

Chapter 3: The Economic Crisis in the Shadow of Political Crisis: The Rise of Party Populism in the Czech Republic

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Introduction

For a long time, the Czech Republic experienced a relative lack of viable populist political parties; moreover, the country has also had a relatively high degree of stability in the party system. From the first half of the 90s, the party system was composed of four major parties – the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) on the right side of the political spectrum, the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and the medium-sized Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) on the left, and a small Christian-Democratic party (KDU-ČSL) in the centre. These four parties were supplemented by smaller formations of a predominantly liberal orientation. In 2010, however, the electoral support of the established parties started to become increasingly unstable, as a result of the surge of support for new parties including the right-center TOP 09 and three populist challengers – Public Affairs (*Věci veřejné*, VV), ANO 2011 (*Action of Dissatisfied Citizens*, i.e. *Akce nespokojených občanů*, acronym ANO means *Yes* in Czech,) and Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy (*Úsvit přímé demokracie Tomia Okamury*, henceforth as The Dawn) (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Allocation of Seats in the Chamber of Deputies (1996-2013)

	1996	1998	2002	2006	2010	2013
ODS	68	63	58	81	53	16
ČSSD	61	74	70	74	56	50
KSČM	22	24	41	26	26	33
KDU-ČSL	18	20	31*	13	0	14

TOP 09					41	26
VV					24	
ANO						47
Dawn						14
Others	31	19	0	6	0	0
Total	200	200	200	200	200	200

Data source: volby.cz

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the character and development of the discourse of these newly successful populist parties during the time of the economic crisis. Our chief argument is that the rise of populist parties in the Czech Republic was due to a political crisis, rather than any economic crisis. We understand populism as combination of the three main components, namely (1) people-centrism; (2) anti-elitism; (3) popular sovereignty and proposals to restore popular sovereignty. The results presented here are primarily based on a qualitative analysis of various data sources from the three successful recent populist parties. The data used for analyzing these parties' populist appeal is comprised of three types of sources: (1) the parties' programs for the 2010 and 2013 elections to the Chamber of Deputies; (2) materials (articles, interviews) from the parties' websites (www.veciverejne.cz, www.anobudelip.cz, www.hnutiusvit.cz) and their leaders' blogs; and (3) interviews with party representatives in national newspapers and on TV and radio, including their participation in TV debates¹. Moreover, for a quantitative assessment of the evolution of the intensity of populist discourse of Public Affairs before and after the party entered the government, the party's journal, *Věci veřejné* (Public Affairs) was used.²

The chapter is divided as follows: the first section focuses on a very short description of relevant populist parties prior to the eruption of the economic crisis in 2008. This is followed

¹ These materials were obtained from the Anopress database

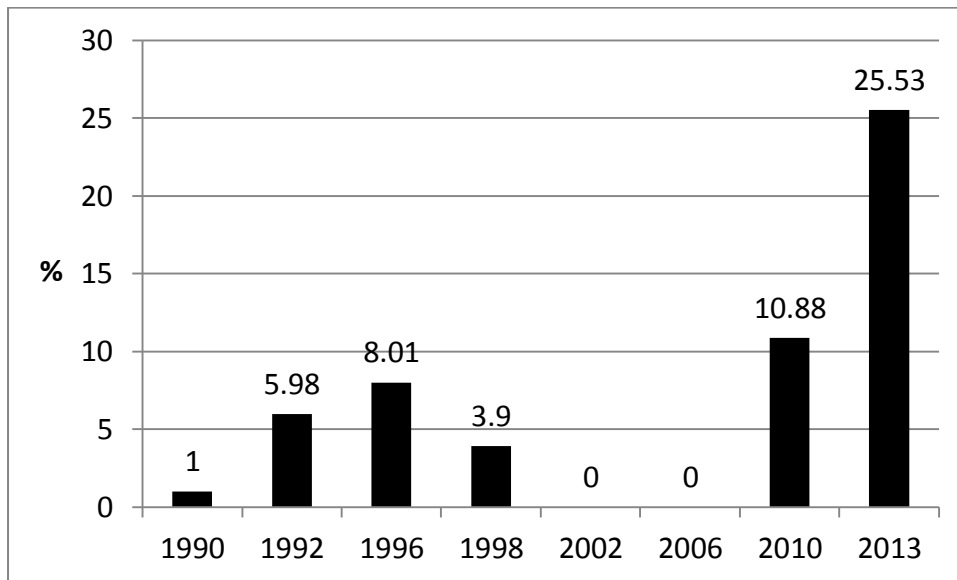
² Similar analyses of ANO 2011 and The Dawn have not been carried out for two reasons. Firstly, there are no data available comparable to those that were used in case of VV's discourse analysis (neither ANO 2011, nor The Dawn publish their own journal). Secondly, even if a different data source had been used (e.g. posts on Facebook profiles of the two parties), the analysis would not have been able to prove any longterm change in the discourse of the parties since this text was finalized less than a year after the 2013 general election (and less than nine months after ANO 2011 entered the Cabinet).

by an overview of effects of the economic crisis in the Czech Republic, and a section analyzing the political crisis and the discourse of Czech populist parties.

