

# The Firm and the Nation: The Role of Fantasy in the Czech Populist Movements of ANO and SPD<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Populism in Central Europe remains an elusive subject to grasp. In relation to neoliberal hegemony, the question remains whether populism represents its rupture or consolidation. This paper explores populist tendencies in Czechia by analysing the discourses of two prominent politicians, Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura, in their campaigns ahead of the 2017 parliamentary elections. Drawing on post-structuralist discourse theory, the analysis looks for key signifiers, narratives and ways certain topics are articulated, making use of a theoretical account of populism as a political logic, rather than an ideology, as well as the concept of fantasy derived from lacanian psychoanalysis. Exploration of the relation between fantasy and populism is of vital theoretical relevance. The paper focuses on corruption as a possible dislocation of neoliberal hegemony that led to an organic crisis. In the context of extreme distrust in politicians and parties both Babiš and Okamura presented anti-corruption narratives that gained resonance, both rearticulating neoliberalism in specific ways and relying on fantasmatic narratives. While Babiš drew on neoliberal discourses surrounding citizenship and work, Okamura radicalized them into an exclusionary populism that seeks to rid society of “parasites”. Both blame the elites - connected with corrupt politicians and their business godfathers.

**Key words:** Populism, Czechia, Fantasy, Neoliberalism, Nationalism

## Introduction

The rise of populism in Central Europe has been an intriguing phenomenon for many in the field of political science. By some this development has been seen as a threat to the liberal democratic project set out in 1989 (Krastev, Holmes 2019). Particularly in Czechia the rise of ANO, the political project of billionaire

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**Andrej Babiš**, came as a shock to many commentators and academics, casting doubt on the future of young democracies. On the other hand, the so-called “populist moment” is seen by others as a real challenge to neoliberal consensus which has defined the political course of most European countries since the 1990s (Mouffe 2018; Salter 2016).

This article situates the rising populist tendencies in Czechia within the context of lingering neoliberal consensus. Neoliberal hegemony had a strong grip in the post-communist block for decades (Ghodsee, Orenstein 2021; Ther 2016), but in the 2010s Czechia experienced a shift in the perception and execution of politics. Long-lasting dissatisfaction with corruption and the unstable nature of cabinets led to certain rejection of politics that proved to be disrupting, inviting a rearticulation of neoliberal hegemony. The migrant crisis turned out to be another such dislocation. Even though Czechia remained virtually unaffected, questions of national identity and national sovereignty in relation to the European Union became central political problems. These crises led to major electoral shifts, downfall of traditional parties and rise of new parties, critical to some extent towards post-communist transformation, such as ANO, SPD, or the Czech Pirate Party.

This article invites a post-structuralist discourse-theoretical approach for the study of populism in Czechia. The Czech political context highlights the advantages of a discourse theoretical approach, as the presence of diverse populist actors offers no clear common features outside of rhetorical methods and radicalization of sedimented discourses. Discourse-theoretical approach is not concerned whether a movement is or is not populist, but rather how it uses populist logic to articulate its political project, i.e., institution of new hegemony. Populism then is not an all-explaining concept, but more of an analytical entry point (De Cleen, Glynos 2021, p. 5). Crucially, discourses have an affective dimension, triggering passion and hatred, which is structured by fantasmatic narratives.

The focal point of this study are the discourses of two prominent political figures, **Andrej Babiš** and **Tomio Okamura**, in the run-up to the Czech parliamentary elections of 2017 and the question if and how they articulated “the people”, in relation to neoliberal hegemony, anti-corruption narratives and national identity. The elections of 2017 marked the ascension of **Andrej Babiš**’s ANO and the surprise performance of the underdog SPD, led by **Tomio Okamura**. While several studies have dealt with populisms of **Babiš** and **Okamura** (Buščíková, Guasti 2019; Havlík 2019; Kim 2020; Naxera, Stulík 2022;

Slačálek 2021 pp. 158-202), a poststructuralist perspective to Czech populism is mostly lacking. Not only do ontological premises of discourse theory offer a unique view into populism but it also allows us to penetrate the affective dimension, which is crucial to all politics. The relation between populism and fantasy is then of crucial importance and needs to be explored more thoroughly within the study of populism.

In the first chapter the discourse-theoretical approach to the study of populism and its merits are introduced, as well as the concept of fantasy, originating in lacanian psychoanalysis. The political development of Czechia is then briefly outlined, in terms of neoliberal hegemony and its crises, mainly political corruption. Discourse-theoretical analysis in the second half of the article draws mainly from speeches, social media post and interviews of the leaders of the two parties, **Andrej Babiš** and **Tomio Okamura**, before the parliamentary elections in 2017, as well as the electoral campaigns of their parties (billboards, newsletters, video spots, etc.). In examining two leader-oriented parties generally considered populist (Buštková, Guasti 2019; Maškarinec 2019) this article leaves out others, for example the Czech Pirate Party, which could be included in the same study, as it emerged at the same time and also responds to disruptive dissatisfaction with corrupt politics.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Populism and fantasy

While there is a considerable amount of academic interest in the study of populism in recent years, there is still little consensus on how to approach this concept. After decades of debates about what exactly is the essence of populism, many adherents of the term conceded that it is not a coherent ideology. It became a trend to conceive of populism as a “thin” ideology. **Margaret Canovan** (Canovan 2002) or **Cas Mudde** (Mudde 2004) talk about populism as an ideology, which does not have a strong ideological foundation and can latch on to another “thick” ideology (like socialism, conservatism, etc.). **Mudde** conceives of populism “as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, p. 543).

