

“You Can’t Corrupt Eight Million Voters”: Corruption as a Topic in Miloš Zeman’s Populist Strategy

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Abstract:

This paper can be seen as a contribution to the debate on political populism. More specifically, we focus on the relation between populist strategies and the perception of corruption. The issue of corruption and the fight against it is a part of various political strategies, programs, and rhetoric. In some cases, however, it lingers only on a rhetorical level, and the issue of corruption is used by politicians merely as a tool for gaining political points or to harm political opponents, whom they label “corruptionists”. The goal of this paper is to provide an interpretation of the ways in which Czech President Miloš Zeman constructs the issues that are related to the topic of corruption and to interpret how such content figures into the theoretical framework of populism. Methodologically speaking, the text is established as a CAQDAS dataset created by all of Zeman’s speeches, interviews, statements, etc., which were processed using MAXQDA11+ software. This paper shows that the dominant treatment of the topic of corruption by the president is primarily linked to the creation and assignment of delegitimising labels (“corruptionist”) to his opponents or the legitimisation of his allies and himself (as “corruption fighter”), which is the quintessence of populist strategies.

Keywords: *Miloš Zeman, corruption, populism, (de)legitimation, presidential speeches.*

Introduction

“I am a supporter of direct democracy and I support the opinion that citizens – because they do not have various clientelist connections as some politicians do – can make less biased decisions in referendums than these politicians.”¹

This paper is a contribution to the debate on political populism or populism in the sense of a political strategy (cf. Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). One of the basic elements of a populist strategy is the creation of homogeneous and mutually antagonistic groups – the “corrupt elite” and the “pure people” (Mudde, 2004). At the same time, a populist assumes the role of a representative of the people and legitimises his/her political requirements by stating that he/she is fulfilling the will of the people (Antal, 2017). A political populist uses stances against the political elite as corrupted actors as a basic strategy to achieve goals. Certain anti-establishment appeals are a part of populism (Barr, 2009). Research on the relationship between populism and the labelling of political opponents (and others) as corrupt actors is presently perceived in academic debate as a relevant research problem. We contribute to this debate and existing research (cf. Jansen, 2011)

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¹ From speech of Miloš Zeman (2017).

with an analysis of the issue based on the example of Czech President Miloš Zeman.² The goal of this paper is to provide an interpretation of the ways in which Czech President Miloš Zeman constructs the issues that are related to the topic of corruption and to interpret how such content figures into the theoretical framework of populism.³

All of Miloš Zeman's speeches, interviews, and articles in his first election period make up the resource base (see below). From these speeches, we can deduce three "islands of deviation" – a term he coined himself – that (according to Zeman) present a problem for Czech society. The first island is made up of "neo-Nazi guerrillas, who occasionally raise havoc in the streets of our cities", and the second island of deviation is "a significant portion of the Czech media".⁴ For our paper, however, the third island of deviation is the most important one:

Some of the most dangerous islands are the godfather-like mafias that are a parasite on the body of Czech society, sucking the blood from it and not giving any added value back to this society in return, whether in the form of new investments or properly paid taxes. From a long-term perspective, I am deeply convinced that the most efficient tool for fighting against

2 For more than twenty years, Miloš Zeman has without a doubt been one of the most prominent figures in Czech politics. In the first half of the 1990s, he became chairman of the Social Democratic Party, which he built up from a party with minimal supporters to one of the strongest political actors in the country and a party that repeatedly won elections at end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s. Thanks to these successes, Miloš Zeman also became the head of the Czech Government from 1998 to 2002. Due to Zeman's political style and several conflicts within both government and party, he was replaced in the positions of chairman of the Social Democrats and Prime Minister by Vladimír Špidla in 2002. Špidla slowly profiled himself as a representative of the "other stream" within the Social Democratic Party. After Zeman's failed candidacy for the presidential seat in 2003, when even members of his own party voted against him in an indirect election, a schism took place within the social democrats and marked Zeman's departure to his position as "the Pensioner from the Highlands". From that position, he continued to comment on political events, reiterating the clashes within social democracy and supporting the newly established, obscure, and marginal Party of Civic Rights, which in the first years of its existence bore the nickname "Zemanites" (Zemanovci). After direct presidential elections were instated, Zeman began to profile himself as a non-partisan candidate advocating the interests of the people. After a very negatively-toned campaign, which managed to polarise the Czech public (cf. ervinková & Kulhavá, 2013), he became the third president of the independent Czech Republic in the second round of the historically first direct election in 2013. Equipped with strong legitimacy stemming from the nationwide popular vote, Zeman began to serve his function in office in a way that further polarised Czech society. He actively intervened in political processes in a manner that did not correspond with a parliamentary regime or constitutionally determined powers, thus destabilising the Czech political scene. An example of the polarisation of society can be found in Zeman's rhetorical strategies – he often labels his supporters "normal people". According to Zeman, this part of society stands in opposition to the "Prague café". This term is often used as a label to stigmatise and delegitimise Zeman's opponents as people who do not work and are not in touch with the "real world of normal workers". This can be seen as a typical populist strategy (cf. Mudde, 2004). An example of the performance of Zeman's office in a way that goes against the assumption of a parliamentary regime (not necessary of the constitution) is the inauguration of the government of Jiří Rusnok (see below in the text). Also, immediately after his election, he became highly active in the media, granting interviews to daily tabloid newspapers, disinformation websites, and on his own television show. This show is broadcast by a marginal and private television station. Broadcasting began roughly around the time when Zeman was expected to announce his second candidacy for the second presidential term of office. Initially, the program was moderated by the wife of the Chancellor of the President's Office, which we consider to be an unprecedented conflict of interests. The wife of Zeman's subordinate provides unlimited space for the president to express his opinions, which are not confronted in the form of a debate that various ideological opponents could join in on. Thanks to this program, Miloš Zeman was able to announce that he would not be taking part in any broadcasted debates with other candidates before the second election took place. Throughout the course of his whole political career, Miloš Zeman has been known for generating strong statements often made on a personal level. He has handed out various labels to his political opponents, which have often been borderline or blatantly vulgar. This is also typical for political populism (cf. Tarchi, 2016). This has led a large portion of the Czech public to accept Zeman and left the remainder to spurn him. After his election to the post of president, Zeman gained additional opportunities to use these strategies to a wholly new extent.

