

“ONE FLEW OVER THE STORK’S NEST”: NEO-PATRIMONIAL POPULISM OF CZECH PRIME MINISTER ANDREJ BABIŠ

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Following the discussion on the relation of populism, its typology and neutral bureaucracy, this text examines the communication practice of the former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš regarding the European subsidies. Using the mixed content analysis of several years of Babiš’s statements, we shall verify two theses: Babiš’s rhetoric is dominantly populist and Babiš’s rhetoric is neo-patrimonial. The analysis results imply Babiš’s case to be a new and not yet described form of populism that we identify as “neo-patrimonial populism” and that complements the standard populist communication with practices not distinguishing between the public and personal interest, property, and status.

Key words: populism; neo-patrimonialism; Czech politics; populist communication.

1 INTRODUCTION

The discussion on populism and populist communication strategies of different political actors is one of the most important debates in contemporary comparative politics (Meijers and Zaslove 2021; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018; Rooduijn 2019; Zulianello 2020). The communication of populist politicians is studied in the connection to some other concepts which allow to analytically grasp a given specific case. One of these often-used perspectives is so-called technocratism (Reiser and Hebenstreit 2020). Technocratic principles are mentioned, among the others, also in the case of Andrej Babiš, the former Czech Prime Minister (prior to 2021 parliamentary elections) and one of the richest entrepreneurs in the country. In this paper, we will try to grab Babiš’s communication from perspective that goes beyond the principles of technocratic (or other; see below) populism – we discuss to possibility of studying his political activities as populist and the same time as neo-patrimonial.

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As we argue in the text, we believe that Babiš's communication consists of a mixture of traditional populist communication rules (hereinafter also "populist order") and the stylisation of a populist into the role of a ruler-patron (neo-patrimonial rhetoric) whose private well-being is also the national well-being, and vice versa – a phenomenon so far undescribed in the Central European context (see below).² There is only one paper dealing with the neo-patrimonial tendencies within the Babiš's communication during unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic crisis (Naxera and Stulík 2021). Contrary to this specific research, we aim to discuss so-called "neo-patrimonial populism" based on the data representing longer period (before the political debate was overruled by the pandemic issues) and using quite different design of algorithm driven computer assist content analysis (with emphasis on its repeatability) enabling to investigate the issue more consistent.

In his person, Andrej Babiš connects the political, economic, and media activities to an extent that probably cannot be observed among other constitutional actors of European democratic regimes. This connection led the European Commission to temporarily suspend the payment of European subsidies to companies owned by Babiš during 2019–2021. Andrej Babiš is described in the scholarly literature as a "centrist" (Hanley and Vachudova 2018), "managerial" (Čísař 2017), "technocratic" (Buštková and Baboš 2021; Buštková and Guasti 2019; Guasti 2020; Havlík 2019), "centrist technocratic" (Maškarinec 2019) or "valence" populist (Zulianello 2020; Zulianello and Larsen 2021). Occasionally, he is also labelled as "ethnopolitist" (Vachudova 2020). However, as we will show, he also speaks about his running the country in a way that can be described as neo-patrimonial and thus not in line with the modern concept of an authority relying on the separation of public finances and private property of the official as well as on the separation of private and public affairs (Weber 2006).

As we argue, the communication of Andrej Babiš correspond to the neo-patrimonial way of management since he does not distinguish between his position as PM and entrepreneur (private person). Babiš uses his public position to defend³ his private economic interest, which is, at least in the context of the Czech Republic, an innovative "state capture" act, and thus denies the ethos of the unbiased bureaucratic apparatus of the modern state not properly described in theory yet. What is mainly innovative about Babiš's rhetoric is that (unlike many politicians in other contexts in which we can talk about state capture) he does not disguise the use of state resources (Baez-Camargo and Ledeneva 2017), but rather legitimizes it with a specific mixture of populist and neo-patrimonial communication practices. In this regard, our text follows a broader discussion on the incompatibility of populism and liberal democracy (e.g., Baggini 2015; Canovan 1999; Havlík 2019), to which the ethos of the unbiased bureaucratic apparatus of the modern state necessarily belongs.

² Neo-patrimonialism is rarely associated with populism, and mostly in connection with Latin America (López Maya 2018) or South Europe (Edwards 2005; Tarchi 2015). In connection with post-communist space, neo-patrimonial principles (without the populist element that we add to the new concept) are dealt with primarily in connection to Russia (Becker and Vasileva 2017; White 2018) and other post-Soviet countries (Robinson 2013) or the Balkans (Kopecký and Spirova 2011). In connection with the region of Central Europe, however, this theoretical concept is not used.

³ Both with his political practice and political communication. The latter is the dimension more important for our research.

Regarding the above-mentioned, we shall verify two theses: 1/ Andrej Babiš's statements concerning the subsidies correspond to the model of statements (*n*; *countable*) of the populist order of communication (for our approach to the populism, see the methodological part) in more than 50 percent of their occurrences compared to his other statements, and therefore, the communication is dominantly populist. Although we have stated that many studies label Babiš as a populist, we consider it necessary to verify this assumption in our text as well. Numerous studies classify Babiš as a populist without performing a rigorous analysis, often based on only a few statements. In addition, other studies (e.g., Naxera 2021) show that Babiš's rhetoric is largely however not dominantly populist. 2/ Andrej Babiš's rhetorical practices are neo-patrimonial, even in more than 50 percent of populist statements, and lead to the denial of the ethos of a neutral bureaucratic apparatus with Babiš not distinguishing between public and private interests and simultaneously not distinguishing between his roles as Prime Minister and private person regarding the content of created practices.