Populist parties until 2008

The Czech Republic has not always been a country with successful populist parties (see Figure 3.1). The only exception was The Association for the Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia (*Sdružení pro republiku – Republikánská strana Československa*, SPR-RSČ), which has been classified as a radical-right wing populist party (Hanley 2013; Mareš 2003; Mudde 2007). SPR-RSČ combined anti-communism and anti-establishment positions with xenophobia and even outright racism in its communication (Sládek 1992; Sládek 1996; see also Mareš 2005). However, in 1998, the party failed to win enough votes to stay in Parliament and despite several attempts to “resuscitate” it, SPR-RSČ has not won enough votes to enter the Chamber of Deputies since then. For many years thereafter, populist parties in the Czech Republic were largely marginalized. However, changes could be seen in the elections in 2010, in which VV successfully entered the parliament, followed by the successes in 2013 by ANO and the Dawn. The increase in party populism took place in the context of the crisis in the economy but was – as it will be shown – facilitated especially by the crisis on the political scene.

Figure 3.1: Combined electoral results of populist political parties*



Data source: volby.cz

* 1990-1998: SPR – RSC, 2010: VV. 2013: ANO + Dawn

Economic Crisis

The economic crisis certainly had an impact on the Czech Republic, but in comparison to other European nations as Greece, Ireland or Spain, these effects have been rather mild. The Czech Republic largely avoided the problems associated with the mortgage and housing bubble as well as its accompanying artificial boom in the construction industry (in contrast to Spain or Ireland), as well as the fact that even though the Czech budget deficit is relatively high, its overall debt is low in comparison to that of other European nations.

Even so, we should point out that mainly due to its high level of economic openness and its dependence exports, after several years of growth, the Czech economy slowed down markedly in 2008, and entered into quite a sharp recession in the fourth quarter of 2008. More

detailed information on the economic situation is illustrated by selected macroeconomic indicators defined in the Chapter 1.

The economic situation at the end of 2008 brought about a significant decrease in GDP (see Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1). This was followed by sputtering short-term growth that nevertheless failed to reach pre-crisis levels, and once again collapsed. One immediate result of the GDP decrease was the increase in unemployment. Even if average quarterly unemployment figures were in fact somewhat lower in the aftermath of the crisis than before the crisis, it is important to emphasize the change in the trend of unemployment: While unemployment had followed a downward trend before the crisis, from a rather high rate of about 9 per cent in 2004, to 4 per cent in the first half of 2008, it increased steeply after 2008 and reached a peak at the beginning of 2010 (Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1). The fall in GDP also resulted in a reduction in tax revenue (and as a consequence, an increase in the state budget deficit), which in turn led to a significant increase in the debt-to-GDP ratio (Figure 1.3 in Chapter 1). The average level of debt to GDP has been considerably higher since the second half of 2008.

In sum, significant negative changes occurred across all three economic indicators after fall 2008, and the Czech economy has not fully recovered in subsequent years. Up to the electoral campaign of 2013, the Czech Republic experienced a continuation of stagnant GDP growth, relatively high unemployment, and growing public debt.

Consequently, economic issues became important topics during the election campaigns in 2010 and – to a lesser extent – in 2013. The parties of the right tended to focus on the need for austerity measures and warned against excessive debt, the parties of the left argued for solutions to the economic problems of the Czech Republic in the form of a more active role for the state and the support of investment (Eibl 2010; Eibl, 2014; Gregor and Macková 2014). Nevertheless, as I will argue below, economic matters were not the only and not the

most important issues of the elections in 2010 and 2013 in relation to the rise of populist parties.

The rise of populist parties after 2008 – the result of a serious political crisis

What is most important for understanding the rise of the populist parties in the Czech Republic is that it took place in the context of a deepening political crisis, the roots of which can be traced *back to the times before the economic crisis*. The core element of this crisis was the widespread loss of trust in political institutions and political parties. The following three indicators of political crisis, defined in the theoretical portion of this book, demonstrate this souring of attitudes towards political subjects (see Figure 1.4 in Chapter 1).

The years between 2007 and 2012 witness a substantial drop in the satisfaction of citizens with the functioning of democracy in the Czech Republic (the share of satisfied citizens dropped from one half to less than one-third) as well as trust in the Chamber of Deputies (which fell from 17 per cent to barely 10 per cent in the year 2012 – Kunštát 2012). Over the same period, from 2006 to 2010, electoral volatility nearly doubled. Since then it has leveled off and was somewhat lower in 2013 (Havlík 2014). The political crisis thus was embodied in a long and gradual decline in satisfaction with politics and political institutions that began more than a year (Linek, 2010) before any economic decline, and indeed in a time of economic prosperity. In relation to the timing of the rise of the populist parties, it is necessary to emphasize a sharp decline of the political trust in the period *after the 2006 general election* which was related to the complicated process of government formation followed by weakness and instability of the government, and extensive (and often well-founded) allegations of corruption (Havlík 2011).

After the 2006 general election, a coalition government headed by Mirek Topolánek (ODS) finally took office a full seven months (!) after the elections which ended with a deadlock between the left and the right. The government could be formed only thanks to the support of two MPs from ČSSD, who for unclear reasons changed sides and chose to support the government of their long-time ideological and political rivals (Foltýn and Havlík 2006). While in previous years public satisfaction with the political situation and trust in political institutions increased after elections (Linek 2010)³, in 2006, the immediate reaction after the elections led to record lows in both indicators and did not return to higher number before the 2010 election. According to the data provided by the Centre for Public Opinion Research, just after the 2006 elections, in the middle of the unsuccessful talks on formation of the new government, the satisfaction with political situation dropped from 17 per cent in May 2006 to 9 per cent in October 2006. Similarly, trust to the Chamber of Deputies halved from 44 per cent to 21 per cent (Čadová 2006).