Although beneficial to the stale field of populism studies, **Mudde’s** definition

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<sup>2</sup> For studies on the communication of Czech Pirate Party vis-à-vis anti-corruption see (Kim 2021 96-99, Naxera 2021)

has been criticized for attributing moral values to the people and the elite, and for insisting that these groups are homogeneous (Katsambekis 2020; Markou 2017, p. 57). This framework is then at risk of having an analytical and moral bias when studying nuances of populist politics. Close to this “thin ideology approach”, which has become somewhat mainstream in the past decades, we can situate discourse-theoretical approach, connected with the Essex school of discourse analysis, which conceives populism as a political logic. This approach builds on the works of **Ernesto Laclau** and **Chantal Mouffe**, mainly their project of social ontology as a discourse, set out in their joint 1985 work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

The main tenant of discourse-theoretical ontology presents us with something that makes the study of populism a lot more accessible and fruitful. Since, according to **Laclau** and **Mouffe**, all meaning is mediated through discourse, maybe we do not need to dig any deeper below the rhetorical surface of populist actors. In this perspective the distinction between rhetoric and politics becomes meaningless. Politics is a play of signifiers where the importance lies in their articulation and structure. Analysis is then freed from any references to sociological categories and focus is brought to the active discursive construction of identities by political actors. The point of discourse analysis is then not to show some true meaning behind discourses, but to highlight their political nature and contingent character.

As opposed to other approaches, discourse here refers not only to the domain of language, but representation itself. It is “the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice” (Laclau, Mouffe 2001, p. 105). Discourses, however, can never be permanently fixed in a social field ruptured by antagonism and are subject to a constant power struggle, which highlights the political nature of discourse. Discourse theory gives an important role to the process of articulation,<sup>3</sup> which links different signifiers in discourse and transforms their identity. These identities are never permanently fixed, due to the antagonistic and contingent nature of discourse. On the level of subject this is conceptualized through dislocation. Dislocations are moments where subjects are confronted with “an experience that cannot be symbolized within and by the pre-existing means of discursive representation” (Glynos, Howarth 2007, p. 14). A possibility then opens up for rearticulation of hegemonic discourses, or their dismissal and

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<sup>3</sup> This also answers doubts about discourse theory’s assumed preference of structure over agency (cf. Carpentier 2017).

institution of something new.

One way to take on the daunting challenge of discourse analysis is to follow the so-called “logics approach” as developed by **Jason Glynos** and **David Howarth** (Glynos, Howarth 2007; Glynos, Howarth, Flitcroft, Love, Roussos, Vazquez 2021). Logics seek to analytically capture the grammar or rules governing certain discursive practices and regimes in order to provide a critical explanation of the phenomena. Three different (but interconnected) logics help us navigate through institution, contestation, and tenability of discourses. While social logics characterize the general rules governing practices and regimes in a particular domain, political logics explain their institution and contestation. Finally, fantasmatic logics tell us why subjects are attached to certain discourses. Put simply, social logics answer the question of *what*, political logics *how*, and fantasmatic logics *why*. For example, in the study of neoliberalism in particular space, social logics would help us characterize the discursive regime of neoliberalism, made up of particular practices like privatization, value of competition, instrumentalization of the state, etc. Political logics would be helpful in explaining how neoliberalism established itself diachronically, through hegemonic struggles, its opposition to the welfare state, the centrality of freedom as an empty signifier, etc. Lastly, fantasmatic logic would explain the salience of neoliberal discourse, focusing on its mythical narratives, presenting a sutured vision of a society healed from antagonism.

Political logics deal with the construction of antagonistic frontiers - in their seminal work **Laclau** and **Mouffe** worked with two different political logics, logic of equivalence and logic of difference. Logic of equivalence groups different elements of discourse into chains of equivalence, where these elements gain common identity through their opposition to the antagonistic other. Meanwhile logic of difference breaks existing chains of equivalences and displaces antagonistic polarity (Laclau, Mouffe 2001, pp. 127–134). Even though these logics are mutually exclusive they are both necessary counterparts to each other (Laclau 2005a, p. 80). This is due to the unstable nature of the discursive field, where every identity is susceptible to dislocation. Political logics then articulate our understanding of dislocation (Glynos, Howarth 2007, p. 143).