The purpose of testing the sustainability of statements that are formulated in the theses is to verify the assumptions they contain, but mainly to identify the original stylisation of this actor and his rhetoric and discuss adding a new phenomenon of a patrimonial legitimization of a ruler-patron of all people to existing theories of populism and populist communication. To fulfil this purpose, we will focus on the research case of the Stork's Nest and the allocation of European subsidies, and we will adhere to some principles of mixed content analysis and grounded theory.

On the contrary, it is not our intention to claim that Babiš's communication cannot be grasped as an example of valence populism (or through other concept of populism often applied to Babiš), we merely believe that adding the dimension of neo-patrimonialism will allow us to understand an important aspect of the examined actor's rhetoric that is not fully comprehensible with the concepts mentioned above. At the same time, we do not intend to create a new type of populism that would be on the same level as centrist/technocratic/valence/managerial populism. The proposed category of "neo-patrimonial" populism is more of an extension (or sub-type) of the existing concept of valence populism (which is more appropriate than centrist/technocratic/managerial) than a completely new type standing next to valence/left-wing/right-wing populism.

2 NEO-PATRIMONIAL AND POPULIST PRINCIPLES OF BABIŠ'S POLITICAL PRACTICE

Babiš's persona and the whole ANO movement established and led (in fact "ruled" and "owned") by Babiš are studied from various perspectives. In addition to the forms of populism mentioned above, numerous papers deal with the internal organization structure, especially with Babiš's position as a political entrepreneur (Brunnerová 2019) or from the perspective of person-based politics (Cabada and Tomšič 2016). At the same time, Babiš's political practice is well documented in the literature, both internally towards his party and externally towards society and the political system, often from the already-mentioned perspectives of populism (Buščíková and Guasti 2019; Hanley and Vachudova 2018; Naxera and Stulík 2021). For our research, the important aspect is also the similarity of how Babiš controls his party and the way he tries

to control the whole political system. Although Andrej Babiš has long stylized himself in the role of the ruler-patron of his movement, he has attempted to expand these principles to the whole of society. This stylization as a ruler-patron is further supported with the populist communication strategy.

It is Babiš's (rhetoric) stylization into the position of a "populist ruler-patron" that is our main interest. Although Babiš's political practice is also important for our research, we focus on the stylization, that is, on the investigation of communication practices. We understand neo-patrimonial populism with both its components (populism and neo-patrimonialism) primarily as a specific way of communication. From this perspective, what is determining for us is not "what Babiš does" but "how he speaks about it" and "how he legitimizes it". We consider populism a specific communication strategy (see Aalberg and Vreese 2017; Bonikowski and Gidron 2015; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Laclau 2005) based on people-centrism and anti-elitism (see the following parts). From the above-mentioned forms of populism applied to analyse Andrej Babiš, we consider the concept of valence populism (Zulianello 2020) to be most suitable since it includes a technocratic aspect and aims at non-positional issues such as the fight against corruption, democratic reform, transparency, etc. In this respect, we believe that the concept of valence populism is even more appropriate than centrist populism because "centrist" points out to a specific position or tendency in positional term (Zulianello and Larsen 2021).

Although we do not question the fact that valence populism is applicable to Babiš and his communication, we also believe that it cannot cover one key phenomenon – Babiš's stylization into the role of ruler-patron of the whole society⁴ and his behaviour and communication, which in a routine manner exceeds (and de facto fails to understand or acknowledge) the formal rules and procedures of modern bureaucracy in a liberal-democratic establishment. It is therefore our assumption that the optimal concept is neo-patrimonialism.

We interpret neo-patrimonial rhetoric as rhetoric which reflects the principles of neo-patrimonialism, which is a model of government based on undefined borders between an office and the person who holds it under a regime in which modern bureaucratic institutions do not formally exist (Bach 2011, 276–277). However, modern institutions and formal rules coexist with governing based on personal relationships and the personal authority of the holder of office (Charrad and Adams 2011), who sees the state as his patrimonium, i.e., as his property and in many cases handles it as such (Hanson 2011). In Babiš's case, the principle of utilizing the state (formal institutions) to defend and reproduce personal wealth is evident (see below), as well as a routine violation of standard procedures and norms of rule of law and political acts based on the personal power (see Naxera and Stulík 2021). At the same time, it must be said that Babiš's political practice inevitably differs from other examples of neo-patrimonialism that are known, for example, from Africa or post-Soviet space. It is evident that the legal framework

⁴ This could be observed for example during the 2018 local elections campaign – the main message on billboards in all cities was that the candidate for mayor has Andrej Babiš's telephone number. This logic can be understood as neo-patrimonial – if the local government wants to achieve something, there is no need to take the burden of formal procedures, simply contact the Prime Minister, who will "just arrange it" (which is one of the ANO election slogans). The relations between the mayor and the Prime Minister shall thus work on an exemplary patron-client principle, in other words, based on a reciprocally advantageous (albeit asymmetrical) relationship. Babiš regularly uses the "I will just arrange it" rhetoric even in relation to the citizens – personal intervention of the Prime Minister therefore replaces formal procedures allowing the Prime Minister to act as a patron for all members of society.

for the functioning of an EU member state limits the actions of a political representative, however, the principle *de facto* remains. We will return to the examples of non-distinction between public and private status (in terms of political practice and, especially, in terms of communication) in the following sections.