The weak position of the government vis-à-vis the Chamber of Deputies was supplemented by friction among the coalition parties, which led to the fall of the government in spring 2009 (Havlík, 2011), contributing significantly to the *crisis of trust in political institutions and in politics in general*. The political parties in the Chamber agreed to the formation of a caretaker government composed of non-partisans (but nominated by ČSSD, ODS and SZ), as well as announcing early elections (Hloušek and Kopeček 2012). However, due to the alleged unconstitutionality of the move⁴, the Czech Constitutional Court overruled the Chamber's call for early elections. This led to a de facto extension of the caretaker government's term (up to

³ The only exception was the drop of political trust after the 1996 general election (Linek 2010). However, the context and consequences were very different in comparison to the period after the 2006 election. The Czech Republic was experiencing a severe economic crisis and dissatisfaction with political situation targeted mainly the centre-right government which had been in office since the beginning of the 1990s. Consequently, the main winner of the 1998 election was not the populist SPR-RSČ (on contrary, the party lost its parliamentary representation that year) but the Czech Social Democratic Party presenting itself as a leftist alternative to the previous right-centre governments.

⁴ Dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies was quite difficult at that time. To make the process faster and following the procedure applied in 1998, the Chamber of Deputies passed a special constitutional act which was supposed to shorten the term and call for early elections.

13 months), which continued in spite of its low level of legitimacy and no clear support in the Chamber of Deputies (Balík 2011). The paradoxical position of MPs after the decision of the Constitutional Court was expressed by Petr Fiala: ‘the political representation already decided to leave voluntarily but they were forced to stay’ (Fiala, 2010).

The above described lack of public support for the Chamber of Deputies (and dissatisfaction with political situation in general) was also fueled by media suspicion of corruption by various members of the government (as well as politicians from the opposition) increasingly reported in the media. Systematic links between big business and politics increasingly came into the open right after the 2006 election. Klíma (2013) has described the symbiosis between political parties on one hand, and “well-connected” private businesses on the other, and defined ‘clientelist parties’ as a best way of capturing the functioning of the established parties in the Czech Republic. Paradoxically, it was Mirek Topolánek, the Prime Minister and chairman of ODS, who introduced the term ‘kmotr’ (godfather) describing people (usually regional businessmen or politicians), considered responsible for corruption, especially in public tenders. The term started to be widely used in media and the fact that the chairman of the biggest party had used it for describing situation in his own party, contributed significantly to public allegation of the established parties of being corrupt. In other words, even though the level of political trust in the Czech Republic was comparatively low at least since the second half of the 1990s, the events in the period after the 2006 election including the weak government, the postponed elections and corruption allegations led to a further and, more importantly, *substantial* drop of political trust to unprecedented low numbers.

The results of the 2010 elections demonstrated continued voter frustration with the established parties as is illustrated by the high level of electoral volatility (Havlík 2014). In particular, the two longtime anchors of the Czech right and the Czech left, ODS and ČSSD respectively, bore the brunt of the voters’ anger. In 2006, the two parties had received two-thirds of all

votes. By 2010, their combined share of votes barely amounted to 40 per cent (Haughton et al. 2011). Conversely, Public Affairs (VV) won enough votes to enter the Chamber, running primarily on a platform of criticizing the established political parties and fight with corruption.

Hunting the “political dinosaurs” – the discourse of the Public Affairs Party

VV was established in 2001, as a local civic association in Prague focused on issues concerning local city politics. In June 2009, the party announced that it would compete in the early election of the Chamber of Deputies with Radek John, a popular former writer and investigative journalist, as leader of the party’s election campaign. However, the real chairman of the party was the well-connected businessman Vít Bárta, whose corruption allegation would later prove to be disastrous for the party (Hloušek 2012; Kmenta 2011). In the end, the party enjoyed relative success in the election, winning 10.9 per cent of the vote and 24 seats in the Chamber, eventually becoming a coalition partner in the center-right government.

The party’s election campaign was based on a combination of a strong anti-establishment appeal, calls for more direct democracy (including within the VV party itself), and anti-corruption slogans, but without targeting any particular social group (Matušková, 2010). Its main election slogan called for “The end of the political dinosaurs.” Chairman John defined such a dinosaur as:

“someone who has been in politics for more than ten years, can’t do anything other than politics, understands it as his trade and starts to make deals.... It’s someone who’s lost touch with reality and ceases to be useful.” (Právo, 2009)

“Dinosaurs” were also a central theme of one of the party’s TV spots, in which John drew a dinosaur, while the accompanying voice explained how the “dinosaurs” were responsible for the deteriorating state of affairs, both in the economy and elsewhere:

“They’re everywhere. They invade the space of every one of us. Corruption. National debts. Parasitism. Low-quality education. Shameful pensions. The dinosaurs of years past.” (VV, 2010b).

In this way, VV lumped all of the established parties together, their representatives were seen as a homogeneous entity of incompetent politicians responsible for the decline of the Czech Republic. One key element was VV’s rallying of voters with anti-establishment demands to fight corruption. VV dedicated more space in its party platform to the topic of fighting corruption than any other party that received seats in the Chamber. Above all, politicians of the established parties were said to be guilty of abusing their positions when dealing with public tenders:

“And then there is all this palm-greasing around, for the Gripen [fighter jets], for the Pandurs [armored personnel carriers]. And the army contracts for other weapons, overpriced over the last three years to the tune of fourteen billion... So we’ve lost an enormous amount of money here and it’s the parliamentary parties who are to blame. Let the gentlemen work out which one of them is specifically responsible for this.” (Frekvence 1 2010).

Members of VV were particularly critical of the two large parties, who were accused of being guilty of corruption as well as of incompetence when governing the country, and were unable to change. As one party vice-chairman, Vít Bárta, stated:

“The large parties are either irredeemable or could be reformed only with difficulty. A democracy of robber barons has taken upper hand within their internal functioning. [The robber barons] hold some regions of the country under their control and influence the

functioning of several political parties at the same time” (Mladá fronta Dnes, 7 May 2010).