When a particular discourse achieves social dominance through logic of equivalence, we speak of hegemony. Hegemonic projects strive to become “an absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility” (Laclau 1990, p. 64). In a less abstract sense, it means that hegemonies construct a “common sense”, becoming sedimented, with their constructed and political nature appearing

natural and objective. Therefore, any apparent consensus in democratic societies is always just “the expression of hegemony and crystallization of power relations” (Mouffe 2000, p. 49). Hegemonies are structured by a signifier which ascends into a privileged position of empty signifier. This signifier assumes the role of representation within other signifiers in a discursive chain of equivalence and thus gives up its particularity. **Laclau**, for example, notes how the “market” was much more than just an economic arrangement for Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, but also stood for civil freedoms, the return to the West and the end to bureaucratic rule (Laclau 2005a, p. 95). In relation to populism, we can say that the vagueness or inaccuracy of populist symbols, slogans and demands is not accidental, but expresses something that is inscribed in the very nature of the political and is the condition of their political efficacy (Laclau 2005b, p. 40).

A possible way for a hegemony to ascend is then through the political logic of populism. Populism can be understood as a political logic that constructs a dichotomous discourse which makes prominent references to “the people” (or its proxy, such as “the underdog”), which is juxtaposed to “the elite” (or “the establishment”, “the oligarchs”, etc.). Populism will predominantly feature the logic of equivalence, linking identities of various elements in discourse by their opposition to an antagonistic enemy. “The people”, or its proxy, will then serve as an empty signifier of populist discourse, representing the whole chain of equivalence, pitting it against “the elite” (Laclau 2005a; De Cleen, Stavrakakis 2017).

For some (De Cleen, Stavrakakis 2017; Stavrakakis 2019) this is where exclusionary populism diverges from inclusionary populism, or “populism proper”. Instead of being a fluid empty signifier, which meaning is never fixed, “the people” in exclusionary populism “usually refers back to a fantasmatic transcendental signified (the nation, race, etc.)” (Stavrakakis 2019, p. 202). Nevertheless, approaches like this could be in danger of assuming that populist actors link together into a chain of equivalence already existing identities and demands. While this may be true to some degree, it is important to stress that populist actors also co-construct these identities and demands (De Cleen, Glynos 2021, p. 8).

To explain why certain discourses hold more than others onto subjects, some authors within discourse theory have deployed the concept of fantasmatic logics (Stavrakakis 2007; Glynos, Howarth 2007). Fantasy is connected to the concept of enjoyment (*jouissance*), stemming from the psychoanalysis of **Jacques Lacan**. Unlike **Freud’s** libido, *jouissance* is not entirely pleasurable. According to **Lacan**, the subject sets a limit to the amount of pleasure he or she can receive,

so-called pleasure principle. Yet there is a paradoxical drive to go beyond pleasure principle. There, where the pleasure becomes painful, we are dealing with *jouissance* (Evans 1996, pp. 93–94). We unfortunately can never attain full *jouissance*, only getting glimpses of it. It is what marks our entry into the symbolic world. Yet this idea of the loss of primordial enjoyment remains with us. A narrative that promises an encounter with the fullness of this lost enjoyment is fantasy (Stavrakakis 2007, pp. 196–199; Dean 2012, pp. 3–8).

This lack on the level of subject corresponds to the missing foundation of social reality in discourse-theoretical framework. Fantasmatic narratives then serve as a cover for the contingent and fundamentally antagonistic nature of the social (Glynos, Howarth 2007, p. 147; Žižek 2008, p. 45). It is therefore not a dream-like illusion, opposed to reality, but a narrative that supports our cohesive perception of social reality. Fantasy offers a vision of a whole and sutured reality, healed from antagonism. This is done by an interpretation of fantasy that promises or produces enjoyment (*jouissance*). However, since this enjoyment is never fully achieved, it is crucial for discourses to account for its lack. This non-fulfilment is explained by a fantasmatic narrative that features “theft of enjoyment” - presence of the other, blocking our enjoyment (Žižek 1993, pp. 201–206). Because of this intrusive element, which has to appear as transgressive to retain its connection to enjoyment, aspects of fantasy tend to be “off the record”, resisted in the public official discourse (Glynos, Howarth 2007, p. 148).

We can then say that there are two sides of fantasy, the beatific side that promises to subject an unachievable fullness and a horrific side which presents an obstacle blocking this fullness (Glynos 2008, p. 283). Fantasmatic logics provide an additional explanatory level to discourse analysis by accounting for narratives that support certain discourses in the affective register. The discursive dimensions of representation and the fantasmatic dimension of enjoyment should be understood as distinct but interconnected. In relation to populist logics, Glynos and Howarth (2007, pp. 150–151) note that non-populist (i.e., institutionalist, reformist) discourses will generally construct fantasies in such a way that the obstacle to full and harmonious society is external. On the other hand, populist discourses will try to construct an “enemy within”, precisely what **Margaret Thatcher** called the leaders of the miners’ strike in the 1980s.