3 In regard to the fact that the president can be considered without a doubt to be a moral authority or a "moral entrepreneur" (cf. Cohen, 2011), the labels that he creates and introduces into dominant political and social discourse (in the sense of the notion of how things should be – Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002, p. 195) are a highly relevant topic of research. The Czech President (as an institution and a specific individual) has long held a high position in terms of public approval ratings carried out by the Public Opinion Research Centre under the Czech Academy of Sciences. For this reason, it can be assumed that the messages of the president are seen by a large portion of Czech society as "the truth" or "objective reality", which is further mediated and amplified by the media (cf. Altheide, 2002; Žuborová & Borárossová, 2016). Analysis of presidential speeches and strategies via the framework of populism also exists (cf. Hawkins 2009). The analysis of presidential speeches has a strong tradition in political science (see Meernik & Ault, 2013; Gregor & Macková, 2015; Cheng, 2006), which stems from the symbolic importance of the function on which certain expectations are based (cf. Scacco & Coe, 2017). Through his speeches, the president creates certain narratives – in this sense, presidential speeches are understood as an integral part of the public sphere, which is also linked to the construction of the shape of democracy in a given country (Reisigl, 2008).

4 Since his times in the function of Prime Minister, Zeman has been well known for his negative attitudes towards the media. This attitude stands unchanged and Zeman often labels some journalists or media as "idiots", "boneheads", etc.

these economic mafias is a law on declaring the origin of income and property, including the possibility to confiscate illegally acquired – that is, stolen – property. Although the president does not have legislative initiative, I will patiently attempt to convince deputies and senators to propose such a law and for such a law to be passed.⁵

It is clear that this island of deviation is directly linked to behaviour of a corrupt nature. Although President Zeman named three problems in the introductory quote above that were different to those he listed off in his inauguration speech containing references to islands of deviation, he put an emphasis on corruption in both cases.

Corruption is without a doubt a phenomenon that is understood in dominant discourses as a negative one (cf. Naxera, 2015b), as it tends to carry with it a whole score of long and short-term consequences generally considered to be problematic (Johnston, 1989) – it harms public finances, citizens’ equal access to the state, and democracy as such (cf. Ceva & Ferretti, 2018). When citizens are convinced of the corruption of public space and the inability or unwillingness of political representatives and institutions to deal with corruption, the situation may be reflected in the ways in which these citizens periodically evaluate political representatives, institutions, or regimes as such and what measure of trust they put into them. In extreme cases, a deviation may occur away from democracy or away from support for the existing political representation, leading to a change in voting behaviour (Linek, 2010; Naxera, 2015a; cf. Hacek, Kukovic & Brezovsek, 2013; Slomczynski & Shabad, 2011; Naxera, 2018). The topic of corruption may thus become a significant part of the political battle, where labelling oneself a corruption fighter and all others “corruptionists” may serve as an effective populist strategy (cf. Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) for winning elections. This mainly functions in cases where the public is generally convinced of the corruptness of political parties (or, according to theory of populism, “corrupt elites”; cf. Mudde, 2004) – according to polls, such a situation has existed in the Czech Republic for a long period of time (CVVM, 2014). These environments and situations are suitable for the success and emergence of new populist political actors, who take a stance and mobilise against the existing party establishment (cf. Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

The goal of this paper is to provide an interpretation of the ways in which Czech President Miloš Zeman constructs the issues that are related to the topic of corruption and to interpret how such content figures into the theoretical framework of populist political strategies. We will focus on various mutually intertwined issues – primarily on how Miloš Zeman defines corruption, what in his opinion are its causes and effects, how corruption may be fought, and what purposes Miloš Zeman’s references to corruption and anti-corruption serve. This last point is the core of our analysis. Our argumentation stems from Steven Sampson’s (2011) assumption that “anti-corruption is not innocent.” He claims that anti-corruption can be perceived as a tool of power, which makes it possible to control resources and other political actors. Although our effort is to analyse all aspects of Zeman’s perception of corruption, the core of our analysis is based on the following question: “How does Miloš Zeman instrumentally use the topic of corruption as a tool within his populist political strategy?”

Stances against corruption as a populist strategy

The debate on populism is extensive and the concept takes on a number of forms in this debate. The currently dominant views of populism deal with the term as an ideology (Mudde, 2004; Aslanidis, 2016), as discourse (Laclau, 2005), or as a specific style of policy or strategy (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). This is the interpretation that we lean toward in this study. All fundamental texts dealing with populism agree that one of the key categories that populism works with is the “us” vs. “them” dichotomisation (Barr, 2009, p. 31; Sanders, Hurtado & Zoragastua, 2017). In all forms of populism, the concept of “our” endangerment, i.e. of “the people”, plays a significant role. This danger stems from variously defined enemies, which can include, among others, corrupt elites

⁵ All verbatim quotations listed in the text come from the data corpus that we created and processed. Therefore, we do not consider it purposeful to provide specific links that would otherwise disturb the flow of the text.

(Wolkenstein, 2016). In its emphasis on resistance toward the elites (and primarily political elites), populism is a distinctly anti-establishment principle (Barr, 2009). The anti-establishment appeal can be seen as a strategy, which is evident in the fact that a similar rhetoric remains present even when the populists themselves have for a considerable time been part of the establishment. The one factor that changes is the nature of the establishment, which is the goal of the anti-elite rhetoric.