Based on our approach, we will return to the blending of the concepts of populism and neo-patrimonialism into the form of “neo-patrimonial populism” and its specifics compared to the “ordinary” valence populism in the final section as part of the discussion on the results of our research.

3 BABIŠ’S BUSINESS: A PROBLEM?

Regarding the political engagement of Andrej Babiš, it is impossible not to mention his economic activities, which are strongly linked to the political ones, and their defence largely determines the form of the policy pursued. This link can be observed on several levels – the first is the personal connection of Babiš’s business with institutions under his influence. The second way of linking politics and business is the direct use of state institutions – already in the period when Babiš was the Minister of Finance (2013–2017), for example, he began to use subordinate institutions to bully his economic competition (Hanley and Vachudova 2018, 287–288). At the beginning of 2020, government documents and documents associated with Agrofert also showed that government officials were instructed to evaluate the business offers Agrofert was receiving. These practices demonstrate not only the connection of politics and business, but directly the use of state institutions as a service to private business, or in fact, the absence of distinction between public and private. But once again, we must remember that while this political practice is important as a context of our analysis, our research focuses exclusively on communication practices in which we uncover populist and neo-patrimonial principles.

The most visible problem is associated with using state or European subsidies, subventions, tax reliefs, etc. The volume of public money that Agrofert and its components received in this way increased significantly after 2013, when Babiš became the Minister of Finance.⁵ However, simultaneously building Babiš’s economic empire and pursuing political activities is not free of problems, it is often on the edge of the law and trying to circumvent legal restrictions. This mainly concerns the case of the Stork’s Nest – the research subject of our case study.

Stork’s Nest is a farm containing a hotel and a restaurant, which operates as a company within the Agrofert group. Current criminal prosecution of Andrej Babiš is associated with this very company – according to the law enforcement authorities, Stork’s Nest was purposefully removed from the Agrofert group in 2007 to reach European subsidies for small and medium-sized enterprises in 2008 in the amount of 50 million crowns (to which it was not entitled as part of a large corporate group). At that time, the company was registered under anonymous owners (later, they turned out to be the members of Babiš’s family),

⁵ The annual reports of the group itself show, for example, that while in 2012, before Babiš’s entry into politics, Agrofert’s subsidies amounted to less than one billion crowns, in 2017, after four years at the Ministry of Finance, it was almost two billion. According to rankings compiled by the Forbes magazine, the wealth of Andrej Babiš in 2013, when he entered politics, amounted to 48 billion crowns. In 2017, however, already 95 billion.

but according to the lawsuit, Babiš never ceased to effectively control the company. Shortly before the 2017 elections, the police asked the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic to extradite Andrej Babiš for criminal prosecution. The elections took place shortly after and Andrej Babiš was re-elected, gaining a new parliamentary immunity; as a result, the law enforcement authorities made a second request for the extradition before the end of 2017. At present (January 2022) the prosecution is still ongoing.

Although the Stork's Nest case is a visible public issue, it is part of a wider problem associated with using subsidies in general. In 2017, the Act on Conflict of Interest was amended, with one of its sections stating that companies at least 25 percent owned by a member of the government may not apply for public subsidies, incentives, etc. For this reason, Andrej Babiš transferred Agrofert in a trust fund, and *de iure*, ceased to be its owner. However, according to the findings of the European Commission from 2019, Andrej Babiš did not cease to be the recipient of the final benefits resulting from the fund being active, thus remaining the *de facto* owner.⁶ The European Commission therefore decided to suspend the provision of EU subsidies to all companies associated in this corporate group until the matter was investigated, with retroactive effect. The decision of the European Commission is also related to the finding of the Czech Constitutional Court, which at the beginning of 2020 responded to the initiative submitted by a group of deputies of Babiš's ANO movement and President Miloš Zeman, who is one of Babiš's allies – they challenged the Act on Conflict of Interest arguing that it restricts Babiš's property rights. In its judgment, the Constitutional Court clearly defines how to understand the controlling person of the company, and in its conclusion, it supports the audit of the European Commission.