## **2. Czech political landscape - Neoliberalism, corruption, and anti-corruption**

A large portion of the post-1989 political development in the Czech Republic could be described in terms of hegemonic consolidation around neoliberal centre. Since the 1990s, until 2010, the political landscape was dominated by two large parties – right-wing Civic Democrats (ODS) and centre-left Social democrats (ČSSD) with another two parties on the apparent opposite sides of the spectrum - Christian democrats (KDU-ČSL) and the Communist Party (KSČM). Although these parties were nominally spread across the left-right axis, there was a clear neoliberal consensus (Mertl, Krčál 2013; Ther 2016). As in many other countries, neoliberalism has been successful in articulating itself as part of an “end of ideology” (Weltman, Billig 2001), avowedly reconciling the left/right divide.

The making of neoliberal hegemony in Czechia came relatively easy. The classic antagonist of neoliberalism, the welfare state, was equated with the old communist regime, which had to be overcome and forgotten. “Return to the West” served as an empty signifier, representing not only integration into western institutions, but also swift financial and political reforms. Anyone doubting these reforms was cast as an accomplice of the past regime, wanting to steer Czechia back to the East (Rut 2018). There was a consensus on privatization of industries, deregulation, cuts in government spending, etc. With the valorisation of competition came the conceptual transformation of labour into human capital (Foucault 2008, pp. 219–224). Entrepreneurship then became an ethical pursuit (Eyal 2000, p. 54). Hard work, with no distinction between labour and entrepreneurship, became a virtue.

Politics in post-communist Czechia have been presented in largely technocratic and consensual manner. Antagonism had been displaced from the political realm, leaving itself to be manifested in the moral register and in revived nationalism. For example, Michal Pullmann (2016: 90-92) notes how open racism entered public discourse after the disintegration of legitimacy of the communist regime. Hostility towards the Roma minority seamlessly continued throughout the process of “nation-building” in the 1990s and onwards. The Roma population drew the short straw from the neoliberal structural changes in the economy, leading to massive unemployment and socially excluded communities (Guy 2001). Resentment towards Roma would sporadically, in times of crises, turn into

open violence (Sasínová 2009; Adamec, Pavec 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Another by-product of hasty transformation was the rise of corruption. Ever since the rapid privatization<sup>5</sup> in the early 1990s, the class of richest Czechs got used to maintaining close relationships with the government. Interconnection between private interests and the public sector led to the rise of shadowy figures, nicknamed “godfathers” in reference to the mafia, who had great influence over political parties. Besides enriching themselves through government contracts, they would exert their influence on policies, as well as party leaders. Corruption in Czechia became to a large degree institutionalized – one report from Transparency International concluded that “powerful lobbies no longer need to break the law, instead they push through its amendment which legalizes their activities” (Transparency International 2017).

Corruption in the 1990s and early 2000s, although present, was not seen as a major problem, perhaps being understood as a price for democratic transition. Roughly since 2010 “corruption emerged as a central issue for political and social debate” (Naxera 2018, p. 35). It became a widely held belief that politicians and political parties are all corrupt.<sup>6</sup> We could say that various corruption scandals around this time served as dislocations in the post-communist neoliberal hegemony. Discontent with the state of politics combined with anger at mounting corruption led to the rise of movements that wanted to take power away from the class of politicians either back to the people or to be managed by successful businessmen.

First of these movements was Věci Veřejné (Public Affairs). The party, with known TV investigative journalist Radek John as its face and businessman Vít Bárta in the background, wanted to take on “political dinosaurs” and claimed to be beyond the left/right divide, believing in “ideology of correct solutions” (Havlík, Hloušek 2014, p. 6). While gaining 10,9% of the vote in 2010 and participating in the government, the party and its support quickly disintegrated thanks to its own corruption scandals and unpopularity of the Nečas cabinet. The cabinet of Petr

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<sup>4</sup> The first major case of anti-Roma sentiment playing a role in politics was the far-right party *Sdružení pro republiku - Republikánská strana Československa* (Rally for the Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia) led by Miroslav Sládek. It combined radical anti-communism with anti-German as well as anti-Roma sentiments. Sládek’s hateful rhetoric towards the Roma population was essential for the electoral success of the party in the 1990s (Roubal 2012, pp. 336-337)

<sup>5</sup> The political elite, led by Václav Klaus, decided that the best way to privatize major state assets was the unorthodox method of voucher privatization (Power, Weinfurter 2015, pp. 111–112).

<sup>6</sup> For example, in a 2012 survey when given the statement “Political parties are corrupt”, 87% respondents agreed and only 7% disagreed (CVVM 2014).

Nečas had to resign because of the so-called “Nagygate”, a police investigation into organized crime reaching all the way to Nečas himself and his associates.<sup>7</sup>

Even though Věci Veřejné was in shambles, the call for revenge against corrupt politicians got even stronger. Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura answered the call, both competing in the 2013 parliamentary elections. Okamura with the vision of direct democracy and Babiš with the promise to run the state as a firm.

Both Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura got their start in politics by criticizing rampant corruption and the political elite, strung along by their godfathers. They also had similar backgrounds before entering politics - successful entrepreneurs who reaped the benefits of the post-communist transformation. In the case of Babiš, hasty privatization led him to vast fortunes, mainly in agriculture and chemical plants, making him one of the richest people in the country. In the case of Okamura, it was the opening of Czechia to tourists and western markets that made him successful. Born to a Japanese father, he made use of his connections in bringing Japanese tourists to Prague as well as importing Japanese food.

