the following question:

- How did the online media frame their criticism of the Czech elites and which individuals were most often tagged as populists in this respect?

In addition to this dimension, “populism through the media” represents “the strengthening of politicians’ populist messages” by means of media support with “the assumption that there is a convergence of goals, which is usually unintentional” (Esser – Stępińska - Hopmann 2017, p. 369; cf. Mazzoleni, 2008, pp. 49-67). Here, we answer the following question:

- How did the said media voice their support to specific political agendas and which of these agendas were supported?

Last but not least, the “populist citizen journalism” happens “when media organizations open the gates to populist messages by audience members—usually in the form of reader comments on their websites” (Esser – Stępińska – Hopmann, 2017, p. 371). This last dimension is the section where we address the following question:

- Which of the given media were most welcoming to populist input by their audiences and which topics were most discussed herein?

Our analytical attention is particularly focused on the language (at times emotional one) used, as media (often) “rely on emotive stimulus words and dramatic visuals, and portray politics using sensationalized terms or with a sense of indignation” (Esser – Stepińska – Hopmann, 2017, p. 367). We approach the said language by particularly pointing out to emotional (or emotionally ‘loaded’) language, as it tends to be the one aimed at arousing and/or inducing emotions in readers, viewers, and listeners, thus not only directed at persuading but also potentially degrading individuals and agendas and possibly causing sway in opinions (see YourDictionary). In that regard, it is particularly nouns, adjectives, and verbs as the main units (word classes) for conveying the meaning that we have our paid attention to (Bolinger, 1980). We have, therefore, relied on addressing the said language using qualitative Content Analysis (CA), which represents an umbrella of methods aimed at providing a picture of the language (context) used in a particular social setting (Herrera, 2004).

2 Analytical Findings

The following analysis is grouped into three different subsections in respect to our research aims and questions. Since we have covered only the abovementioned period, our analysis is to be taken as indicative of the said period, thus standing as an invitation for additional research to be done in the future, perhaps covering a larger timespan and different research sample.

2.1 Populism by the online media

This refers to situations when the online media engage in attacking chiefly the elites and express highly critical attitudes towards them regardless of being justified, indicating that they see politics as some sort of an arena where “personalities, popularity, conflict, and strategy and tactics are emphasized” (Esser – Stepińska – Hopmann, 2017, p. 368). In our case, this happened in situations when the online media largely centred their criticism on the Czech elites, which is either the Office of the President of the Czech Republic or the current government. In that respect, there were specifically two individuals who were tagged as populists in the online articles analysed here, indicating that the said media outlets portrayed their political actions in populist light and presented them accordingly. Additionally, there were also a few occasions when a number of the online articles focused on a politician who is not a government member but represents both an influential and quite a controversial political figure, the one of

T. Okamura, the Deputy Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies and the leader of SPD.

The Office of the President is represented and de facto personified by the current Czech President M. Zeman, while the government representation is reserved for the current Czech PM A. Babiš (and his ruling party of ANO). In the said period, they were usually characterized and at the same time tagged as populists for advocating positions polarizing Czech society by claiming it was them rather than any other politician that represented interests of 'the common Czech people', described as having managed to successfully 'create an image of an (external) enemy' to 'the common man' while at the same time refusing to be on their part associated/equated with the political elites (*Hospodářské noviny*, 2020). This 'tactic' of the said elite political camp was thus on several occasions rejected and criticized by the online media as intentional and done purely for 'maintaining popular support', particularly when Zeman is taken into consideration (*Hospodářské noviny*, 2020). In addition to this, the said maintenance of the steady support was additionally dismissed in the online articles as being at the expense of polarizing public opinion in the country, chiefly realized by condemning the elites for abusing often a highly politicized topic of 'outsiders' (as in 'foreigners,' 'minorities', 'alienated ones') posing a major threat to Czech national interests (*Hospodářské noviny*, 2020). More than that, it was particularly Zeman's critical approach to the EU that was disapproved of through emotionally loaded language, whereby his approach to politics was said to be the one of 'corrosiveness' in being hostile to both 'Muslims and allies of the Czech Republic in the West alike' (*Týden*, 2020). More than this, M. Zeman was on a few occasions condemned in the context of his often dismissive and disrespectful communication, presented as essentially 'non-civilized' and therefore anti-European in spirit, when addressing his fellow politicians whom he has had an aversion to (*Neviditelný pes*, 2020a).