Points of reference that populists often take a stance against include corruption or corrupt politicians, parties, and the existing establishment in general (Barr, 2009; Jansen, 2011). This stance, however, does not mean that populist actors that criticise the corruption of others have themselves strictly refused corrupt practices. Criticism of the corruption of the existing establishment is thus merely a tool that populists use in their search for power. As an example, we can cite the Czech parliamentary elections in 2010, when the newly formed Public Affairs (*V cí ve ejně*) movement gained success (see Hanley & Sikk, 2016), or in 2013 and 2017, when Czech billionaire Andrej Babiš (cf. Kopeck, 2016) was highly successful in elections. Babiš presented himself using the motto “everyone steals”. Both of these parties entered the political sphere from the business environment with a “mantra of anti-corruption” as the main point of their programs. These programs did not have any uniqueness compared to the other programs, except for one – both of these parties presented themselves as something “new and not corrupt”. As we have already mentioned, ANO used the motto “everyone steals”, and Public Affairs introduced themselves with the slogan “out with political dinosaurs” (see Hanley & Sikk, 2016). Despite this argumentation, both populist political parties (cf. Kubánek, 2016) have experiences with corruption among their representatives after their election to political functions. In the case of the political party Public Affairs, which was a member of government (2010–2013), we can find several corruption charges linked to the main representatives and also to members of government (see Hloušek, 2012). The case of ANO is the same and Andrej Babiš and other representatives of this movement face criminal prosecution for suspicion of fraud with public funding of Babiš’s companies. Actors who actively use the issue of corruption include President Zeman, despite the fact that the period of the so-called “Opposition Agreement”, when Zeman was head of government, tends to be linked to a rise in the number of corrupt transactions in top politics (Kopeck, 2013), a fact that was reflected in a score of studies (*Corruption Perception Index, Varieties of Democracy* etc.).⁶

In this context, a relationship to broader academic debate dealing with corruption and anti-corruption strategies (see Schmidt 2007) can be found. As we pointed out above in the case of Czech political parties, anti-corruption is often seen as a “rewarding” topic. This is why political actors (not limited to those populist) often utilise anti-corruption discourse and the willingness of voters to punish corrupt representatives via elections (see Bauhr & Charron, 2018; Slomczynski & Shabad, 2011). However, this does not mean that anti-corruption rhetoric has to be linked to real anti-corruption practices. It should also be noted that other research studies highlight the fact that “anti-corruption warriors” are often corrupt and/or corrupting and the “war against corruption” is only their populist political strategy. The debate related to the instrumental (mis)use of anti-corruption is not limited to populism and is relevant for both democratic regimes (see Sampson 2011 and his example of the Balkans) and authoritarian regimes (see Zhu & Zhang, 2017; Burger & Gitau, 2010; Karklins, 2002, p. 29; Holmes, 2015, p. 90–91). The subject of our interest is the (mis)use of anti-corruption rhetoric by political populists. As we have stated above, it is important in this context to place anti-corruption rhetoric into the overall populist strategy of the given actor, which is based primarily on the “people” versus “the elite” dichotomisation (Mudde, 2004), anti-establishment appeal (Barr, 2009), and the creation of delegitimising labels that are handed out primarily to the existing political elite in order to stigmatise them (Tarchi, 2016).

⁶ The term “opposition agreement” is used for the governmental arrangement in 1998–2002, when a one-coloured minority government of social democrats ruled. This minority was supported by agreement and held in power by the Civic Democratic Party, which made a commitment not to call for a vote of confidence on the government. Both parties divided up power in a number of government institutions, which was one of the reasons for contemplations on the growth of the potential for corruption (for more details see Kopeck, 2013).

Data and methodology

Methodologically speaking, this paper has been conceived as a CAQDAS⁷ dataset, which is made up of complete interviews, statements, speeches, and other expressions made by Miloš Zeman in the first presidential election period (March 2013 – March 2018). All documents were taken from the official website of the President of the Republic (<http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/>).⁸ The total extent of the dataset is 730,192 words. The dataset was processed using MAXQDA11+ software,⁹ while using the *extended lexical search* method. The search subject included words that are linked to the topic of corruption, specifically:¹⁰ corruption/to corrupt/corrupted, godfather¹¹, clientelism, bribe, criminal, theft, to tunnel/tunneller/tunnel¹², mafia/mobster. In all, after manually cleaning¹³ the results, we identified 221 codes, i.e. results of key word searches. This means that we found 221 of Zeman’s statements related to issues of corruption. After the first reading of these codes, we realised that Zeman used some of these statements in similar ways. We detected six different methods of the use of corruption-related issues in Zeman’s speeches. We used the standard procedure of inductive coding carried out using specialised software (see Saldana, 2009). On the basis of inductive coding, we then divided the codes that were found into several subcategories. This is linked to the fact that the size of the data corpus allows us to follow the contexts in which the actor operationalises the term corruption, what purposes they have for speaking about corruption, what reasons they have for using this topic, and how they use the phenomenon of corruption (and anti-corruption) in agreement with the assumptions of populism as a strategy (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Based on this idea, we are able to interpret several varying methods for dealing with the topic of corruption (although codes may overlap in many cases). Thus, we could claim that our approach was hermeneutic (see Ricoeur, 1981).

First, we must determine the attributes of corruption. In other words, we must state the way in which Miloš Zeman defines corrupt behaviour (26 codes in total). This definition is followed by taking a stance, and corruption is thus perceived as a reference point of desired behaviour (15 codes in total). The next category relates to the causes of corrupt behaviour – in such codes, Zeman presents his perspective on what allows corrupt opportunities to arise and what leads to the actual use of these opportunities (24 codes in total). Naturally, corruption also has various consequences (on politics, the economy, society), which are linked to another concept of the phenomenon (14 codes in total). A part of Zeman’s projection of himself as a corruption fighter includes suggestions for certain solutions in suppressing corruption (50 codes in total). The final and perhaps most interesting point – and clearly the most frequent (92 codes in total) – is the use of the topic of corruption as a label via which the president delegitimises his opponents or legitimises his own behaviour and his supporters. As is evident from the high number of occurrences of the final category, Zeman uses corruption to stigmatise his opponents, which is an assumption stemming from the theory of populism (Tarchi, 2016).

