



Looking Back on Corruption: Representations of Corruption and Anti-corruption in Czech Party Manifestos between 1990–2017¹

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ABSTRACT This study follows the constructivist tradition of corruption research. Specifically, we analyze representations of corruption and anti-corruption in the electoral manifestos of Czech political parties and movements between 1990 and 2017. In these documents, corruption is primarily construed as a security issue and is framed within the context of economic and organized crime. The causes of corruption, the main actors behind it, and the proposed countermeasures draw on three dominant discourses: neoliberal, centrist, and populist. Neoliberal discourse attributes corruption to the overextended nature of the state, with public officials as the primary perpetrators of corruption. Countermeasures are based on streamlined public administration and personal accountability of government employees in this discourse. Centrist discourse sees the interweaving of economic and political power as the cause of corruption perpetrated by the mafia or lobbyists. Countermeasures are rooted in legal regulation and cooperation with anti-corruption forces in this discourse. Populist discourse provides an updated interpretation of the former two discourses. It borrows the metaphoric labeling of perpetrators from the centrist repertoire and the logic behind the proposed countermeasures from neoliberal discourse. In the conclusion, we compare our findings with the political constructions of corruption in other cultural contexts. We also shed light on some of the circumstances that may have contributed to framing corruption as a security issue in Czechia.

KEYWORDS corruption, anti-corruption, official representations, electoral manifestos, post-socialism, Czechia

Introduction

In this study, we analyze the representations of corruption and anti-corruption that have emerged in Czech politics over the last three decades. Throughout the 1990s (that is, from the “defeat of communism” to the advent of the “global war on terror”), corruption was universally perceived as one of the most significant threats to the global spread of democracy (Ledeneva et al. 2017, p. 6; see also Wedel 2001, 2012). During this time, corruption was

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of similar standing in Czechia, partially due to a series of scandals in the upper echelons of Czech politics which were and still are defined as cases of corruption.

The position of corruption as a major public and political issue is also reflected in the sheer amount of coverage it receives in Czech social sciences in general. Social scientists in the country have investigated a wide range of topics in connection with corruption, dominated by issues such as: the manifestations of corruption under the communist regime and the transformations that followed (Chytilík and Svačinová 2019; Plaček et al. 2021), public perceptions of corruption (Smith 2010; Plaček et al. 2022), measuring corruption (Bašná 2019; Pinková and Jusko 2021) and the link between corruption and social movements (Císař 2003; Školník 2021a). Despite the extensive scope of Czech research on corruption, some have criticized the very limited attention paid to how corruption is generally understood in the Czech Republic, including which actors or practices are recognized as corrupt (Školník 2021b). This also results in the lacking coverage of certain important issues and the use of particular approaches to corruption, namely constructivist-based analyses focused on the discursive formation of corruption in a Czech context. That is, what the concept of corruption actually means to Czech politicians.

Drawing inspiration from international studies (namely Kajsiu 2020, 2021), this text strives to fill this gap. This analysis sheds light on how political actors (in this case, political parties and movements) have understood the concept of corruption as well as its root causes and proposed tools for combatting corruption. We then hone our focus on the shared and distinctive patterns of thought which came to shape these representations.² This text is conceived as a thematic analysis of party manifestos between the years 1990 and 2017. In this context, we pose the following research question: “How were corruption and anti-corruption represented in the electoral manifestos of Czech political parties and movements between 1990 and 2017?”

We argue that corruption and anti-corruption emerged at the intersection of three discourses: neoliberal, centrist, and populist. Each of these discourses localize corruption in different areas of the social sphere, identifying different causes of corruption, the main actors responsible, and proposing different countermeasures. In other words, our study reveals not only one, but several competing conceptions of corruption and anti-corruption.

The study is structured as follows. The first part presents the theoretical background of our study based on the constructivist tradition of corruption research. This is followed by a description and analysis of our data. The third part comprises an analysis of corruption and anti-corruption in Czech party manifestos between 1989 and 2017. The text concludes with a discussion of the implications of our findings for both Czech and international context.

² This sets our study apart from other existing texts engaging with similar data (see Naxera 2022) which focus on a different level of analysis.