In the 2013 elections, Babiš's ANO finished close 2nd behind Social democrats with 18,65% of the vote. Conservative ODS and TOP09, who made up the Nečas cabinet, both lost substantial amounts of votes and seats. Tomio Okamura was successful with his party Úsvit přímé demokracie (Dawn of Direct Democracy), receiving 6,9% of the vote. Both ANO and SPD carried over the electoral support from Věci Veřejné as well as over time gaining support from traditionally leftist voters (Maškarinec 2019). Soon after the elections a cabinet was formed consisting of Social Democracy, ANO, and the Christian democrats.

Babiš himself was a prominent member of the cabinet, as a minister of finances and vice prime minister. He was forced to resign in 2017, because of the so-called “Stork's nest affair”, in which Babiš was under investigation for receiving €2 million in EU subsidies intended for small businesses only. He also had to face inquiries and a court case about his involvement with the Czechoslovak secret police prior to 1989. Even out of government Babiš survived attacks on him without losing support. Public opposition to him seemed to be mostly in the moral register. Since Babiš never played the moral card, he was exempt from charges of hypocrisy (Buščíková, Guasti 2019, p. 16).

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<sup>7</sup> The eponymous Jana Nagyová was the director of the Nečas' office and his mistress. In June of 2013 she, Nečas himself and several members of ODS were charged with multiple accounts of corruption. Nagyová was also accused of using the country's military intelligence service to spy on the wife of Petr Nečas. While the court case regarding corruption is ongoing, Nagyová was found guilty of abusing the military intelligence service (ČTK 2019).

Five months after Babiš's resignation elections to the Czech parliament took place. The main issues of the 2017 elections proved to be the relationship to the EU, Babiš himself and his scandals, as well as the fading refugee crisis. ANO emerged as by far the biggest party, winning almost 30% of the vote, with ODS being a distant second with 11,3% of the vote. Out of the new parties which got into the parliament for the first time there was Czech Pirate Party and Okamura's SPD, both receiving around 10% of the vote and offering a new way of doing politics.

The following chapters consist of analysis of Andrej Babiš' and Tomio Okamura's discourses in the run-up to the 2017 elections. Drawing on the theoretical framework described in the first chapter the analysis identifies key signifiers through empirical coding using the software MaxQDA. These signifiers are then examined against discourse-theoretical concepts such as antagonistic division, empty signifier, logic of equivalence or fantasmatic narratives. In line with the logics approach, the populist discourses in question are analysed as political logics, operating with terrain of sedimented discourses, such as neoliberalism, nationalism and anti-corruption, which are treated as social logics. The main research question is how did Babiš and Okamura construct "the people" of populism and how they related to these social logics. Of particular interest are also the fantasmatic logics, i.e., how did these politicians make use of fantasy and how it was integrated into their populist discourse. The selected corpus consists of speeches, Facebook posts, articles and interviews of Babiš and Okamura published within 3 months before the elections to the Czech house of representatives on the 20th and 21st of October, as well as posters, Facebook posts, print media etc., from their parties during the same timeframe.<sup>8</sup> The time frame was chosen for the heightened intensity and crystallization of distinct articulatory practices during the pre-election period.

### **3. Andrej Babiš's revenge on politicians and the state as a firm**

Major change from the 2013 elections was that in 2017 **Andrej Babiš** was not an underdog that came to shake up politics from the outside, but an established politician that was a member of the cabinet for 4 years. This would be a challenge for anyone, but **Babiš** also had to adapt his anti-corruption

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<sup>8</sup> Both parties are extremely leader-centric, so their public discourse diverges very little (if at all) from the one of their respective leaders.

discourse. Doing so proved to be surprisingly not that hard since one of the main issues of the elections turned out to be **Babiš** himself and his conflicts of interests.

**Babiš** was in the run-up to the elections successful in constructing a peculiar populist discourse, where he stood for honest, hard-working Czech people pitted against corrupt traditional parties with an agenda to destroy him. In ANO's discourse the traditional parties were antagonistic to its political project, wanting to desperately hang on to power and paint **Babiš** as a villain. They represented the old corrupt politicians with their godfathers and back-door interests. "Stork's nest affair" was in **Babiš's** discourse just another campaign made up to discredit him and his struggle to change politics for good.

For **Babiš** the 2017 elections were: "the first and last chance to get rid of the excruciating, sophisticated and felonious corruption hydra, which for more than 25 years parasitizes and slowly decomposes our whole country. That is why the traditional politicians and their godfathers are waging a massive, organized and dirty campaign with one goal: to banish me from politics at any cost. [...] [These elections are] the last chance to start governing our country not at the benefit of godfathers and their friends, but to govern our country at the benefit of the people" (Babiš 2017a).