Nevertheless, the Czech institutions did not stop granting subsidies to companies associated in Agrofert (although it was not certain whether they would be reimbursed by the European Commission), and at the beginning of February 2020, the Babiš-led government decided to sue the European Commission for suspending the payments. Here we find another example of patrimonial behaviour – the whole government becomes a tool for defending the business interests of their Prime Minister. During February, the situation was immediately investigated by a commission composed of members of the European Parliament, which also included two Czech MEPs, whom Babiš described as traitors fighting Czech interests and the Czech government. Even in this case, we find the demonstration of neo-patrimonial rhetoric – the interest of a private company is declared to be the interest of the state. In their final report issued at the end of April 2020, the commission composed of MEPs declares that the EC should not reimburse Agrofert until the possible conflict of interest is investigated, and at the same time investigate whether Agrofert is not reimbursed by the Czech government. Based on the report of the committee of inquiry, the responsible committee of the European Parliament adopted a resolution in early May 2020, according to which the European Commission should immediately and completely stop paying all subsidies to Agrofert and other companies associated with the Prime Minister, who is currently the largest Czech recipient of EU subsidies. In their report from November 2020, the EC continues to insist on stopping the subsidies in Andrej Babiš's trust funds due to conflicts of interest. This was confirmed by the EC's final report of 2021.

⁶ There are different ways, in which Andrej Babiš comments on this matter. For example, at one of the meetings of the Chamber of Deputies at the beginning of 2020, he restated several times that he did not own Agrofert, but also stated several times that he himself employed 35,000 people.

Babiš's communication strategy is populist and neo-patrimonial (see the analysis below). In terms of his statements, it is necessary, among other things, to check whether he uses the rhetoric in such a way as to publicly normalize this state and thus shift the liberal democracy towards the populist neo-patrimonial democracy. For the analysis, we chose not only the most visible case of the Stork's Nest, which has been publicly discussed for quite some time. The visibility and media appeal of the Stork's Nest case is enhanced by police investigation. At the same time, however, it is not an isolated act – the Stork's Nest is an example of repetitive patterns. As this is the most watched case, Andrej Babiš actively comments on it at various levels (see the data description below). On the other hand, we must admit that this event, i.e., the granting of subsidy, preceded Andrej Babiš becoming the Prime Minister. It might therefore seem that Babiš as the Prime Minister “only” defends from his position the act he made as an entrepreneur before entering politics. According to our assumption, however, Babiš's communication transcends this dimension, and in his statements the Prime Minister blurs the line between a politician and a businessman. To verify our assumptions unquestionably, we decided not to limit the analysis to statements related to the Stork's Nest – we extended our scope to the whole problem that the Stork's Nest symbolizes, that is to European subsidies as such. These subsidies were being granted to Babiš's companies even during his premiership. For this reason, it is impossible to speak of a current politician “merely” defending his previous business steps. The decision to link a more general issue to a specific case is also convenient for the analysis – subject of our interest defined in such a way provides enough data and the possibility of thematically narrowing the analysis. This case enables to combine the examined context of populism and/or neopatrimonialism with specific arguments regarding this issue.

4 METHODOLOGY AND QUANTITATIVE DATA CREATION

4.1. Input data

The input data, from which we subsequently created the empirical corpus, have two components. These are 1/ the official stenographic records of meetings of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, and 2/ the official presentation of Andrej Babiš on social networks, specifically on Facebook. The stenographic records cover all meetings of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic from the first meeting after the 2017 elections to the end of 2019. A total of 39 meetings took place in the monitored period and the total length of the stenographic records is 7,014,332 words. The scope of the input data was reduced by the fact that we continued with focusing only on the parts containing the speeches of Andrej Babiš. The input data from the stenographic records are thus formed by 174,171 words. Andrej Babiš's presentation on Facebook is examined from October 2017, when the Chamber of Deputies elections took place, to the end of 2019 (the “standard political period” before pandemic). The input data from Facebook contain all statuses with a total length of 170,243 words.

4.2. Preparation of empirical corpus and identification of data relationships

Babiš's communication is given by the populist order and stylisation into the role of a ruler-patron. To confirm or rebut the assumption, it is necessary to build on methods and procedures that respect the linguistic order of the communication strategy and use the principles of mixed content analysis. The following description of the methodology is based on the just-mentioned first point, (1) determining the order of the populist communication strategy by means of defining characteristic populist statements. The order of the populist communication strategy consists of interconnected meanings of triplets: (a) the people are good (innocent, pure, etc.) (b) the elite (or "the others") are bad, (c) Andrej Babiš is the speaker/part of the people. Triplets must comply with all three indicated contents of populist strategy to be labelled as populist statements. Statements that lack one of the contents of populist strategy were not labelled as populist and were not included in the count. An example of a populist statement is: "Well, those who were responsible in 2011 for our country having to return 34.5 BILLION to the European Union for misused subsidies, and they took all this money from taxpayers, from all of us." The triplet which outlines the context of the quoted sentence is: elites (responsible; *subject*) caused financial loss (*object* – to whom; it also applies here that Babiš is presented as a part of the people thanks to the use of "our"). Such populist order corresponds to the primary theoretical framework of contemporary populism as a communication strategy, on which we are building and to whose theoretical tradition we adhere (see above).