VV rejected any possible participation with “political dinosaurs” in the government (Česká televize, 2010a). Nevertheless, in light of the election results, hoping to participate in the formation of the new government and after the government was formed in particular, VV softened its expressions concerning the established parties, and claimed that it was the voters who had the decisive say over who is (and who is not) a “political dinosaur” (Český rozhlas 2010b). In other words, VV sought to leave the door open for cooperation with parliamentary political parties (see below).

VV’s representatives regularly presented the decision-making of political parties as being against the voters’ will. As a consequence of the emphasis on people-centrism in the party’s discourse, VV proposed greater emphasis on direct democracy and a greater number of direct elections as its chief recipe to remedy the allegedly bleak state of Czech politics. The party proposed a law on general referenda, and argued that the pool of directly elected public offices should include the president, regional governors, and mayors. (VV, 2010a: 5) The emphasis put on direct democracy is apparent from the very first sentence of the party’s program for the 2010 election of the Chamber of Deputies:

“The Public Affairs Political Party intends to transform the present political (non-)culture through a greater involvement of citizens in decision-making...” (VV, 2010a: 5).

The party called itself a “party of direct democracy”, and the chairman – Radek John – described the principles of direct democracy as a “common-sense model” (Český rozhlas, 2009b). Moreover, the party sought to differentiate itself from others in terms of intra-party governance:

“We are for the direct election of party chairmen, as this will clean things up... Let people decide and let’s make this grow from the bottom up. People are not stupid.”
(Prima TV, 2009).

Thereafter, principles of direct democracy were implemented concerning decision-making within VV itself. In addition to its members, the party also recognized its registered supporters, the so-called *Věčkaři* (the “Vs”), who could register on the party’s website. Party regulations adopted in June 2009 granted a key position to these supporters, in terms of deciding on party leadership and its election candidates (VV, 2009b). Registered supporters could also decide, by means of intra-party referenda, on the party’s stance on selected issues. Referring to the results of certain referenda within his party, John opined:

“It seems to me that voters are brilliant and this is how I imagine a cultivated nation. In my view they’re more cultured than MPs.” (VV, 2009a).

To a large degree, populist appeals functioned as a substitute for any “full ideology” in the party’s profile. Although the party initially presented itself as a center-right challenger to the established political parties, the rhetoric related to its own ideological orientation changed and representatives of the party either attempted to position the party in the “center” or resisted positioning the party on the left-right spectrum. As John said:

“...[T]he ideology is totally empty. The right-left perception is so last century. And we say: we are a centrist party with clever solutions” (Česká televize, 2010a)

“We don’t want to move left or right, we want to move forward” (Pokorný 2010).

Vít Bárta spoke in similar terms and connected the refusal to view politics in terms of the left and right with the party’s anti-establishment appeal:

“The classic sign of a political dinosaur is a strict right-left view of society... There is also a centrist ideology, the ideology of correct solutions. That’s what I believe in.” (Mladá fronta Dnes, 7 May 2010).

Instead of clear ideological arguments, party representatives emphasized common sense as the leading principle behind the party’s program. John repeatedly described a vote for the party’s candidates to the Chamber of Deputies as “votes for common sense” (Frekvence 1 2010). He rejected the idea that his party’s promotion of direct democracy was somehow leftist; instead he described direct democracy as “centrist common sense” (Český rozhlas 2009b).

While the dominant themes of VV’s political communication concerned the political crisis, VV also naturally discussed the economic crisis. In its program and in statements by party officials it warned of the Czech Republic’s rising debt, and made capping it a priority (Česká televize 2010a, Instinkt 2010, VV 2009a). Indeed, capping the debt was even a condition for VV’s potential participation in a coalition government (Český rozhlas 2010a). The VV repeatedly demanded austerity measures, and pointed to the alleged threat of state bankruptcy:

“[W]e demand an end to the money squandering. During the good times, when there was money, unfortunately nothing was set aside; and at this moment every citizen of the Czech Republic has a debt of 108,000 crowns... Each one of our grandchildren will eventually owe 500,000 crowns” (Český rozhlas, 2009b).

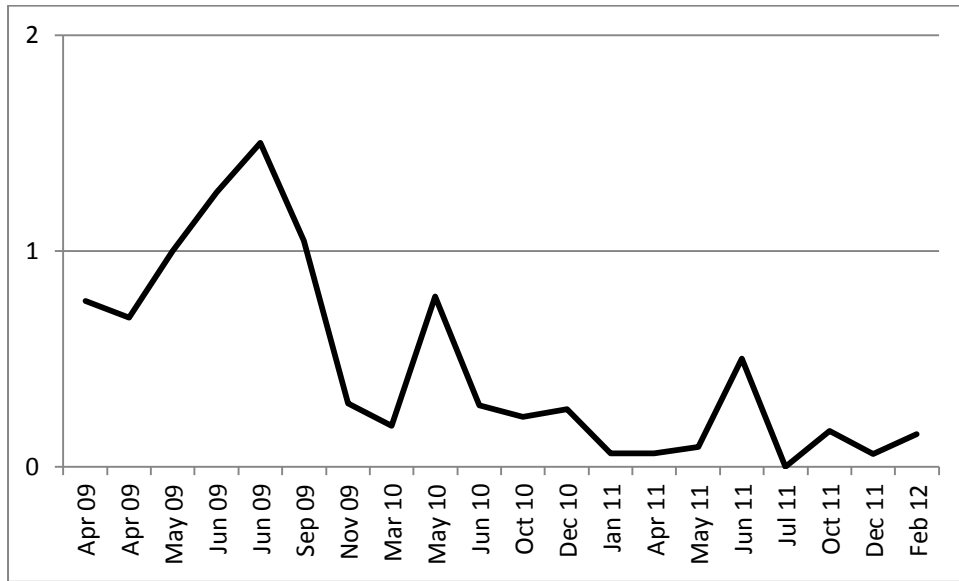
Nevertheless, economic topics were not vital components of party communication; of all parties that entered the Chamber of Deputies, VV dedicated the least space of its party platform to economic questions (Eibl 2010). Even more importantly, the VV’s references to the economic crisis were subordinated to anti-establishment rhetoric, in which the party linked the economic crisis and rising public debt to the issue of corruption. By curtailing corruption in public tenders, savings could be made in the budget, the party argued. As Radek John said:

“At this moment we need to solve a very practical issue, namely the fact that there’s an awful lot of stealing going on here; a third of it is stolen money, a third of the state budget” (Český rozhlas, 2009a).

As such, the economic crisis was not a theme around which the discourse of VV consolidated. While economic topics indeed were occasionally present, they chiefly were relegated to a secondary role and were often utilized in the context of VV’s anti-establishment demands and in relation to the need to battle corruption.

As mentioned above, the populist discourse of the party underwent significant changes after the party had entered government. In order to demonstrate this trend quantitatively, the content of the journal *Věci veřejné*, which was published by the party between January 2009 and February 2012, was analyzed. Each article published in the journal (including the main headline on the cover page) were included in the analysis (N = 287). Based on a qualitative interpretative assessment, three elements of populism (people centrism, referring to representation of the people as homogeneous entity and/or supremacy of the people; anti-establishment appeal as denigration of political elites in general; and calls for the strengthening of popular sovereignty) were observed in the articles and their presence coded as “1.” Therefore, each article could reach a maximum value of “3” if all three elements were identified in the text, and a value of “0” in case the article was “populism-free.” In order to assess the development of the role of populism in the discourse of the party over the time, we analyzed the level of populism in each issue of the journal (N = 20) – see Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2: Overall level of populism in the discourse of Public Affairs



The two peaks indicating the highest levels of populism refer to the period preceding the planned (and then canceled) early election in 2009 and the election which actually took place in May 2010. The populist rhetoric of the party almost disappeared from the VV discourse after it had entered the government in July 2010. This difference in the intensity of populism rhetoric (almost five times lower while in office) is clearly demonstrated in Table 3.2. The steepest decline could be identified in the anti-establishment component of the discourse. Therefore, the hypothesis on decline of populism in relation to government participation set in the theoretical chapter of the book can be verified in the case of VV.

Table 3.2: Populist appeals in the discourse of the Public Affairs party before and after entering the government (N = 287)

	Pre-government period	In Office
Overall	0.72	0.15
People-centrism	0.15	0.04
Anti-establishment appeal	0.35	0.04
Sovereignty of the people	0.22	0.08

Political crisis – version 2.0

The period after the 2010 election failed to bring about a significant shift in the perception of politics by the public. The starting position of the Nečas center-right government was better (118 deputies out of 200) than that of the Topolánek government. However, the government was seriously weakened by ongoing conflicts within the governing coalition (Hloušek, 2012), and by several corruption scandals.

Trust in politics slumped notably after an internal VV document was made public which clearly indicated that the party's election campaign against corruption was chiefly designed as a way to increase business opportunities for Vice-Chairman Bárta's private security firms through public procurement. Moreover, Bárta allegedly paid off Deputies from his own party for their allegiance (Kmenta 2011). Subsequent speculation about a suspected intra-party putsch of "compromised" VV Deputies collaborating with ODS and TOP 09 (the other parties in the government) led to a split in the party, with some members of VV leaving the government altogether. In addition, internal ODS conflicts about party policy and whether or not the government was sufficiently "on the right" meant that eventually the government as a whole found itself without a secure majority in the Chamber of Deputies (Hloušek, 2012).

The government's weakened position was seen most clearly in a vote on changing the tax code, which for the first time failed to pass because of opposition by "rebels" from the ODS. Before a repeat of the vote two months later the "rebels" resigned their seats and were replaced by more loyal party colleagues. Later, it came out that the resigning deputies would

be nominated for the board of directors of state-run companies. This became one of the reasons for a police raid on the Office of the Government in spring 2013, and, for charging Prime Minister Nečas and the rebel deputies with corruption. The Prime Minister was forced to resign under pressure, which brought down the entire government. The political crisis was prolonged by President Miloš Zeman, who refused to appoint a representative of ODS as the new Prime Minister, even though the new government had the declared support of a majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Instead, the President appointed Jiří Rusnok, a former Minister of Finance from his government in the early 2000s, as Prime Minister. However, the government did not win a vote of confidence. As a consequence, the Chamber of Deputies voted to dissolve itself. Elections were then scheduled for the end of October 2013, which meant the longest period in the Czech history with a cabinet without a clear legitimacy, as well as the longest period with a dissolved Parliament.