We have already mentioned a number of these uses of the topic of corruption in the president’s inauguration quote above on islands of deviation – in it, we find mention of corruption in the sense of attributes (“mafias that are a parasite on Czech society”), reference points (“mafias are dangerous”), consequences (“mafias suck the blood from the body of society”), and solutions (“a solution is a law on declaring the origin of income and property”). Methodologically speaking,

7 CAQDAS is an acronym for Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis.

8 This website is in Czech. All verbatim quotations taken from the webpage were translated by the authors of this article and proofread by a native English speaker.

9 MAXQDA is software for CAQDAS that enables the processing of a vast amount of qualitative text data (see Oswald, 2019).

10 Roots of the Czech equivalents of these words were used for the analysis.

11 In the Czech context, the term “godfather” came into use to label regional patrons involved in corrupt and clientelist structures between the political sphere and private business (e.g. Müller, 2012).

12 The term “to tunnel” originally referred to the construction or path clearing of transport or other tunnels, but the words “to tunnel” or “to tunnel out” began to be used in the Czech language in connection with the theft of investment and privatisation funds during post-communist transformation as a term for the theft of such funds internally by insiders. Today the term is used as a metaphor in a global context.

13 During this cleaning process, occurrences of terms that were not linked to the topic of corruption (e.g. “tunnel” in the meaning of traffic infrastructure or “criminal behavior” nonrelated to corruption activities) were deleted.

these code categories allowed us to structure our analysis into a logical frame. Our analysis had the following structure:

Attributes of corruption → Corruption as a reference point → Reasons for corruption → Consequences of corruption → Solutions of this problem → Using issues of corruption as a (de)legitimisation label

From the perspective of political populism, the last category is most important to us, therefore, it will be given the most attention (as was mentioned above, it is the most strongly represented category in the corpus). All of these categories have a certain inner logic – our effort was to find and interpret this logic and illustrate it by using direct quotes from Zeman's statements. This means that the statements and direct quotes that we have listed in the text do not capture the uniqueness of their occurrence, but represent the overall logic of portraying corruption and its (mis)use in a populist manner (cf. Jansen, 2011) in the discourse created by the president.

The design of our analysis stems from the tradition of interpretative political science (see Bevir & Rhodes, 2016), and thus our effort did not aim to find causality or provide an explanation of the analysed phenomenon. We attempted to put forward an interpretation based on the transparency of our procedures and arguments. We perceive methodology as a “map and key to the chest full of qualitative data”.

Interpretation

In this paper, we focus on interpreting the ways in which President Zeman deals with the topic of corruption and in what specific populist ways he makes use of this phenomenon. Before moving to the interpretation of individual categories of codes and their link to political populism, we find it suitable to mention the connection with the mutual occurrence of variedly conceived references to the topic of corruption. The largest overlap can be found in the categories of (de)legitimisation labels and solutions. In other words, if President Zeman labels various actors (either abstract or more concrete) as corruptionists (and therefore delegitimises them), he very often also offers a solution for how to combat this issue.

The total overlap of codes shows that when Zeman speaks about corruption in any sense, he also very often frames this reference into the form of a delegitimising label. A typical example can be seen in the following statement:

You know, as I've been saying for 20 years now, that I differentiate entrepreneurs into two types. The “Ba a” type and the “Kožený” type.¹⁴ The “Kožený” type today are called godfathers, but what we call them is not important. What is important are the resources that their assets stem from. Therefore, incessantly, like a broken record, I repeat that the only thing that will help clear up who is who is a law on property declaration, including the declaration of the origin of property.

As we mentioned, the main parts of this chapter will be structured according to the framework characterised above. Let us now move on to the individual categories, starting with the attributes of corruption, i.e. how Miloš Zeman defines corruption. Zeman perceives corruption as criminal behaviour: “[...] what else would corruption be but economic crime [...]”; the principle of corruption is “theft of both private and state property”. We can find corruption on various levels of the political system: “[corruption is a problem that we find] not only on a central level; on a regional and communal level there are also many corruption scandals.” In many regards, the term corruption is linked to the principles of clientelism, which Zeman speaks about very often as an issue for the proper functioning of Czech politics and society. In terms of the way in which Miloš Zeman defines the attributes of corruption, we find examples of typically populist statements:

¹⁴ These terms refer to the industrialist Tomáš Ba a from the Czechoslovak interwar period and Viktor Kožený, infamous for tunneling out funds over the course of post-Communist transformation.

[a presidential candidate in indirect elections formerly used in the Czech Republic] does not have to go into a true election battle, because the 281 other people [this is the number of members of both chambers of the Czech Parliament] can make a deal with each other based on partisan schemes and some of them may be corrupt. But you can’t corrupt eight million registered voters.

The attribute present here is the link between corruption, partisan politics, and relationships between political parties, which fully convenes with public opinion in the Czech Republic (e.g. CVVM 2014; for a broader context see Slomczynski & Shabad, 2011). Zeman’s statement also legitimises his position, as he reached it via a direct vote by the citizenry. Comments that political parties are corrupt actors can be found in other statements as well. In this case, we find the dichotomisation that Cas Mudde (2004) speaks of in his work – pure people that cannot be corrupted stand against the political elite. Elements of political populism are even contained in the very way that Zeman defines corruption. We will return to the labelling of politicians and political parties as corrupt actors in the following code categories.