The next step is (2) determining the keywords whose occurrence will be recorded by text's machine reading (see the search algorithm below; machine reading was performed using the MaxQda software). The choice of keywords depends on the topic of the research. In this regard, the key words are subsidies (in the sense of using the EU subsidies); Europe (in the sense of the EU and its political elites); (Stork's) nest; enterprise (meaning the Agrofert company); Andrej Babiš (in the position of Prime Minister – a politician, but also a private person and entrepreneur); (conflict of) interests (of Andrej Babiš as Prime Minister and entrepreneur). In line with the specified research subject, the following collocations were found (in approximately five sentences): (a) Europe – subsidies, and (b) Prime Minister/entrepreneur – (conflict of) interests. Both collocations were created axially according to the pattern of *the actor – acting – towards what/whom*. Using the structure of such a triplet allows capturing the subsequent meaning that results from the specific occurrence in the context (see Aslanidis 2018; Popping 2018; Stulík 2019).

The first collocation was created according to the logic of Europe (see above) providing subsidies to actors. The actor (recipient of the subsidy) was not specified for searching for collocations due to the need to ex post analyse Andrej Babiš's attitude to subsidies in general regardless of their recipient (and thus to determine whether he is primarily populist or non-populist when referring to European subsidies). The second collocation of Prime Minister/entrepreneur – (conflict of) interests was created based on the actor's self-presentation (Prime Minister/entrepreneur Andrej Babiš) who is/is not in conflict of interests (with respect to his position as Prime Minister and entrepreneur in the context of EU subsidies). This second collocation is semantically connected to the first, and to cover all the necessary meanings, we also included the isolated occurrences of

the lemma “nest” to the occurrences of the collocations. An overview of the algorithms can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF ALGORITHMS FOR MECHANICAL READING OF DATA BY KEYWORDS, BASED ON AUTHORS’ OWN ANALYSIS

Collocation and lemma	Algorithm
Europe – subsidies	<„Evropa“ (Europe) OR „Unie“ (Union) OR „Brusel“ (Brussels) OR „EU“ AND „dotace“ (subsidies) OR „čerpát“ (a word meaning “to use (subsidies)”, but only in this specific context) AND NOT „dotaz“ (query, question, inquiry)>
Prime Minister/entrepreneur – (conflict of) interests	<„Premiér“; „předseda“ (Prime Minister) OR „podnik“ (enterprise/business/company) OR „Agrofert“ AND „zájem“ (interest)>
(Stork’s) nest	< „hnízdo“ (nest)>

The third step of the procedure, which shall bring analytical results, is (3) determining the content of the context in which keywords appear, also considering the content of five sentences before and after the sentence with collocations according to the algorithm (or lemma “nest”) in the input data. The result of the third step is the division of contexts into the “populist” and “non-populist”⁷ sets. Contexts unrelated to the research subject were removed from the empirical corpus, and within the non-excluded contexts, we counted the occurrences of the code in the required context of five sentences before and after the occurrence (other codes within the text defined like this were deleted). An overview of the number of occurrences can be seen in Table 2.

TABLE 2: TOTAL NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES WITHIN THE „POPULIST” AND „NON-POPULIST” SET, BASED ON AUTHORS’ OWN ANALYSIS

Populist (N _p)	N _p = 85 Σ
Non-populist (N _{np}) ⁸	N _{np} = 22 Σ
N _p /N _{np}	N (108) = N _{np} (22) < N _p (85)

This quantification allows to claim that Andrej Babiš uses populist communication in relation to the subsidies and the Stork’s Nest, since the non-populist statements in Andrej Babiš’s communication make up only about 24 percent of all statements included. The above-defined thesis that “the statements of Andrej Babiš (N_{AB}) correspond to the populist order of communication (N_p) in more than 50 percent⁸ of their occurrences compared to his other statements (Σ N_{np})” was confirmed (N_{AB} = Σ N_p > Σ N_{np}).

⁷ Other meanings that do not correspond to the order but include Andrej Babiš as the actor as well as at least “the elite” or “the people”, or where applicable, also “the people” together with “the elite” including equivalent triplet subjects.

⁸ There are two reasons for the 50 percent limit: 1/ a percentage lower than 50 percent can confirm the contextual validity of the premise only if the median between the reference points can be determined. In our case, such reference points would be “no neo-patrimonialism” and “complete neo-patrimonialism”. The median cannot be determined because data on the measurement of neo-patrimonialism are not available, which is logical since we are still in the process of creating the framework for its measurement (through identification); 2/ 50 percent and more is the absolute limit regardless of the median.

5 DESIGNING QUALITATIVE CODES – INTERCONNECTED CONTEXT OF POPULISM AND NEO-PATRIMONIALISM

After the quantitative analysis, we evaluated the above-identified contexts qualitatively and recorded their form determined according to the context (see Table 3). When evaluating the context and categorizing, we respected the following framework: 1/ codes were now created only from the “populist” data set; 2/ content of Babiš's communication strategy (simplified into triplets according to the context, see above); 3/ position of the Babiš towards the context.

We take this context as data, and sentences as data units. We simplified the context of all sentences into triplets (see above): Babiš is the speaker who creates the context where he presents himself as either the Prime Minister, or an entrepreneur (private person). Whether he speaks from the position of the Prime Minister or businessman is evident from the context of the whole paragraph (in approximately five sentences; see also above) where he speaks of himself and styles himself into the role of either the PM⁹, or an entrepreneur.¹⁰ However, we must note that the boundaries between the two categories are not completely strict (which is not essential for the qualitative evaluation and interpretation of the key content of created practices; see below).