On the other hand, the image of the PM A. Babiš as a populist was largely deliberated both in respect to his own 'conflict of interest' over the abuse of EU funds allocated to the Czech Republic, with his political role of PM being associated with him continuing to 'manage' his own business empire of 'Agrofert' (*Lidovky*, 2020) in an 'oligarchic', and therefore uncivic and undemocratic, manner (*Romea*, 2020). This went hand-in-hand with the media addressing the PM's problems and 'risky behaviour' (*Lidovky*, 2020), allowing for both regional and wider European context and comparison to be introduced (*iDnes*, 2020; *EuroZprávy*, 2020; *EurActiv*, 2020). In that regard, the Czech Republic was

addressed and discussed in the context of other Visegrad states (the V4 group), where populism is said to have become deeply rooted into the political system, as in Hungary (Český rozhlas, 2020). More than that, the case of Czech populism was additionally discussed in the wider context of factors leading to it in being 'much more complex, more varied and psychologically coloured', thus indicating that populism represents a major concern not only for the future of the country but for the survival of democratic societies as we know them today (Respekt, 2020). In addition to this, apart from the PM and a range of issues tied to him personally, the current government was on several occasions denounced as having a very populist approach to, among other things, 'taxes' (Aktuálně, 2020), additionally described as being the government of empty 'promises' (Aktuálně, 2020), and with the kind of 'populism that sells well' (Prima, 2020). This went side-by-side with the online articles reporting on Czech opposition that heavily criticized the government accusing it of populist tactics in leading the country 'without a vision' and 'with reforms lacking' (České noviny, 2020). To top it all and indicative of our discussion here, the PM's populist role became increasingly questioned during the recent coronavirus (COVID19) crisis (iRozhlas, 2020), whereby his image/photo was, although *not* specifically mentioned in the text itself but implying it, used in an article describing the international context of states abusing and limiting 'civic rights' and liberties of their citizens (Byznys Noviny, 2020). In all fairness, it is important to mention that the current Czech government is composed of both ANO and Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) cabinet members, but the analysed articles tended to highlight chiefly the PM's, and therefore in all likelihood ANO's, role rather than discuss any other government figure or political party in the government.

Last but not least, populism by the online media was witnessed in a few articles where T. Okamura was tagged in respect to his long-term and distinguishingly uncompromising attitude to immigration to the EU (Lidovky, 2020), and additionally when his image/photo was used in two articles herein, whereby direct reference to him was, though *not* made in the text itself, in both implied as such (Český rozhlas, 2020). Although our discussion here does not include the treatment of images, they represent important aspects of (political) communication as has already been mentioned in the theoretical section. For the sake of the argument, Okamura's political activity and respective agenda has for years been centred on two main elements, that is the introduction of direct democracy in the Czech Republic and accountability of Czech politicians, whereby heavy usage of the anti-establishment discourse has allowed him to

become quite a well-known figure, particularly so on social media. His cooperation with other populist subjects, particularly those in other European countries, has been accentuated and tagged as 'right-wing populist' (Info.cz, 2018), as we have already claimed herein.

2.2 Populism through the online media

Populism through the online media, whereby politicians' platforms, agendas, and ideas are supported by the media was in our case found in a relatively small number of the online articles in the analysed period. We have not in any particular way explored whether the said online media had any ulterior motives in spreading the messages they did in the period we have analysed, and we do not make conclusions in this respect whatsoever.

For that matter, there were instances when the populist surge in (not only) Central Europe was altogether defended, without naming any specific political actor in this respect, by dismissing attacks against the populist movements in a frame that one could describe as the 'power to the people', with calls for 'direct democracy' to be instituted in the Czech Republic (Neviditelný pes, 2020b). Just for the sake of the argument here, this approach to political order has largely been supported by SPD of T. Okamura, lending his political party's name to this type of domestic political order. By predominantly using the emotional language that heavily relied on the use of descriptive adjectives, as in arguing that 'the common people are not some sort of a stupid bunch', or on verbs, as in 'the common people' refusing to 'voluntarily relinquish their sovereignty, their cultures, their languages', the said media largely presented the image of populist movements as both desired and preferred political and social arrangements in being an answer to complex problems the today's societies face (Neviditelný pes, 2020b). This went hand-in-hand with arguments characterizing populist political surge in Central European context as supposedly a defensive wall against the 'enemy' found in 'denationalizers and globalizers' working against national interests of states (Neviditelný pes, 2020b). The aforementioned approach effectively linking both Czech and regional to international context was on several occasions highlighted by emphasizing the populist agenda to be the one of the fights against 'shrinking civic liberties' and the need for safeguarding democracy and the state/rule of 'law' (Neviditelný pes, 2020b).

In addition to this, the KSČM agenda was hailed as a preferred solution to remodelling of the current Czech capitalist system characterized by many flaws (Haló noviny, 2020). This continued with criticism of the political elites and attacks

against the Party of Freedom and Direct Democracy for their complicity in allowing capitalism in the Czech Republic, and additionally for allowing historical revisionism and denialism to take root in the country's politics (Haló noviny, 2020). The galvanizing moment mentioned in this regard was the removal of a statue of the Soviet Marshall Konev in Prague in early April 2020, with a call against relativizing past events presented through a lens of criticism of a wider EU context by aiming to diminish Czech political elites' credibility and boost the respective KSČM agenda as arguably a preferred solution for the given problems (Haló noviny, 2020). More than that, the said EU context, and with it several Czech politicians not belonging to KSČM, got criticized for being ideologically faulty in 'justifying the rewrite of history' (Haló noviny, 2020), implying that this would not take place in a socialist country with a communist leadership.