Research Background – Constructivist Approach to Corruption

Czech research on corruption is dominated by a positivist approach which many authors use when defining the concept of corruption (e.g. Otáhal 2006; Vymětal 2003, 2006; and many others). However, from a constructivist perspective, the idea that corruption “exists” and can be “objectively defined” and/or “objectively measured” is rather illusory. For Kajsiu (2021, pp. 28–31), who draws on the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1984), the term “corruption” as well as the proposed countermeasures, generally referred to as “anti-corruption,” have a contextually variable meaning; these terms thus serve as classic examples of a *floating signifier* that tends to resist any fixed meaning. Both corruption and anti-corruption become a *signifier without a signified*, that is, an *empty signifier*.

The contextual contingency of corruption is well perceptible in the constructivist approach, with proponents such as Tjnzler et al. (2012) asserting that what is understood as corruption is bound to specific historical and socio-cultural circumstances. For example, clientelism or nepotism, which are typically perceived as forms of corruption in modern society, were commonplace and tolerated practices throughout Europe only a few hundred years ago. The “classical” definition of corruption which speaks of the “abuse of public office for personal enrichment” (e.g. Nye 1989) is thus lacking in historical and cultural neutrality (Ledeneva 2009, p. 77). “Abuse,” “public office,” and even “enrichment” can take on different meanings depending on the context. This does not necessarily refer solely to different cultural contexts, but also extends to different discourses within a single cultural context (Gupta 2005; Pierce 2006; Smilov and Dorosiev 2012; Casciano 2021). Moreover, what ends up being labelled as corruption is not only informed by political figures (Bratu et al. 2017; Kajsiu 2021; Kiss and Székely 2022), but also non-government and international organizations (Marquette 2003; Bewley-Taylor and Woodiwiss 2005; Sampson 2010; Wedel 2012) as well as the media (Tumber and Weisbrod 2004; Lambropoulou 2012; Markovska and Serdyuk 2014; Berti et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, political discourse is the most crucial here, as it is the very discourse from which specific anti-corruption measures are derived. A recent study on corruption discourse in contemporary Russia (Pavlova 2020) points out that the political elite of Russia’s current regime directs their anti-corruption rhetoric solely toward specific individuals (politicians or officials) and not toward the everyday corruption practices of the Russian public. This suggests an inconsistent and unpredictable approach when adopting and enforcing anti-corruption measures. Another example is the “Nagygate” scandal, in which the former Prime Minister of Czechia, Petr Nečas, condemned the police investigation of corruption among high-ranking politicians as the criminalization of political decision-making (see Kupka and Mochťak 2015; Naxera 2021b). It is thus worth inquiring into what exactly corruption means for politicians. What is perceived as corruption by some may be chalked up to “just politics” or a lack of tact by others (see Bratu and Kažoka 2018, p. 67).

Differences in political constructions of corruption are often ideologically motivated, despite the fact that corruption and anti-corruption are often framed – similarly to many other anti-politics and anti-policies (Walters 2008; Kuldova 2022) – as a technocratic problem without any tangible ideological footing. However, according to Kajsiu (2021), the ideological subtext behind how corruption and anti-corruption are constructed can be identified

where corruption is localized in the first place. According to the author, the localization of corruption in the public sector is typically associated with the call to mitigate corruption via privatization and/or the extension of market logic. Conversely, the localization of corruption in the private sector may suggest a demand to limit the sector's sphere of influence. Kajsiu examines the ideological contingency of how corruption is construed in relation to three overtly ideological projects in Albania, Columbia, and Ecuador. He uses these examples to illustrate how different ideological frameworks inform people's understanding of corruption and how it should be tackled.

In the "hard neoliberalism" of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, corruption is localized in the public sector and defined as the abuse of public office for private gain, the failure of the state to provide services to citizens, and bribery. The proposed countermeasures take the form of modernized public administration, more limited contact between the state and citizens, deregulation, and privatization (Kajsiu 2021, pp. 40–42, 2013, p. 1009). In the "moderate neoliberalism" of Columbian President Juan Manuel Santos, corruption is localized somewhere between the public and private sectors. Corruption in this case is namely ascribed to the abuse of public office for private gain, bribery, squandering and stealing of public funds, lack of competition, and state capture. Stronger sanctions, open tendering, and reform in public administration are then championed as potential solutions (Kajsiu 2021, pp. 39–40, 45). Lastly, the "21st-century socialism" of Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa is instead localized in the private sphere. Corruption practices here include the capture of the state by private actors, abuse of private power and market power, abuse of public office for private gain, as well as unjustified enrichment in the private sector. Anti-corruption efforts are then targeted towards combating fiscal havens and the capture of the state by private actors, expanding the public sector, and nationalizing public property (Kajsiu 2021, pp. 36–38, 45).