The contexts recorded in the table indicate some initial conclusions related to thesis no. 2. Evidently, based on Babiš's rhetoric, there is no distinction between the position of two different speakers that, in a normally functioning bureaucracy, should be distinguished – i.e., the position of Babiš as the Prime Minister, and Babiš as an entrepreneur (or more generally, a private person). Although it is possible to distinguish and quantify when Babiš speaks of himself more as the Prime Minister and as an entrepreneur, regarding the content of created practices, this difference is not significant (we would like to clearly emphasize that).

⁹ Example: “Lex Babiš. This is the big guns. They thought that if they tampered with the company that I have been building for over 21 years, I would leave politics. Well, I surprised them. I gave priority to the interests of the people who elected me and put their trust in me. I gave up the company. I followed the Act written against me by traditional, democratic parties. Although renowned lawyers have declared it unconstitutional and against the European law. It has taken almost 3 years for the Constitutional Court to decide what it actually is. Both the President and some of the deputies filed a lawsuit against this Act. But I still obeyed, I gave up the company. So, if I come to the Agrofert general meeting now, they will throw me out the door. I simply have no influence on the company.” Interpretation of the inclusion of this statement in “AB = Prime Minister”: Babiš first speaks of himself as an entrepreneur who built the company and at the same time entered politics when he owned it. He was put in the position of choosing between his business and political office. He has chosen a political position and continues to talk about himself only as a politician who has no influence on his company (i.e., the conflict of interest does not exist).

¹⁰ Example: “It is absolutely unbelievable that in 2006 I started setting up a subsidy fraud in relation to subsidies, when no one knew anything about the operational programme in question. The operational programme was announced on December 20th, 2007, and the police claim that I set up something already in 2006 because I probably knew that there would be a programme. Incredible nonsense.” Interpretation of the inclusion of this statement in “AB = entrepreneur”: Babiš describes his role in the above-mentioned accusation from the time he was an entrepreneur and as a private person he is currently commenting on his business activities. In addition, he questions the work of the police in terms of condemning all the elites that oppose him as an entrepreneur when they cannot defeat him politically.

TABLE 3: SCHEME OF RECORDED CONTEXTS, BASED ON AUTHORS' OWN ANALYSIS WITH TRIPLETS' COUNT

Position of the actor towards the context (ad. 3)	Content of created practices (ad. 2)
<p>AB = Prime Minister (populist Andrej Babiš acting as PM; <i>ppm</i>) $N_{ppm} = 38 \Sigma$</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - elites are either Czech or those of the EU – the Czechs (meaning Czech elites) are informers (and Czech journalists are activists), and Czech elites exploit the subsidies and the system; the EU elites (OLAF and actors connected with the audit) are amateurs and/or attack the Czech Republic (and the Prime Minister), we are being dictated by the EU elites = the Stork's Nest is a campaign, but no one is concerned anymore, the conflict of interest does not exist and the subsidies will not be returned
<p>AB = entrepreneur (populist Andrej Babiš acting as a private person and/or entrepreneur; <i>pe</i>) $N_{pe} = 47 \Sigma$</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the authorities (OLAF and the Czech Police) do not work adequately - political elites lead the „Stork's Nest” campaign and exploit the subsidies and the system = the Stork's Nest and the subsidies are a pseudo-problem
<p>Populist triplets in sum (for cross-checking data): $85 = N_{ppm} (38) + N_{pe} (47)$</p>	

The narrative structure of both contexts can be interpreted (except for some deviations, which we will describe below) within a similar line. Since we are building on the analysis of the “populist” data set, the statements and the context of the analysed sentences contain all the necessary components of the populist order, which we can now specify when interpreting the content of statements. We shall add that we also verified the statements from the “non-populist” data set, and it is noteworthy that this set did not contain any context that could be associated with neo-patrimonial practices. This fact speaks for the connection between populist and neo-patrimonial rhetoric (see below).

Regarding the positions of “both” speakers (Prime Minister and entrepreneur/private person), the topic of the Stork's Nest and the subsidies is downplayed (in the sense that “Stork's Nest is a pseudo-case”, “Stork's Nest is a campaign against me”, “Stork's Nest is a topic not interesting anyone”), claiming that they are “purposefully” used against Andrej Babiš by variously defined “bad elite” (representatives of “traditional” political parties, EU representatives) and actors who are helping them in this matter (OLAF, Czech journalists, Czech Police). Babiš presents his business as exemplary legal (“The Czech Republic will definitely not need to return any subsidies.”) and his political activities as anti-corruption motivated and directed against the representatives of “traditional” parties who “were involved when billions were stolen here, banks, insurance companies, and funds stripped of assets.” He presents himself as the protector of the good people from the bad political elite (“We are truly an anti-corruption movement.”). At the same time, he presents himself as an actor whose actions directly help people – both political and economic actions – Babiš's profits are reflected in the profits of the whole (“I employ 35 thousand people”, “I pay big taxes to public budgets”, “I save bankrupting companies”).