Last but not least, an interesting discussion on the poor state of Czech democracy and the need to have it fixed was offered in an article where a former PM, member of the Czech Senate and a long-term member of the Christian and Democratic Union–Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU–ČSL), used largely emotional language to launch his criticism of the elites and speak on upcoming elections where Czech citizens were to 'drive out of the trenches of power those who have settled there for good', whereby the role of 'citizens of today' being the 'voters of tomorrow' was accentuated (Parlamentní listy, 2020a). This call was not directly associated with the aforementioned political party, but it nevertheless remained implied in this text.

2.3 Populist citizen journalism

Czech online media space was quite interesting to address when populist citizen journalism is taken into consideration, chiefly because our case study indicated that it was chiefly alternative and tabloid online media that provided space to their readership to express ideas and opinions on a range of topics. This is not uncommon for mainstream media as well, though the question of comment moderation in the online media in the Czech Republic overall remains an interesting point to be researched and discussed in the future, as a recent study on this topic shows (Eberwein – Fengler – Karmasin, 2018). It is, however, certain that more respected and thus mainstream media, such as the state TV and radio, tend to invest additional scrutiny in regulating public comments posted on their webpages, whereby more alternative media do not necessarily meet this standard and fall behind considerably (Holt – Figenschou – Frischlich, 2019),

generally pointing to the issue of “a limited number of media accountability instruments within Czech journalism culture” (Trampota, 2018, p. 52).

In that respect, our analysis indicates that some alternative online media, particularly those of tabloid nature as well as those belonging to the extremist group in spreading fake news and engaging in full-blown disinformation agendas (cf. *Parlamentní listy*, 2020b; *Sputnik Česká republika*, 2020; *G.cz* 2020), seem to allow for quite extensive public input in their comments section. Expectedly so, most of the debate led in this particular regard was centred on topics that the said media regularly published on, which usually involved the propagandist reporting using manipulative techniques to support, for instance, pro-Russian political views and agendas through tagging, blaming, fabrication of facts, and inciting fear, among others (*Evropské hodnoty*, 2020). This was usually done to criticize the political elites, predominantly concerning Czech foreign policy orientation to the Western democratic camp of EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as aiming to present the Czech-Russian relationship in a chiefly positive light (cf. *Evropské hodnoty*, 2020).

In addition to this, considerable part of the said public input in the form of comments addressed the issue of immigration that, as already shown, did not significantly fare in the analysis of populism by and through the online media in the given period. In that respect, substantial number of public comments addressed immigration in sensationalist terms, often using the terms of ‘illegal immigration’ and ‘immigration’ interchangeably, to criticize the political elites (*Pravý prostor*, 2020). This particular criticism often addressed supposedly negative cultural aspects that were deemed as tied to (illegal) immigration and highlighted the alleged destruction of cultural values of European nations accepting immigrants (*Pravý prostor*, 2020). The said topic, for that matter, occupied vast space in these public posts and comments following the articles on the said web servers, indicating that the said agenda fares relatively high in the contemporary Czech political discourse by remaining an important point allowing politicians to score cheap political points.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article aimed at the relationship between populism and media in the case of the Czech Republic. By approaching the said topic as largely unexplored in the given scholarship we discussed our single case study by taking into consideration online articles on the topic of populism in the

period between January 2018 and March 2020. This body of articles was then subjected to analysis by using the three-fold analytical lens of populism by the media, through the media, and populism in the form of populist citizen journalism, allowing us to focus on the language used and uncover how different online media reported on the said issue in the selected period and how they respectively framed their discussions and analyses in this regard. Consequently, our analysis indicates that populism by the media, as in the criticism of the elites, represented the most significant aspect in the given period, while, at the same time, only a few online media engaged in openly supporting individual political platforms and ideas, as discussed in the section on populism through the online media. Last but not least, populist citizen journalism is expressed through public comments mostly centred on criticizing the elites, largely by questioning Czech place and role in the West (EU and NATO), and is additionally focused on supporting chiefly pro-Russian propaganda, anti-immigration attitudes, and the supposed need to preserve one's cultural heritage. Since we may have covered a relatively small fraction of the Czech online media space, we believe that our article serves as an invitation for additional research to be done in this regard, particularly when taking into consideration rapid development and increasing importance of the online media space that is poised to have an even larger role in shaping public opinion in the future.

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