Even more often than during the previous election term, the media reported about various alleged corruption scandals involving almost all the parliamentary parties. Among the most visible, one can mention so-called ProMoPro affair (overpriced purchase of various equipment used during the Czech presidency over the EU), purchase of CASA airplanes for the Czech army, non-transparent public tenders at the Ministry for Environment or several instances of misappropriation of the money from European Union operational programmes at the regional level (one of the MPs was even arrested for alleged bribery). As in 2006-2010, repeated corruption scandals and government instability led to another drop of trust in the Parliament and satisfaction with the political situation fell to another historical low. In the weeks after a part of VV had left the government, average satisfaction with the political situation collapsed to just 5 per cent of the population, while trust in the Chamber of Deputies crumbled to 12 per cent (Kunštát, 2012; Kunštát, 2013b). General satisfaction with political situation was further weakened by a controversial amnesty decision made by the President

Václav Klaus in January 2013 after it had been revealed that several people imprisoned for serious financial crimes and corruption (only 3 per cent were satisfied with political situation in January 2013 while trust to the President dropped drastically from 53 per cent in December 2012 to 26 per cent in January 2013 – Kunštát 2013a).

Consequently, with a deepening of the crisis of political trust before the 2013 general elections conditions for the rise of populist parties were even more favorable than three years earlier. As a result, two populist parties recorded impressive successes in the elections.

4 “We’re not like the politicians – we work!” - The Discourse of ANO 2011

In November 2011, a billionaire of Slovak origin and the owner of the biggest agro-chemical company in the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš, released a document entitled “Action of Dissatisfied Citizens,” in which he criticized the existing situation in Czech politics and the politicians, calling on citizens to take part in an initiative towards “a more just society, and a functional state with the rule of law.” (ANO 2011). The initiative became the basis for the ANO 2011 movement, which rolled out a very intensive election campaign before the 2013 election and finished with 18.65 per cent of the vote and 47 out of 200 seats. ANO eventually became part of the new government alongside ČSSD and KDU-ČSL.

The discourse of the party combined a very strong anti-establishment appeal but differed to some extent from the discourse VV had applied before the 2010 election. The cornerstone of ANO’s anti-establishment rhetoric was a contrast constructed between practices typical for running companies – symbolized by the successful businessman Andrej Babiš – and a supposedly dysfunctional, spendthrift, and corruption-ridden state (run by the current set of politicians):

“My name is Andrej Babiš. In the Czech Republic I employ thousands of people in my companies, I pay hundreds of millions of crowns in taxes, and I’m angry, just like you. I’m angry because since the revolution, politicians of our country not only have failed to lead, but they have watched over the embezzlement of the country. I’m angry that we live in a dysfunctional state” (ANO 2011).

“None of the current parties, none of the politicians who stated that they would solve the most burning problems facing the Czech Republic have been successful. We’re voting for the same people who because of the own interests only make promises and lie [...]. Isn’t it about time that someone goes into Czech politics whom you can trust? Isn’t it time that people enter politics who have some experience behind them and know what real work looks like? Isn’t it time that we all have it a little better?” (ANO 2013).

Creating an efficient, private-sector style approach as the main solution for politics and public administration was reflected in the slogan “I will run the state like a business,” which ANO took into the election campaign. The election slogan, “We’re not like the politicians – we work!” also clearly illustrates the dichotomy constructed in the ANO discourse between the “incompetent” politicians of the established parties and the representatives of ANO (Babiš in particular), successful in “real” life. As an alternative to the politics of intrigue and pointless conflict, ANO promised to “run the state simply, effectively – using common sense” (ANO 2012). The movement spoke of the “corrupt system of political parties” (ANO 2013b), which it framed by economic argumentation and set against Babiš’s own ability and experience managing a large corporation. ANO presented politicians and politics, as compared to the “real world,” as something negative, a realm serving only the personal interests of politicians and the interest groups connected to them:

“Politicians do not work to make things better for everybody, but for their own hunger for power, and the interests of the influential groups that placed them into office and at the top of their candidate lists” (ANO 2013b).

What is important is that the movement’s anti-establishment appeal was not focused on one or more specific parties, but against practically every relevant political party which was blamed for the bad situation of the Czech Republic:

“And the politicians bicker [while the situation in the Czech Republic worsens]. [The Chairmen of the governing parties] Nečas and Kalousek between one another in the coalition; and Bárta with all of them. Sobotka [the Social Democrat chairman] battles with party colleague Hašek [the Social Democrats’ vice-chairman], while [President] Zeman and [former Social Democrat chairman] Paroubek try to get their parties into parliament on a single motivation: to get revenge on the ČSSD. Mrs. Bobošíková with Mach and Bátorá [representatives of small parties] advance the further political career of Mr. President [Klaus], while the lobbyists chuckle.... And President Klaus reigns over all of this and says the corruption is no worse than in the countries around us, and demands hard data.” (ANO 2011, 2011).

Similarly to the VV case, anti-establishment rhetoric dominated ANO’s communications with the public in reference to the economic crisis as well. The worsening economic situation in the Czech Republic thus served as yet another opportunity for criticism of the established political parties and governments (the prescription for the relatively high unemployment rate was “to do the opposite of what the previous governments have done” [APRI 2014]), especially in the context of the expanding national debt:

“Our country wasn’t always in debt; on the contrary, others were in debt to us. It was not always systematically robbed by nameless “godfather” groups and people whose names nobody knows and who hide behind the faces of inept politicians” (ANO, 2013b).

The discourse of ANO nevertheless differed from that of the rhetoric from VV and The Dawn (as will be shown below) in that the strong anti-establishment message of ANO never extended to arguments with a strong emphasis on the need to restore popular sovereignty despite the fact that Babiš, referring to the broad movements that emerged at the time communism fell, said that he had founded ANO as a “Civic Forum for the future” (Česká televize, 2013a). But later, the role of “the people” faded into the background, and was limited to occasional mentions of elements of direct democracy. For ANO, the problems of the Czech Republic were not to be solved by broadening the spaces for elements of direct democracy, but by competent professionals on the ANO ballot, with Andrej Babiš at the top of the list.