In sum, combining the position of a politician and entrepreneur is *not problematic* for him – if an individual succeeds, even in the office of Prime Minister, it is beneficial to the whole. Moreover, he rhetorically *defends* and *legitimizes* his private business interest as a public interest (“attack against the Czech Republic”). This is an exemplary neo-patrimonial rhetorical practice (also evident from a series of statements, such as “Czechs inform on the Czechs in Brussels.”, etc.). Drawing the attention to the potentially illegal activities of the Prime Minister and entrepreneur Babiš (a specific individual) is thus presented as “betraying the whole” – in line with the neo-patrimonial logic, the private interest is thus raised to the level of the public interest. These “traitors” (representatives of the

“traditional” parties) are understood as enemies serving the transnational elite, whose goal is to attack the Czech Republic or the entire political community. Babiš puts himself in the role of a selfless protector (“And I work for people for free from morning till night, I pay for everything.”) against these activities.

To summarize, we can describe Babiš’s rhetorical practice as both populist (“elites of traditional parties are bad”, “Brussels is evil”, “I act in the interests of the people”) and neo-patrimonial (not distinguishing between private and public). As a typical populist, Babiš presents himself as the protector of the good people in whose interests he fights against evil (“we are an anti-corruption movement”, “I fight in the EU for Czech interests”). He then reinforces this populist rhetoric with neo-patrimonial practices that prevent him from distinguishing between private and public – his private interest equals the public interest, his personal well-being and wealth helps the well-being and wealth of the society, etc. With these rhetorical figures, he connects himself as a private person with the state approaching it in the terms of private economic (and de facto ownership) relations. Similarly, if the EU’s criticism of the Prime Minister’s private business activities is an “attack against the Czech Republic”, we are not finding any difference between private and public. The logic of the statements analysed above shows that Babiš does not really distinguish between what is really his and what he administers from the position of a supreme representative of the executive power. He thus treats the state (and the citizens) as his own patrimony. He styles himself as a ruler-patron, who “manages the state as a company”, treats it as private property and builds relationships with citizens based on mutual (albeit asymmetric) reciprocity according to the patron-client relationship pattern.

The combination of populist statements and neo-patrimonialism is evident from the qualitative evaluation of the content of created practices. Now, we are expressing the quantification of the ration of neo-patrimonial statements to be able to confirm or refute the second thesis. Neo-patrimonial statements have had to meet the following criteria based on the above-introduced theory:

1/ the statement does not indicate a strict distinction between private and public¹¹

2/ despite the formal procedures, the exercise of power is in many respects replaced using personal relationships and personal interventions of the one in power towards the rest of the political field and the public (or at least by promising such interventions)¹²

¹¹ An example of such statement could be: “What would you say here? Stork’s Nest. Yes, regarding the Stork’s Nest the money was returned, because if my former company sued, they would sue against Schillerová, and I could not do that to her.” The context of this statement being that Babiš comment on the return of money to the public budget and ties his actions to personal sympathy for the Minister of Finance.

¹² An example of such statement can be: “In 13 years, my former company paid 33 billion 470 million into public budgets and received 4.22 from the Czech budget. And in 11 years of investment, it has invested 101 billion and those investments, those subsidies from Europe and the Czech budget, are 3.3 percent... Yeah, so little, 3.3 percent. And of course, these are things that can be traced. But I understand, everything was pulled off before the election. Toast bread. Scandal! What about the fact that someone here invested 517 million in a toast bread line and received a subsidy of 100 million, and employed a lot of people? No?” In this case, Babiš links the formal procedures of receiving a subsidy and of the purpose of the subsidy with his own interest of investments and he defends it with a public interest of employment. In addition, as we would like to emphasize, Babiš, even as the Prime Minister, defends the interests of his former company (which also appears in other neo-patrimonial statements).

TABLE 4: TOTAL NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES WITHIN THE „NEO-PATRIMONIAL” AND „NON-NEO-PATRIMONIAL” SET, BASED ON AUTHORS’ OWN ANALYSIS

Neo-patrimonial (N_{n-p})	$N_{n-p} = 34 \Sigma$
Non-neo-patrimonial (N_{n-n-p})	$N_{n-n-p} = 51 \Sigma$
N_{n-p}/N_{n-n-p}	$N (85) = N_{n-p} (34) < N_{n-n-p} (51)$

The second thesis was not partly confirmed as the ratio of neo-patrimonial statements was “only” 29 percent. However, the question is whether the percentage-wise limit of “confirmation” of quantified statements should be 50 percent to determine whether the actor tends toward neo-patrimonialism or not. Comparative data are lacking in this area, and until the data are available, it is not possible to set a relevant contextual (not absolute) threshold (which, on the other hand, calls on other scientists to make such comparisons) or median. In any case, we believe that almost 30 percent of neo-patrimonial statements is not an insignificant number. In addition, we confirmed the presence of neo-patrimonialism based on qualitative content analysis.

6 CONCLUSION

The former Czech Prime Minister and one of the richest businessmen in the country, Andrej Babiš, uses a specific mix of populist (thesis 1) and neo-patrimonial (thesis 2) rhetorical practices. He presents his actions as conventional, which we have proved based on the analysis of the context of his rhetoric. The dangers of neo-patrimonial behaviour and its legitimization are apparent.