Our research tackles a similar issue in a Czech context. Unlike the work of Kajsiu (2021), which focuses on anti-corruption policies over a short timespan, our analysis investigates anti-corruption policies over a 30-year period after the fall of the socialist dictatorship.

Data Description and Analysis

Data Description

Our dataset comprises 55 electoral manifestos of political parties, movements, and pre-election coalitions that were elected to the Czech National Council (prior to 1992) and to the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament (after 1992) in the years 1990–2017. The manifestos were obtained by one of the authors of this text from the websites of the political organizations as well as the *Manifestos Project Database*. Some of the manifestos make explicit reference to supplementary materials or strategies of the political party in relation to specific election issues. However, these documents were not necessarily designed solely for the party's election campaign and were thus not included in the analysis. All of the obtained party manifestos were transcribed into a word processor for subsequent analysis. A list of the analyzed party manifestos is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Analyzed electoral manifestos of political parties and movements elected to the Czech National Council and Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament in the years 1990–2017

Election year	Party manifestos
1990	Czechoslovak People's Party (<i>Československá strana lidová, ČSL</i>) Movement for Autonomous Democracy–Party for Moravia and Silesia (<i>Hnutí za samosprávnou demokracii – Společnost pro Moravu a Slezsko, HSD-SMS</i>) Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (<i>Komunistická strana Československa, KSČ</i>) The Civic Forum (<i>Občanské fórum, OF</i>)
1992	Czech Social Democratic Party (<i>Česká strana sociálně demokratická, ČSSD</i>) Czechoslovak People's Party (<i>ČSL</i>) Movement for Autonomous Democracy–Party for Moravia and Silesia (<i>HSD-SMS</i>) Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (<i>Křesťanskodemokratická unie – Československá strana lidová, KDU-ČSL</i>) Left Bloc (<i>Levý blok, LB</i>) Liberal Social Union (<i>Liberálně sociální unie, LSU</i>) Civic Democratic Alliance (<i>Občanská demokratická aliance, ODA</i>) Civic Democratic Party (<i>Občanská demokratická strana, ODS</i>) Association for the Republic–Republican Party of Czechoslovakia (<i>Sdružení pro republiku–Republikánská strana Československa, SPR-RSČ</i>) Green Party (<i>Strana zelených, SZ</i>)
1996	Czech Social Democratic Party (<i>ČSSD</i>) Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (<i>Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy, KSČM</i>) Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (<i>KDU-ČSL</i>) Civic Democratic Alliance (<i>ODA</i>) Civic Democratic Party (<i>ODS</i>) Association for the Republic–Republican Party of Czechoslovakia (<i>SPR-RSČ</i>)
1998	Czech Social Democratic Party (<i>ČSSD</i>) Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (<i>KSČM</i>) Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (<i>KDU-ČSL</i>) Civic Democratic Party (<i>ODS</i>) Freedom Union (<i>Unie Svobody, US</i>)
2002	Czech Social Democratic Party (<i>ČSSD</i>) Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (<i>KSČM</i>) Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (<i>KDU-ČSL</i>) Coalition (<i>Koalice</i>) Civic Democratic Party (<i>ODS</i>)
2006	Czech Social Democratic Party (<i>ČSSD</i>) Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (<i>KSČM</i>) Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (<i>KDU-ČSL</i>) Civic Democratic Party (<i>ODS</i>) Green Party (<i>SZ</i>)
2010	Czech Social Democratic Party (<i>ČSSD</i>) Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (<i>KSČM</i>) Civic Democratic Party (<i>ODS</i>) TOP09Public Affairs (<i>Věci veřejné, VV</i>)
2013	ANO Czech Social Democratic Party (<i>ČSSD</i>) Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (<i>KSČM</i>) Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (<i>KDU-ČSL</i>) Civic Democratic Party (<i>ODS</i>) TOP09 Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy (<i>Úsvit přímé demokracie Tomia Okamury, Úsvit</i>)