Populist claims effectively substituted a clearer profile of the movement in terms of party families or left-right division. This corresponds to the high proportion of valence issues (as opposed to positional issues) in ANO’s election platform, which exceeded all other parties’ space in their respective platforms (Eibl 2014). With respect to ideological vagueness, ANO was to a marked extent similar to VV or The Dawn. Chairman Babiš’s words on this are illustrative:

“There is no such thing as right and left. In the Czech Republic we have completely different categories. On one side are the current parties and current politicians, and on the other side are the voters” (Babiš, 2013).

In sum, ANO in its discourse before the 2013 elections skillfully took advantage of the deepening of the political crisis and laid its populism in a strong anti-establishment setting. The dichotomy between the ineffective and compromised arena of Czech politics represented by the established political parties and the efficient world of private enterprise symbolized by the successful businessman Andrej Babiš became a key rhetorical point of the movement. In this way, the economic crisis was barely a rhetorical rallying point for the movement, but it became part of the anti-establishment dimension of ANO’s discourse. In contrast to VV and

the Dawn, the broadening of the use of direct democracy or more active input of citizens in decision-making processes was not particularly important for ANO.

The end of demo-democracy – the discourse of Tomio Okamura’s Dawn of Direct Democracy

The Dawn was founded by Czech-Japanese businessman Tomio Okamura, owner of a firm that imported Japanese food as well as a travel agency. In 2012, Okamura was elected to the Senate (the upper house) and wanted to run in the historic first direct presidential elections in January 2013, but the Interior Ministry barred his candidacy for having an insufficient number of valid petition signatures. Despite the fact that his Dawn movement was registered just a few months before the 2013 general election, it was able to gain 6.9 per cent of votes and 14 seats out of 200. Strong anti-establishment rhetoric and Okamura’s adamant refusal to participate in any governing coalition left the movement in opposition.

The key element of The Dawn’s discourse was an unending emphasis on direct democracy as the most important element of any proposed reforms of the political system. The current setup of the political system of the Czech Republic – a representative parliamentary democracy with a proportional voting system – was understood by Okamura as the main culprit of the political crisis. Direct democracy would be further supplemented by a reform of the voting system, the option of recalling politicians in office, material responsibility, and the introduction of a presidential system. Only a model of direct democracy was understood as “actual” democracy, in contrast to what Okamura characterized as “demo-democracy ruled by godfather-like party mafias” (Úsvit 2013c):

“The system as it stands is not real democracy – political scientists call it oligarchy – the rule of the powerful. In our case it’s a government of the big

mega-firms, the godfathers, and as their tools they have the individual parties”
(Okamura 2013a).

In advocating direct democracy, The Dawn emphasized the element of accountability and the necessary checks on politicians, and presented a contrasting image of incompetent elites versus the sensible people. As The Dawn’s leader said:

“We not going to trust the elites who tell us we are too stupid to govern ourselves. I don’t know anyone so stupid who would let so much public property be stolen as our elected have managed to do” (Okamura 2013b).

“It [direct democracy] is the complete opposite of the current situation, in which people know that nothing changes, and so they are either resigned to public problems or they complain.” (Okamura 2013c).

The key role of direct democracy and greater citizen involvement in decision-making for the movement was confirmed during negotiations over support for the new coalition’s vote of confidence in parliament. Dawn’s leader repeatedly declared that:

“I support and will allow to function any government that helps us pass a law on a general referendum without exception, so that the voices of the Czech Republic’s citizens become the ultimate voice.” (Lidové noviny, 2013).

An important part of The Dawn’s discourse were anti-establishment appeals (often combined with people-centrism) that made no difference between representatives of the governmental and opposition parties, but which generally criticized the political representation at the time. In one pre-election interview, Okamura explained The Dawn’s candidacy by saying he wanted to curb “thievery, fraudsters, and the political-economic mafia” (Česká televize, 2013b). On another occasion he labeled politicians from the established parties as “do-nothings and mouth-runners” (Úsvit, 2013b). As expressed by future Deputy Radim Fiala:

“After twenty years we see a plundered country led by a select elite of godfathers who run the country without regard to who its real masters are – without regard to its citizens.” (Úsvit, 2013a).

As in the cases of VV or ANO, the topic of economic crisis was rather subjugated to populist rhetoric, in which The Dawn blamed the other political parties on both the right and left whose “false games have led our republic into a vicious circle of economic crises, deep indebtedness, and high taxes” (Úsvit, 2013c) and the bad economic situation was seen as “the result of a failure of the political system created in the Czech Republic after the era of totalitarianism” (Úsvit, 2013d). In his book *The Art of Governing*, Okamura blamed the Czech Republic’s growing indebtedness on “robbery under the governments of the right [and] wasteful management under the left” (Okamura, 2011: 64).

The discourse of The Dawn was similar to that of VV in the sense of the emphasis put on direct democracy as the chief prescription for all the problems in the Czech Republic. However, The Dawn differs by its anti-Roma stances, which was not an issue either for VV or for ANO at all:

“In the Czech Republic the biggest “multicultural” problem is obviously Roma. For those to whom this doesn’t apply, forgive me, but a large portion of them are simply a huge burden on society... The number of Roma in society is increasing, but their proportional contribution to the common wealth does not. Quite the opposite” (Okamura, 2013d).

The negative attitude to the Roma minority pushes The Dawn toward Sládek’s Republican Party of the 1990s, and toward the family of radical right populist parties (Mudde 2007). On the other hand, leading up to the 2013 general election this attitude did not play a decisive role in the discourse of The Dawn.