Andrej Babiš, as a populist and neo-patrimonial politician, does not respect the basic liberal democratic mechanisms, the principle of the rule of law and the neutrality of the modern bureaucracy. This behaviour fits into the discussion on the incompatibility of populism and the liberal democratic establishment. The addition of the adjective “liberal” to the word democracy is necessary in this case – most authors agree that populism is not the antithesis of democracy as such (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012) but is based on a different concept of democracy (Canovan 1999) and, above all, is hostile towards its liberal form. Therefore, populism is not undemocratic, but it is illiberal. Today’s Central Europe is facing a weakening of liberal democratic principles, with the trend most noticeable in Hungary; although other countries in the region are also unable to face illiberal challenges. Technocratic or valence populism is often described as the main challenger of liberal democracy in the region, and its growth is not a manifestation of ordinary political dissatisfaction, but rather an overall transformation of party politics (Havlík 2019).

Similar principles apply in the case of Andrej Babiš. In our analysis, however, we went a step further and connected the populist challenge to liberal democracy and the issue of neo-patrimonialism, which is rarely associated with populism, and mostly with respect to Latin America (López Maya 2018) or South Europe (Edwards 2005; Tarchi 2015). Our goal was not to reject the existing concepts that are often used to describe Andrej Babiš and ANO, especially valence populism (Zulianello 2020), but to link them with another concept that would allow us to grasp the communication practices incomprehensible by conventional approaches to populism.

As we have shown, in the case of Andrej Babiš, neo-patrimonialism manifests itself primarily by not distinguishing between public and private interests (or ownership) and public and private persons. Andrej Babiš does not distinguish between these positions – from the position of Prime Minister he treats the public property in the same way as an entrepreneur treats the private one. This is not a case of mere state capture, i.e., taking over the state by private actors. Andrej Babiš does not conceal the connection of these two positions; he presents it in various contexts as normal and even beneficial. His private welfare is linked with the welfare of the whole; that is a clear conclusion of the analysis of his rhetoric in the case of the Stork's Nest and the related cases of European subsidies.

Populism is traditionally associated with the principle of the unity of the people, the general will and the direction towards fulfilling the common good. Populist politicians are styled in the role of an actor who can recognize and fulfil this common good. Let us now combine this principle with the logic of neo-patrimonialism, according to which, if the ruler-patron succeeds, the whole succeeds. Recognition and fulfilment of the public well-being is linked to the fulfilment of the private well-being of the individual at the forefront. Above, as one of the principles of Andrej Babiš's rhetoric, we identified that political competitors drawing attention to the potential illegality of Babiš's activities in Brussels are referred to as "traitors" by the Prime Minister. In the perspective of Babiš's model, they are also actors who, by their actions, damage the common good.

We can consider Andrej Babiš as a representative of the specific category of neo-patrimonial populism we have described. The combination of these concepts opens wide possibilities for research on the communication of populists within oligarchic circles in each regime and their mutual comparison. New category of populism anticipates new ways of populist communication. In contrast to traditional people-centrism and anti-elitism, which are typical of valence populism, neo-patrimonial populist communication is more complex and can be described by the following features: (1) do not rhetorically or factually separate their own private interests from the interests of the state, (2) use the state structures to pursue their own private interests, (3) normalize (legitimize) their actions by defining themselves against traditional elites, and (4) promote their interest as the interest of the whole, that is, of all the people.

The credibility of the new populism category must be tested both by analysing other topics addressed by Andrej Babiš and by other cases of populism in Central Europe (e.g., Szabó 2020; Naxera et al. 2020) or elsewhere. Although our concept was built on extensive and solid data, it is based on only one case study which, on the other hand, concentrate Babiš's rhetoric modus. We are fully open to a possible debate on the partial reformulation of the created category based on other data or other case studies. We believe that it would be interesting, for example, to analyse Viktor Orbán's rhetoric in the case of the constitution he enforced, which entered into force in 2012, and which, among other things, introduces greater control of the government regarding public budgets. As we mentioned, the linkage between populism and patrimonialism is analysed also in some South European cases (Edwards 2005; Tarchi 2015). We suggest forming a new comparative criterion applicable for those variety of cases.

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"LET NAD ŠTORKLJINIM GNEZDOM": NEOPATRIMONIALEN POPULIZEM ČEŠKEGA PREDSEDNIKA VLADE ANDREJA BABIŠA

Izhajajoč iz razprave o odnosu do populizma, njegove tipologije in nevtralne birokracije, ta članek obravnava komunikacijsko prakso nekdanjega češkega premierja Andreja Babiša glede evropskih subvencij. S pomočjo mešane vsebinske analize večletnih Babiševih izjav preverjamo dve tezi: prvič, Babiševa retorika je dominantno populistična in drugič, Babiševa retorika je neopatrimonialna. Rezultati analize kažejo, da je Babišev primer nova in še neopisana oblika populizma, ki jo identificiramo kot »neopatrimonialni populizem« in ki standardno populistično komunikacijo dopolnjuje s praksami, ki ne razlikujejo med javnim in osebnim interesom, lastnino in statusom.

Ključne besede: populizem; neopatrimonializem; češka politika; populistična komunikacija.