The second code category is linked to corruption as the reference point of desired political behaviour. Zeman relates the topic of corruption to how things should or should not be. As we will see, even in this category we find a strong link to elements of (de)legitimation (cf. Marion & Oliver, 2012). This also takes place in a populist spirit (cf. Tarchi, 2016). We have mentioned above that, according to Zeman, corruption is wrong and should be combatted. In the president’s view, however, present political actors are not doing so: “Corruption, which we fight so beautifully with words while doing practically nothing against it.” Political parties are primarily to blame: “These parties have become lazy, these parties have godfathered, and these parties have often been incapable of finding and offering prominent individuals or an attractive and viable plan.” Zeman, however, presents himself as an exception to this rule, as he talks about never “having become involved with any so-called political entrepreneurs, nor has my largest opponent every labelled me a corruptionist.” He thus links corruption to political parties, and the principle of parties is conceived as political businesses (see Krouwel 2012), several of which have appeared in the Czech party system in previous years. It is, however, somewhat paradoxical that Andrej Babiš, who is an extreme case of a political entrepreneur and also linked to a number of corruption scandals (Kopecký, 2016, p. 742), is at present (June 2018) a key political ally to the president. This is linked to the fact that Andrej Babiš continually aims his rhetoric against political parties as poorly-built structures and claims that he himself is not a politician (Kopecký, 2016, p. 742; Cirhan & Kopecký, 2017; Naxera, 2015a). Similarly, to the example of Miloš Zeman, Andrej Babiš’s strategy has been purely populist since the very existence of his political engagement (Kubánek, 2016; cf. Moffitt & Tormey, 2016). Zeman has used this line of resistance against parties as corrupt actors in other cases (cf. Mudde, 2004), when he spoke of the so-called “bureaucrat/caretaker government”¹⁵, which he nominated himself, in the following sense:

This is the first government in the Czech Republic that has the support of both employer associations and labour unions [but not the parliament – see footnote above], which are two mutually opposed groups that strongly differ in their interests. It is a government that is a tool in the fight against corruption, as their program declaration contains the commitment not to interfere in the ongoing investigation or disturb this investigation via political pressure.¹⁶

The reference point is thus linked to the legitimising label, which is also related to the fact that the government in reality was a government of “Zeman’s friends”. The politicians who did not belong in the circle of Zeman’s followers are labelled “populists, who would create nothing, populists,

¹⁵ Zeman nominated this government in 2013 after the previous right-wing government resigned due to a wave of corruption scandals (Kupka & Mochák, 2014; compare Naxera, 2015a). Zeman labeled the government “bureaucratic” and “professional”, but in reality it was dominantly comprised of politicians of various parties that could be seen as Zeman’s personal followers – this was visible in the fact that, in the elections that followed, several members of this government ran for the party mentioned above in which Zeman served as honorable chairman. Also, the head of this government Jiří Rusnok had previously been the minister of finance in the Zeman-led government. He left the government in power for several months despite the fact that the party did not gain a vote of confidence in the Chamber of Deputies.

¹⁶ This investigation dealt with scandals involving the previous right-wing government (see Kupka & Mochák, 2014).

who would only give, populists, who have tolerated tunnellers for a long time.” Such politicians are thus outside the circle of Zeman’s followers, a circle that includes Jiří Rusnok or Andrej Babiš. Attacks on his political opponents (i.e. de facto all political representatives standing outside the circle of his followers) and their delegitimisation and stigmatisation (in this case labelled tunnellers, corruptionists, and populists) is a common political strategy (Tarchi, 2016; Antal 2017).

There are certain reasons for the existence of corruption opportunities and the fact that these opportunities are taken advantage of. On a general level, the “lazy and corrupt political parties” are to blame for these problems, as they provide protection to corrupt and mafia-like structures. “Because, without political protection, these godfathers could not exist, and if they did, it would only be for a very, very short time.” One of the reasons for the corruption of political parties according to Zeman is their small party membership: “This logically points to the fact that there isn’t a very large personnel selection for the ballots, and this small amount of members can hardly make an impact on the influence of the so-called political entrepreneurs.” In addition to political parties, which always play a role in Zeman’s speeches regarding the causes of corruption, unsatisfactory laws are to blame for the amount of corruption or, in his words, the “set of rules, whether they are laws against corruption, against laundering dirty money, or against tunnelling in general.” Insufficient legislative protection stems from the unwillingness of political parties to deal with corruption. The fundamental problem is the lack of political will, which is a cause that is also dealt with by experts in the field of corruption (see Naxera, 2015b; Holmes, 2003). In addition to parties, the media is also to blame, which fully convenes with Zeman’s disgust for journalists. He attempts to delegitimise them via corruption as well:

[...] independence not only from political pressures, but also against pressures of the mainstream media, which to the very last moment have claimed that some allegations are totally false, they're completely baseless, until it turned out that the people who weren't elected by the citizenry could make decisions on overpriced public procurements, doling out prominent positions in the administration, and this hydra, this clientelist network, was wholly neglected by our mainstream media.

Attacks on the media as enemies of the people (cf. Antal, 2017) are another typical expression of populism. In addition to the media and political parties, courts are also an issue as they allow for corrupt transactions. According to Zeman, they are in some cases linked to parties and provide protection to corruption. These corruptionists and godfathers “were under the smoke-screen of the judiciary’s indifference or the bias of the judiciary in their favour.” “Primarily in questions of economic crime, courts rule in a desperately slow manner and there is suspicion that some judges are corrupt.” Even after more than twenty years of post-communist privatisation and economic transformation (see Myant, 2013), Zeman continues to return to these trials (he often speaks of Viktor Kožený) and calls privatisation one of the sources of corruption (cf. Arikán, 2008; Holmes, 2003; Grzymala-Busse, 2007). In this respect, Zeman has been consistent in his critique of privatisation for over twenty years. If we shift our focus from the initial post-communist period, however, the main causes of corruption in contemporary Czech politics in Zeman’s eyes include the insufficient political will of parties, the representatives of which are involved in corruption themselves while they are protected by the courts and media. Zeman’s arguments are distinctly anti-establishment (cf. Barr, 2009) and populistically create the image of a conspiratorial network of courts, journalists, and politicians acting against the interest of the president and the “ordinary people”. At the same time, Zeman stylises himself into the role of the representative of this group (cf. Wolkenstein, 2016).