Okamura repeatedly focused on the moral dimension of politics, which he understood as the most important; as the source of these negative phenomena, including corruption, everything else was somewhat tangential:

“It is mainly the missing morals, the missing politeness, the honesty, and responsibility to others. It’s senseless to pretend that what we need is GDP growth, production growth, growth of whatever else. What we need is to be happy. We need to feel secure – each of us need to feel secure from poverty, from hunger, from cold, from violence, from injustice. ... These things are absolutely independent of the gross domestic product numbers.” (Okamura 2013b).

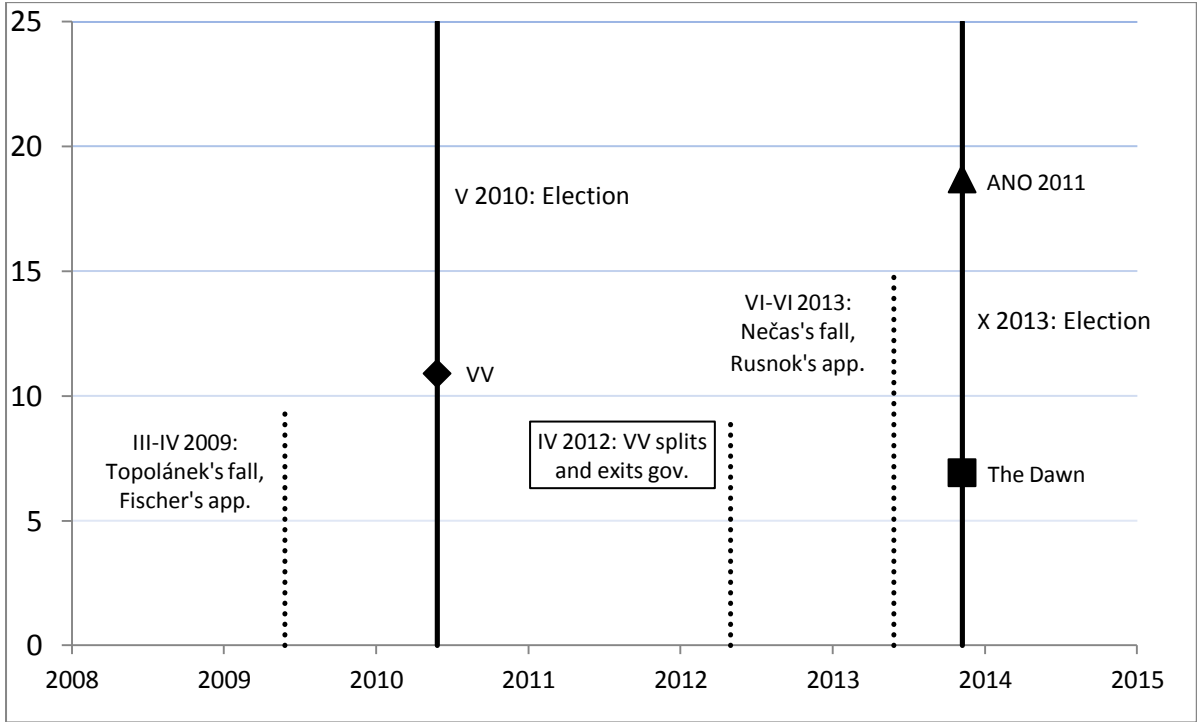
To conclude, the central element of The Dawn’s discourse in reaction to the political crisis in the Czech Republic was a critique of the establishment at the time. In contrast to ANO, but like VV (even more intensively), The Dawn emphasized the need to reform the political system with direct democracy serving in a key role. Indeed, for The Dawn, direct democracy was a panacea for all societal problems. Portions of the populist appeals of the movement were also indictments of the political elite on the poor state of the Czech economy; nevertheless, economic topics were not particularly important for Okamura’s movement. Finally, anti-Roma stances in the discourse of The Dawn echoed those of the rhetoric successfully employed by the SPR-RSČ in the 1990s.

Conclusion

The Czech Republic has experienced an unprecedented rise of populist political parties in recent years. However, we cannot draw a clear connection between the impact of the economic crisis and the growing support for populist parties in the Czech Republic. Even before the economy began to slump, the Czech Republic was hit by serious political crisis reflected in plummeting satisfaction with the political situation and trust in the political institutions. Consequently, the opportunities for employing strong anti-establishment appeal

opened and were successfully exploited firstly by VV in 2010 and later, after the deepening of political crisis, by ANO and The Dawn (the main events related to the political crisis are depicted in Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.2: Timeline of the rise of populist parties in the Czech Republic



The discourse of all the political parties which were included in this analysis took advantage of the political crisis. Its central theme was criticism of the established parties, which the populists associated with corruption and incompetence. Although all of the parties can be described as populist, there are also some significant differences in their discourse. Whereas VV and especially The Dawn promoted direct democracy as the main prescription for the cure of all social ills, ANO did not emphasize direct democracy to such an extent. Instead, the movement contrasted “standard” politics and business practices, preferring the latter.

Moreover, anti-Roma and xenophobic stances became a part – although not a key one – of the discourse of The Dawn.

The question, however, remains whether the success of the populist parties may be due to the economic crisis. I have demonstrated that not the economic but rather the political crisis and significant changes in the perception of politics and political institutions were crucial for the discourse of populist parties. On the other hand, the established political parties were *also* blamed for the economic crisis. Thus, the economic crisis was used as one of the issues in the broader context of anti-establishment rhetoric. In other words, the economic crisis may have strengthened the effectiveness of the protest rhetoric used by the populist parties.

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