Election year	Party manifestos
2017	ANO Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL) Civic Democratic Party (ODS) Czech Pirate Party (Česká pirátská strana, Piráti) TOP09 Freedom and Direct Democracy (<i>Svoboda a přímá demokracie</i> , SPD)

The analyzed party manifestos take the form of textual documents which offer insight into the ideals of political organizations competing for votes in parliamentary elections. Party manifestos, unlike other forms of political marketing (such as political debates or social media activity), present a closed corpus of representations through which the party's ideals are communicated. Barring certain differences in terms of scope, structure and style, party manifestos typically exhibit some of the same features. These features include a diagnosis of present-day society, an outline of the party's political ideals as well as the proposal of specific measures for attaining these ideals (cf. Fertikh 2014).

With minor exceptions, the representations of corruption and anti-corruption were by no means exclusive to any of the analyzed party manifestos. On the contrary, the party manifestos of different political organizations seem to borrow ideals, topics and measures from one another. At the same time, the representations of corruption and anti-corruption were not fixed. The same political organization could thus invoke different formulations of corruption and anti-corruption depending on the election cycle. It should also be noted that the topic of corruption may have been added to certain party manifestos at the last minute without any regard for their overall structure or content. In such cases, anti-corruption measures were proposed without any clarification as to which phenomena were being targeted and what the intended outcome was supposed to be.

These instances of overlap, disparity and incoherence were all taken into account during analysis.

Data Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis of the party manifestos using the MAXQDA 2020 qualitative data analysis software. First, we read and coded all the party manifestos using a combination of four predefined open categories (chapter title, causes of corruption, localization of corruption, solutions to corruption). Inspired by Bratu and Kažoka (2018), corruption was defined by coding paragraphs containing terms such as corruption, bribery, kick-back, embezzlement, collusion, favoritism, nepotism, clientelism and familism.

We subsequently divided these text segments into subcategories based on semantic proximity. For example, drawing inspiration from Kajsiu (2021), the category "localization of corruption" was divided based on whether corruption was localized in public administration, the private sector, or both. The category "solutions to corruption" was broken down depending on whether the solutions targeted individuals, institutions, or the relations between them.

In the next step, we focused on the use of specific terminology and metaphors surrounding each of the subcategories. This required repeated readings of the party manifestos which featured the above categories. For example, when examining the subcategories under “localization of corruption,” we focused on the perpetrators of corruption and their practices. We were thus able to identify three different understandings of corruption, defined here as abuse of public office, penetration, and conspiracy.

For the subcategories under “solutions to corruption,” we focused on the intended objectives behind the adoption of anti-corruption measures. If these objectives were not detectable from the coded segments, they were inferred from the party manifesto as a whole. This resulted in the creation of seven categories of objectives which we defined as: efficiency, accountability, professionalism, regulation, cooperation, depoliticization, and penalization. These categories were either exclusive to a single discourse or appeared across multiple discourses.

Based on the similarities and differences in terminology found for each of the subtopics, we reconstructed three forms of anti-corruption discourse which saturated the party manifestos across the political spectrum for the period under review. In other words, these discourses reflect three patterns of thought used to interpret the causes of corruption, the actors involved and potential countermeasures. It should be noted that many of the party manifestos borrow from several discourses rather than serving as a perfect example of one discourse in particular. In this regard, our study employs discourse as an analytical tool in order to try and systematize the underlying meanings of corruption produced by political actors throughout the various stages of post-revolutionary Czechia (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Kupka et al. 2022).