Corruption has a whole score of consequences – in addition to consequences concerning both sides of the corrupt transaction, there are consequences that impact the whole of society and the system (Bayley, 1966; Ceva & Ferretti 2018). The indirect consequences are many – both short-term and long-term (Johnston, 1989). This involves economic consequences (e.g. Mauro, 2004; Choi & Woo 2011; Drury, Kriekhaus & Lusztig, 2006), as the finances spent on corrupt activities limit the amount of public finances. Typical short-term consequences are rises in costs, slow-downs, and the unpredictability of bureaucratic procedures (Naxera, 2015b). In a more general and long-term

sense, we should mention the disruption of citizens’ equal access to the state, which should lie at the core of the liberal democratic system (cf. Rawls, 1971). This is something that may be linked to citizens’ distrust of their representatives, the system’s institutions, and the system itself (Linek, 2010; Hacek, Kukovic & Brezovsek, 2013; Kovalík & Láň, 2016).

Zeman also speaks about the decrease in trust in political parties: “Not only on a central level, but on a regional and communal level, there are too many corruption scandals that discredit the representatives of these parties” (see also Linek, 2010; Naxera, 2015b). Zeman’s following statement can also be interpreted in the spirit of the concept of populism (cf. Tarchi, 2016): “People are disgusted by the commonness, the everydayness, by corruption scandals, of which there have of course been many. This, I think, is the primary reason for the disgust for politics.”

Zeman’s proposed solutions in the fight against corruption *de facto* convene with his convictions on the causes of corrupt behaviour. When he speaks of the reasons, he also commonly suggests a solution. Solutions can be found on various levels. It is necessary to limit the political protection of corrupt and godfather mafias. However, Zeman offers no specific directions on this point, and only reiterates that changes should be made on the level of the party system. This fully corresponds to the statements listed above, dealing with political parties as corrupt and corrupting actors (cf. Slomczynski & Shabad, 2011; Mudde, 2004). In his speeches, Zeman therefore vested great anti-corruption hopes in his nominated government led by Jiří Rusnok in 2013, which he labelled a government of uncorrupted elites fighting against party corruption. While nominating the government, he stated, “I believe that you will be a guarantee that scandals will not be swept under the rug and that mobsters won’t be made out to be innocent citizens due to political pressure.” Pointing to the advantages of direct democracy allegedly meant to take the “will of the people” into account is standard populist rhetoric (Antal, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Zeman offers a recipe in the form of direct democracy as a solution to the problem of corruption: “I am a supporter of direct democracy and I support the opinion that citizens – because they do not have various clientelist connections as some politicians do – can make less biased decisions in referendums than these politicians.” These people are thus pure and uncorrupted and thanks to this fact are more qualified to make decisions than the political elite, who are susceptible to being corrupted. This construction corresponds almost exactly to the theoretical assumptions and stances of the concept of populism (cf. Mudde, 2004).

The category that we have already mentioned several times and the one we are now approaching is, from an analytical and interpretational standpoint, related to the issue of political populism. It is the most interesting and also the most frequent in Zeman’s references to corruption. This category deals with the use of corruption as a legitimising or delegitimising label aimed either at Miloš Zeman’s followers (or himself) or his opponents. At the same time, this category crosses the boundaries of rhetorical constructions, as, through its use, the president is not only expressing his opinions, but is entering into the practical political process by handing out these labels (cf. Edelman, 1964 or 1988). This finding is also supported by other research concluding that anti-corruption strategies are often misused and serve as a toll for empowering the political position of “anti-corruption warriors” (see Sampson, 2011). Building the “anti-corruption warrior image” is a crucial strategy for populists. The basis of the message is an anti-establishment appeal, the broad labelling of the existing political elite as corrupt, and offering an alternative in the form of a person entering politics from the external environment (an example is Andrej Babiš) or a politician that stylises him/herself as one standing outside the parties that are associated with depravity and corruption (Miloš Zeman is an example – for years, he was a part of the party establishment and strongly shifted his rhetoric toward populism after returning to active politics in the role of directly elected president).

We will begin with how Zeman uses the label of corruption as a tool to delegitimise his opponents, which is a basic populist strategy (cf. Tarchi, 2016). On a general level, we can claim that the goals of this labelling *de facto* overlap with the goals of individuals that the president has seen as his competitors and enemies in a long-term sense. The first of these individuals is what is labelled as the right wing in the Czech political spectrum. Zeman has attacked the contemporary right wing

and the right wing governments that existed from the first half of the 1990s, after which Zeman took the post of prime minister in 1998, blaming the right primarily for corruption linked with post-communist privatisation (cf. Arian, 2008; Holmes, 2003; Grzymala-Busse, 2007). In regard to corruption, Zeman also criticises the contemporary right that has functioned over the course of his presidential mandate. He relates corruption, godfathers, and the theft of finances primarily to the Civic Democratic Party on various levels – he often spoke of both the causes for the collapse of Petr Nečas' government due to corruption scandals and, for example, the former leadership of the City of Prague and various scandals linked to this right-led coalition. In Zeman's words, ODS (Civic Democratic Party) is linked to corruption ties and various regional "godfathers".