When **Babiš** first ran for office in 2013 he became known for his belief, which he would repeat like a mantra, that "the state should be run as a firm" (ČTK 2013). This neoliberal trope was on the level of political logic positioned antagonistically against the notion of a corrupt state, led by shadowy godfathers and their friends. It gained resonance in the context of distrust in politicians and **Babiš's** image of a successful manager. On a fantasmatic level, this neoliberal fantasy presents a vision of a fulfilled society, which can be achieved if the obstacles of corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and the unemployed are removed. The main tenant of neoliberalism, i.e., bringing the logic of market to the mechanisms of the state (Foucault 2008, pp. 241–242), is here brought to its ultimate conclusion. Depoliticized economy, as the fundamental fantasy of neoliberalism (Žižek 1999, p. 355), is in the notion of the state as a firm enhanced by depoliticized state apparatus, built on hierarchy and market logic.

In 2017 this discourse is supplemented by the idea that the firm should be understood as a family business, or even family itself: "in some respects the state should operate like a family. It is often forgotten that the greatest asset of a family, business or a state, is its people" (Babiš 2017b, p. 9). **Babiš** goes on to say that the driving values of not only family but also a firm and a state are "solidarity, responsibility, austerity, effectiveness, rules, and common sense". Family is

painted as an efficient economic unit. You get solidarity, but only by being frugal and following the rules.

With the values mentioned being clearly economic, the image of family is connected to the empty signifier of **Babiš's** discourse - that citizenship is achieved only through hard and honest work. The ones that are disregarding of this rule are the traditional politicians and benefit scroungers. On a fantasmatic level, these represent the horrific side of fantasy, obstacles to the fulfilment of "state as a family firm" fantasy. The first case is exemplified by perhaps ANO's most prominent election billboard where **Andrej Babiš** stands next to presumed politician in a suit with their head swapped for an emoji, throwing up the words "bla bla" and the caption reads "To work, not to blabber". Work is here antagonistically pitted against the usual business of politicians, which is incompetence and blabbing.

In the case of benefit scroungers, the obstacle to a full and sutured society are those unwilling to work. Unemployment is portrayed as an individual failure and people on unemployment benefits are vilified, portrayed as enjoying themselves (in different ways than we do) and stealing our enjoyment. The archetypal bearers of this image are Roma. **Babiš** would often make off the cuff remarks invoking this fantasy of Roma not willing to work hard (Vokurka 2017), with one particular comment being significant. **Babiš** visited the city of Varnsdorf and while talking to the locals, in front of journalist but notably "off the record", made a comment casually denying the Roma holocaust: "What those idiots write in newspapers, that the camp in Lety was a concentration camp, that is a lie, it was a labour camp, people who didn't work ended up there" (Bartoniček, Werner 2016). Historical falsehood is by **Babiš** articulated to support the fantasmatic narrative of unemployed Roma, seen as the primary thieves of enjoyment for avoiding work, which supports the image of hard-working Czech people (Slačálek 2015, p. 376). It is important that this comment was made off the record, to preserve its transgressive status that facilitates enjoyment.

The prevalence of logic of equivalence tended **Babiš** to focus on internal enemies, i.e., corrupt political elites, Roma and prying journalists, but he was also active in constructing antagonistic frontier against external enemies. **Babiš** advocated for a hard stance against the perceived threat of illegal immigration. He often proclaimed that multiculturalism has failed (Babiš 2017b, p. 256; Zajíček, Ščeblykin 2020) and that national sovereignty must be protected any cost: "I believe that the European Union should be like an old Slavic or Celtic village. [...] free movement of [goods], services, capital, and persons. But that

comes to a stop beyond the last structure. A palisade, a moat, an earthen mound. A border. Our village can't accommodate everyone who is looking for a better life. It's not big enough" (Babiš 2017b, p. 245). **Babiš** saw terrorist attacks as evidence that western countries had failed in surveillance of the "dangerous individuals coming from outside of Europe" (Babiš 2017b, p. 254).

The threat of illegal migrants was not just about security or imagined failures of multiculturalism. **Babiš** made it clear that the biggest threat of immigrants was the possibility of them reaping social benefits without work: "What about those thousands of people who are swarming in just to get social benefits, with the vision of an income without work? [...] We must do everything we can to make sure they don't come to us" (Babiš 2017b, p. 256).

**Andrej Babiš** would also make references to his allegiance to Donald Trump and Trump's political project. **Babiš's** profile picture on social media platforms during the campaign was his portrait with a red cap, in the same style as the Donald Trump's Make America Great Again hat, with the slogan *Silné Česko* (Strong Czechia) on it.<sup>9</sup> Just a week before the elections, a letter was sent out by ANO to every household with the headline "Andrej Babiš's contract with the citizens of the Czech Republic", very reminiscent of Trump's "Contract with the American Voter". This was the end of the campaign and **Babiš** was here mostly mitigating the personal attacks on him from other parties. Therefore, the letter put **Babiš** on the defence and dismissed opposition: "Almost all politicians and journalists are constantly attacking me, that I want to move our country towards an authoritarian regime, that I have a problem with democracy, or that I am a danger for our country" (Babiš 2017c). Politicians from the traditional parties and journalists are blocking **Babiš** from delivering his basic promise to the people: "We don't lie, we don't steal and we work for you" (Babiš 2017c).

**Andrej Babiš's** political project revolves around the empty signifier of work. Hardworking individuals are seen as the base of society through which other signifiers in the chain of equivalence such as the family firm, national sovereignty, and anti-corruption are quilted. The people of populism are constructed as hard-working, honest and Czech. Characteristics of hard work and honesty serve as clear demarcation against the corrupt elite. **Babiš** presents himself as a saviour in a fight against this corrupt political establishment and as a competent manager of Czechia thanks to his business savvy.

The discursive structure of **Babiš's** particular rearticulation of neoliberalism

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<sup>9</sup> He would keep it as a profile picture until after the Capitol Hill riots in January 2021 (EURACTIV 2021).

is supported by the affective dimension of fantasy. The image of a family firm as a model for the state portrays hard-working, non-corrupt, depoliticized society, free from antagonism. This fantasy strikes as a vision of an accomplished neoliberal community. What is emphasized is the point that one has to stick to their role, i.e., work, to benefit from the wealth of society. The obstacles to the fulfilment of “state as a family firm” fantasy then are the un-adaptables, i.e., those who do not want to work, and those who are hurting the smooth economic development, corrupt politicians and obtrusive journalists.

#### 4. Exclusionary populism of Tomio Okamura

The 2017 elections were the first elections that SPD (Svoboda a přímá demokracie - Freedom and Direct Democracy) participated in, although **Tomio Okamura** was successful in 2013 with *Úsvit přímé demokracie*, which soon disintegrated after a split in the party caused by nebulous financing. As is the case with **Babiš**, **Okamura** is the clear leader and the party, lacking any other established names, is to a large degree synonymous with him.<sup>10</sup>

**Okamura** built the campaign of his party on its antagonistic relationship towards the EU and the problem of illegal immigration, underpinned by the fantasmatic narrative of “parasites” coming in and stealing what rightfully belongs to hardworking Czech people. Even though the refugee crisis in Europe was over its peak, the party made substantial use of rhetoric and images centred on refugees and Islam in their campaign. Parasite signified “anyone with two hands who doesn't want to work” (Svobodová 2017). Although **Okamura's** campaign was to a great extent targeted at the underprivileged, it was made clear that these parasites are Roma and dangerous immigrants, disguised as refugees.

**Okamura** managed to articulate into a chain of equivalence a securitized fear of refugees, with resentment towards the EU and anti-corruption narrative. This was done in a highly aggressive manner that made **Okamura** stand out in a political scene with general euroscepticism and consensus on not welcoming refugees. One of the main billboards of SPD simply said “No to Islam, no to terrorists” with a picture of **Tomio Okamura** in front of a waving Czech flag. Articulation between refugees, terrorism, Islam, and the EU was key performative action by **Okamura**. He would insist on Islam being an ideology, (Okamura

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, both the former *Úsvit* and SPD had Okamura's name in their full name: *Úsvit přímé demokracie Tomia Okamury* (Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct democracy) and *Strana přímé demokracie Tomia Okamury* (Tomio Okamura's Freedom and Direct Democracy).

2017a) which in a post-ideological era meant being cast into damnation.

Perceived failure of immigration and integration became the weapon to attack EU with, and the reason to leave:

*“Let’s name the cause [of illegal immigration]: European Union is a multicultural project, it is a project of multicultural superstate. As long as we stay in the European Union we will be under this threat [of illegal immigration]. Today we have concrete barricades against potential terrorist attacks. Even small-town festivities are guarded by policemen with machine guns because of the terrorist threat” (Předvolební debata o stavu demokracie 2017).*

This highly securitized articulation of problems surrounding migration created grounds for radical solutions: “That is why we are proposing a referendum to leave the European Union [and] also zero tolerance for illegal immigration, literally zero, because we can’t distinguish who is who, not even western Europe could do it, we are proposing a ban on Muslim ideology in Czech republic” (*Předvolební debata o stavu demokracie 2017*).

The problem with migrants in **Okamura’s** discourse is not only that they are from culturally incompatible place, but also that they are not willing to work: “Nobody minds a migrant from a culturally close country who works, does not parasitize and is even of benefit to the host country” (Okamura 2017b). Refugees from the Middle East and Africa were presented as “murderers, rapists, Islamic disseminators of religious and sexual racism. [...] people who cross borders illegally, becoming parasites on the prosperity which Europeans worked on for thousands of years” (Okamura 2017b).

To articulate into equivalence the parasitisation of immigrants to the stigmatized at home, **Okamura** adopted the term parasites. Another billboard, in the same format as the previous one, said “money to the honest, not parasites”. In a Facebook post that accompanied this image **Okamura** followed it by saying that SPD will raise pensions, benefits for the disabled and give interest-free loans to “working” newlyweds. The text is riddled with allusions to Roma, who according to **Okamura** do not work and do not deserve social security. He went on to say that the condition for receiving unemployment benefits must be a history of employment and a clean criminal record (Okamura 2017c).