[/...] for ODS to gradually become an honest right-wing party that suppresses its godfather legacy, I would give them better odds than TOP09 for example, which is a two-person enterprise, one of which was kicked out of the Christian Democrats and the other from the Green Party, so they founded their own party.¹⁷

Scores of other similar references to the right wing parties and politicians can be found, and there is no sense in reiterating them here.¹⁸ Another target includes political parties and politics as such: "We have a whole array of cases of corrupt politicians." In other speeches, Zeman commonly speaks about corrupt parties, the possibilities to corrupt deputies, etc. Political parties are "plagued by many corruption scandals."

By using the corruption label, Zeman also commonly attacked state apparatuses, specifically corrupt courts and the police. He also commonly makes comments about the media, which according to his judgment exaggerate or, on the contrary, silence corruption scandals, often based on their ownership structure. "[Media like] Respekt weekly, Hospodářské noviny and Aktuálně.cz [whose shared characteristic is that they] belong to Zdeněk Bakala, the biggest fraudster and criminal, in my opinion, after Viktor Kožený." Here, in addition to the delegitimisation of selected media,¹⁹ we find a fundamental attempt to denigrate one of the richest Czech billionaires Zdeněk Bakala,²⁰ who is often labelled by Miloš Zeman and Andrej Babiš as an ally of the former head of government and social democracy Bohuslav Sobotka,²¹ who was in open conflict with Zeman and Babiš. This not only deals with delegitimising Bakala, but Sobotka as well.²² Again, we can point out that Zeman creates an image of a network of evildoers against the people (cf. Tarchi, 2016), which is made up of corrupt politicians (represented by Sobotka), entrepreneurs (Bakala), and the media (Bakala's media or Czech public service media).

Thus, some billionaires are labelled by Miloš Zeman as corruptionists, while he is quite forthcoming to others and attempts to exculpate them from suspicions of corruption by handing out various labels. Specifically, this concerns the previously mentioned Andrej Babiš and Petr Kellner. As an example of comments about the latter, "He looks good, he's successful, and contrary to other

17 Here we can see that, in addition to the delegitimisation of ODS by pointing to corruption, Zeman is attempting to delegitimise another right-wing party TOP09, which is one of Zeman's strongest critics. He does this by attempting to ridicule the base of the party and by distorting facts – Miroslav Kalousek, one of the individuals mentioned by the president, was a member of the Christian Democrat Party (and was, in fact, its chairman), who was not thrown out, but left voluntarily. Similarly, Karel Schwarzenberg, the other individual that Zeman is referring to, was not ejected from the Green Party, as he was never a member; he was only a non-partisan senator, who was proposed by this party for election. Even after founding TOP09, he departed from the Greens on friendly terms. As for Schwarzenberg, we can find attempts by Zeman at delegitimising him via corruption, as Zeman points out that his opponent criticises corruption only rarely.

18 In this footnote, we can add other examples of these attitudes: "Because there always was a right-wing majority in the Chamber of Deputies that canceled anti-corruption law."; "You have maybe noticed that I stated that Mr. Kalousek, according to some sources, was trying to make his last tunnel."

19 These media outlets are not only owned by Zdeněk Bakala but also share another characteristic – all of them are well known for their high-quality investigative journalism often dealing with issues related to Zeman and his political allies. On the other hand, Zeman usually does not criticise the media outlets that cooperate with him (for example, newspapers owned by Andrej Babiš).

20 In this sentence, we encounter yet another target of the delegitimising label – Viktor Kožený – who is often mentioned by Zeman when reiterating criticisms of the privatisation era.

21 Former Prime Minister in 2013–2017. Andrej Babiš used to be minister of finance in his government.

22 It is interesting to note that in the case of his ally Andrej Babiš, one of the richest Czech billionaires and owner of a media empire several times larger than Bakala's, this fact does not seem to bother Zeman.

Czech entrepreneurs, he’s not responsible for any corruption scandals.”²³ Zeman has placed Babiš in the role of an uncorrupted billionaire in the field of business (just like Kellner), but also in the role of corruption fighter on a political level. This, incidentally, is how Babiš won over many voters (cf. Kopecký, 2016) in 2013. In one of his statements, Zeman praises Babiš for supporting his proposal to implement the law on declaring income according to the Scandinavian model; at the same time, Babiš assumes that it is first necessary to halt tax evasion, which in present discursive practice is reflected in the implementation of the highly debated and disputed system of electronic registration of sales.²⁴ Just as Babiš supports the implementation of Zeman’s desired law, Zeman in exchange approves of the electronic registration of sales, although it has been criticised by a large portion of political actors. In this, we find an excellent example of populist political *quid pro quo*.

Other actors that Zeman attempts to legitimise via the use of references to incorruptibility or anti-corruption stances include, for example, the previously mentioned former head of caretaker government Jiří Rusnok and, primarily, himself. In Zeman’s case, as was mentioned above, he highlights the fact that he was not elected by corrupt means: “I’m glad that it was the citizenry that was able to decide who to elect in a direct election, and that it wasn’t dependent on the various parliamentary schemes and possibly corruption.” Zeman continues in his critique of the Czech parliament, when he states that

If I had been in a parliamentary election, I would never have become [the president] for the simple reason that you can corrupt 281 deputies and senators in all various ways. You can’t corrupt eight million voters, because there’s not enough money to do so, and that’s why I’m a supporter of direct elections.

In addition to the legitimisation of the “purity” of his election (as was stated above), he delegitimises his political opponents, including social democrats, who stood against him in 2003 in the indirect election, allowing Václav Klaus, former chairman of the Civic Democratic Party, to be elected. After this election, Zeman openly spoke about this betrayal and stated, “The presidential election was linked to various manipulations, including threats, corrupt offers, bullets in envelopes, and so forth.” In addition to his defence of his election, he presents himself as an uncorrupted politician. When asked about his trip in Kellner’s private plane, he said, “In my life I’ve never allowed myself to be corrupted, so why would I allow myself to be corrupted now, to save three and a half hours of my sleep.” Thus, the “incorruptible people” (contrary to the “corrupt politicians”) elected Zeman as president, a person who has stylised himself into the role of protector of the interests of the people, in whose name action should be taken, and the role of a warrior against corrupt politicians. Again, we can consider this construction to be the essence of populism.