The resentment towards the EU and “parasites” was connected to the incompetence of traditional politicians. They are not just corrupt as in the case of

**Babiš's** discourse, but thanks to what is at stake, they are also traitorous. These politicians serve the “dictate of the elites and oligarchs and restriction of democracy” (Okamura 2017d). Elsewhere, on a prominent double page in *Na vlastní oči* (*With your own eyes*), SPD's newsletter, we find a map of Europe, which highlights terrorist attacks that have happened since 2015. Underneath there is a “gallery of liars and hypocrites”, which features top-level politicians (then prime minister **Bohuslav Sobotka**, **Andrej Babiš**) and their statements in favour of immigration (SPD 2017, pp. 12–13). **Okamura** would often claim that those supporting refugees are committing high treason and should be punished accordingly (Maňák 2017; Okamura 2017e).

**Okamura** relies heavily on fantasmatic narratives to support his populist discourse. The force of fantasy in **Okamura's** discourse is particularly strong. He is presenting a nationalist fantasy which promises an encounter with the fullness of enjoyment projected at the roots of national history and myths (Stavarakakis 2007, p. 204). When presenting his political programme **Okamura** stresses that “in order for our country to stay ours and faithful to the legacy of our ancestors, who shed their own blood for it, help us preserve it” (Okamura 2017f). The inability to obtain enjoyment is attributed to those outside of the nation, in this case refugees and Roma as well as the EU establishment and the corrupt Czech elites who are conspiring on behalf of them.

What Tomio **Okamura** is articulating in the run up to the 2017 elections is a political logic of exclusionary populism that draws upon and radicalizes sedimented neoliberal and nationalist discourses while adding new elements to its chain of equivalence, such as islamophobia. “The people” is synonymous with ethnic Czech nation. The main virtue of the people is hard work. **Okamura** promises social security, but only to those who are deemed not to be parasites. Parasite is a signifier for the antagonistic enemy, which connects the internal and external threat, standing for both Romas and Muslim refugees. Antagonism is articulated through their refusal to work and their reliance on social security, as well as being supported by nationalist fantasy. Along with **Babiš**, **Okamura** positions himself in a fight against political elites, who are in the discourse of SPD not only incompetent and corrupt, but also criminal for allowing the Islamization of Europe and jeopardizing its security.

## Conclusion

Discourse theory offers us a unique view into populism. It highlights the

performative dimension of politics and focuses on the active construction of the people. Fantasy is a necessary feature of social reality since it serves to cover its fundamentally contingent nature. Any identification is then best understood at two distinct but interconnected levels, the discursive field of representation and the affective, stemming from lacanian ontology of jouissance (Stavrakakis 2007, p. 195). The logics approach can analytically account for this affective dimension of fantasy, as well as its relation to populism.

Looking at the discourses employed by **Andrej Babiš** and **Tomio Okamura** we see how both men use populist logic to articulate their politics, reacting mainly to the dislocation of corruption. They both started out in politics by criticizing rampant corruption, which naturally led them to anti-elite discourse, which ended up with different contours for both of them. Their anti-corruption narratives made the enemy out of the whole class of politicians. As time developed this antagonism in **Okamura's** case fused with resentment towards national outsiders and in the case of **Babiš** with the antagonism against those hurting smooth economic development.

Their populist projects rely on fantasmatic narratives rooted in sedimented discourses of nationalism and neoliberalism. Fantasmatic narratives became prevalent in this era of organic crisis, where stabilization of key signifiers was up for grabs with subjects susceptible to dislocations. **Okamura's** answer was a reliance on nationalist fantasy which fits well into exclusionary populism. It reactivates certain sedimented neoliberal discourses (surrounding work, the role of government, social security) into a populist logic along with a nationalist fantasy. The obstacles to a full and sutured society are those outside of the nation, grouped together by the signifier parasite, which connects immigrants and Roma. Notably, the intersection of the nationalist and the neoliberal fantasy is that these enemies are defined by their animosity to work. On the other hand, Babiš presents a vision of a meritocratic and regimented society through a “state as a family firm” fantasy, where work is seen as the main metric of value and is opposed to the corrupt world of politics. Although the us/them dichotomy is weaker, the parasitisation of “benefit scroungers” is still present as a barrier to the fantasy of fully sutured society.

Populism by itself does not constitute an ideology, or even coherent content, of movements. It should be registered at a formal level, here understood as a political logic. What should be of interest to us is how it relates to other discourses, practices, and regimes. Populism should not therefore be used as the sole conceptual tool for explanatory purposes. Populism as a political logic can seem

like it would make particular movements fluid, flexible to changes and various demands. On the other hand, when we turn our attention to the affective level, as we have seen in the empirical cases here, fantasies can have a sort of centripetal tendency, constructing narratives that pull subjects back to sedimented hegemonies, in our case neoliberal and nationalist.

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