Conclusion

In the introduction, we asked the following question: “How does Miloš Zeman instrumentally use the topic of corruption as a tool within his populist political strategy?” As we have shown above, the method with which Miloš Zeman creates the image of corruption fulfils the basic signs of populist strategy (cf. Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). This behaviour is most evident in the creation of an antagonistic relationship between two opposing groups – the pure people, whom Zeman attempts to represent (at least rhetorically), and corrupt political elites, who harm the interests of the ordinary people through their actions (cf. Mudde, 2004). Zeman understands political elites in relation to established political parties, i.e. the existing political establishment (cf. Barr, 2009). He places individuals who are not standard or party politicians against the existing elite, which is corrupt, and presents them as individuals who are fighting against corrupt political parties. This includes Zeman himself – regardless of the fact that for years he was a clear part of the

²³ Links between Zeman and Kellner can be seen in examples such as one of the president’s visits to China, during which he returned not in the standard manner (i.e. by government airplane), but in Kellner’s private jet. Later, Zeman commented, “And for those who see corruption in this can rest assured that the airplane would have flown from Peking to Prague regardless, with or without me.”

²⁴ The electronic registration system is a tool of the Ministry of Finance to control taxes from entrepreneurs.

top party establishment, he presents himself as a “president of the people” and a defender of its interests (against the parties). Another example can be found in Jiří Rusnok, whom Zeman nominated for the head of the caretaker government several years ago. Although Rusnok did not gain the confidence of the Chamber of Deputies, Zeman allowed him to govern for several months with the explanation that, contrary to party governments, Rusnok’s government would battle corruption and had the “confidence of the people”. Present Prime Minister Andrej Babiš is another individual to be named among non-partisan corruption fighters. At present (June 2018), Babiš has ruled for half a year without the confidence of the Chamber of Deputies. The alliance between the two men is evident in a whole array of facts – for instance, they supported each other in both the 2017 parliamentary elections and 2018 presidential elections. Criminal charges against Babiš notwithstanding, Zeman presents him as a successful and honourable politician and entrepreneur – if we use the metaphor of the *Kožený* and *Baba* type of businessman that Zeman often uses himself, Zeman depicts Babiš as a representative of the latter category, i.e. as someone who gained his riches thanks to his hard work and as an individual that is trying to purge himself of negative phenomena in the field of politics. *Quid pro quo*, Babiš gives Zeman the label of wise and experienced statesman. Zeman’s anti-establishment appeal is further manifested in attacks on the police, courts, and selected media outlets, which he has labelled as corrupt actors (cf. Barr, 2009).

The quotes above imply that since his election to the post of president Miloš Zeman has actively used the concept of corruption in various respects, but most often as a rhetorical-political weapon. This finding of our analysis can be supported not only by the quotes mentioned above, but also by the fact that the issues of corruption belonging to the category of “(de)legitimation label” were the most frequently used by Miloš Zeman. This fully corresponds to the assumptions of the theory of political populism, as one of the basic principles of populist strategies is the creation of enemies, their delegitimation, and stigmatisation (cf. Tarchi, 2016), which in this case is done via the use of corruptionist labels. Miloš Zeman’s use of anti-corruption as a rhetorical-political strategy corresponds with Sampson’s (2011) argument that “anti-corruption is not innocent”. We can say that Zeman’s framing of corruption serves as a tool to achieve his political goals. Corruption is predominantly viewed by the public as a negative phenomenon that harms public finances, trust in the political system, and in its institutions (cf. e.g. Karklins, 2005). If a politician who has the same significant amount of trust from the public as Miloš Zeman does (as an individual and an institution) begins to present him/herself as a corruption fighter, society may gain the impression that this person truly is such a fighter (cf. Becker 1963). This happens regardless of the fact that Zeman remains only at a level of rhetorical exercises, not real actions (which is also something for which he has criticized other politicians in his speeches) (cf. Oliver, Marion & Hill, 2016). President Zeman often speaks about the anti-corruption solutions that he would like to implement – in this respect, it should be said that the Czech president does not have the right to initiate legislation (which is typical of parliamentary regimes). His statements, which refer to his dedication in solving this problem, are in this respect aimed more toward the public and gaining the support of voters that have become disenchanted with extensive corruption (cf. Tedin, Rottinghaus & Rodgers, 2011). Again, we can perceive this as another expression of populism in Zeman’s political strategy, i.e. promising something that is positively accepted by “the people” but is wholly beyond his presidential competencies (Taggart, 2000).

This paper has focused on one of the theories of populism, specifically populism as a political strategy (cf. Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Using the empirical example of President Zeman, we have illustrated the methods in which such a strategy can be built in practice on anti-corruption rhetoric of a populist actor. The text’s contribution lies in the empirical analysis of the topic (i.e. corruption), which is an integral part of the theory of populism but is not the subject of a large number of studies focusing on political populism. The text and the results of the analysis are also significant in a broader regional context. Central and Eastern Europe is a region that is facing a weakening of democratic principles (Dawson & Hanley, 2016), which is linked to the work of actors (i.e. politicians or even whole parties) of a populist character (e.g. Antal, 2017; Stulík & Král, 2019). It is our assumption that academic attention and interest in the research of populism in this region should be oriented in this direction, i.e. toward specific actors and their specific populist strategies. We also find a number of political representatives in the region who label

all their opponents (politicians, civil society, NGOs, the media) as corrupt and bribed, acting in foreign interests and harming the people (cf. Antal, 2017). This “corruption card” thus makes up an integral part of the populist game for political success and for the acquisition/preservation of power and the marginalisation of opponents.

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