Analysis

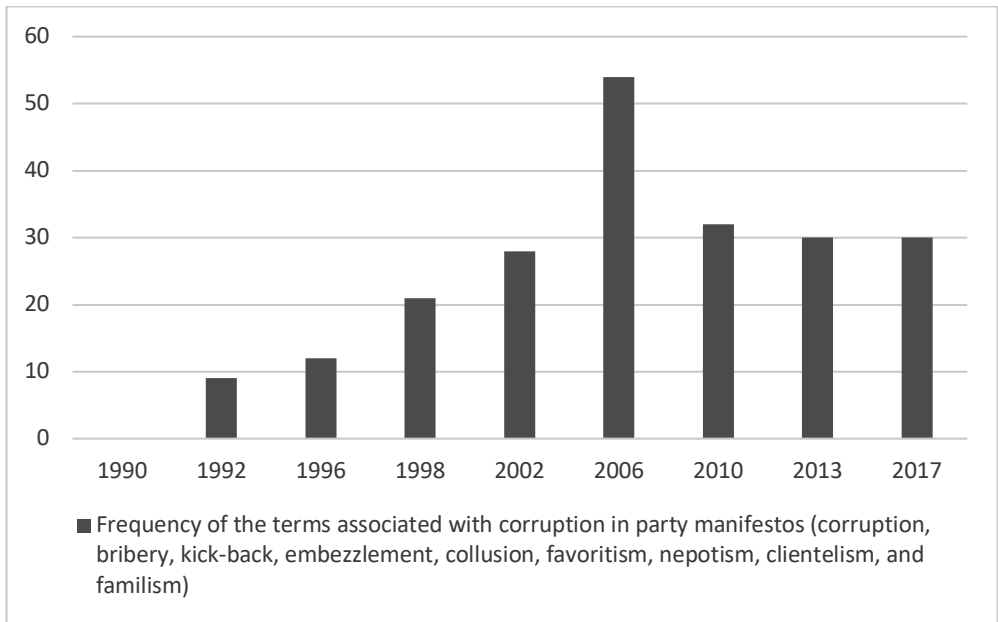
Corruption as a Security Issue

At the beginning of the 1990s, corruption was a marginal topic in the country’s party manifestos, though in 1998, it suddenly appeared in all of the manifestos of the political parties elected to the Chamber of Deputies. The number of references to corruption across party manifestos reached its peak in 2006 (see Fig. 1). Since then, this number has been on the decline with some parties even dropping the topic of corruption from their platforms entirely (e.g. ODS). However, this has been offset by the emergence of new political organizations that made the topic of corruption integral to the very existence of their party (e.g. ANO).

The unifying thread of the party manifestos across the entire ideological spectrum and throughout the whole observed period is the predominant construction of corruption as a security issue. The political manifestos of Czech political parties have systematically presented corruption in this manner since 1992 (ODA 1992; KSČM 1996; KDU-ČSL 1998; KSČM 2002; SZ 2006; ČSSD 2010; TOP09 2013; Piráti 2017), localized in chapters with titles such as “*Citizen Security*” (ODA 1992), “*The Security of the People is one of the Foundations of the Rule of Law*” (SZ 2006), or “*Internal Security*” (TOP09 2017). Corruption is thus framed within the context of organized and economic crime as a tool

(Koalice 2002), form (ODS 1992; ODA 1996; KSČM 1998; ČSSD 2010; Úsvit 2013; ANO 2017) or as a separate, but similarly serious crime (ČSSD 1996; US 1998; KDU-ČSL 2002; KSČM 2010; TOP09 2017). The construction of corruption as a serious security issue on par with organized crime is illustrated by the following quotation: *“The greatest non-military threat which undermines the stability of the economy and the entire democratic establishment is organized crime coupled with corruption”* (TOP09 2017).

Figure 1: Frequency of the terms associated with corruption in party manifestos (corruption, bribery, kick-back, embezzlement, collusion, favoritism, nepotism, clientelism, and familism)*



Source: Naxera (2022)

* Quantified at the paragraph level

At the same time, the party manifestos express a certain dissatisfaction arising from the disparity between the amount of publicized corruption scandals and the number of perpetrators actually convicted of corruption. This discontent is articulated through the following quotation: *“While journalists may be good at exposing corruption, no major case of corruption has ever been successfully brought to justice and no perpetrator has ever been convicted and sentenced”* (VV 2010). This might explain why all of the party manifestos place such emphasis on the supervisory, police and judicial institutions intended to mitigate this asymmetry. These institutions were promised explicit political or material support in numerous manifestos (ODA 1996; KDU-ČSL 2002; ČSSD 2006; VV 2010; ANO 2017). Their

importance was underscored by emphasizing strict sanctions against the corrupt practices of their representatives (KDU-ČSL 2002; SZ 2006; VV 2010; TOP09 2013; ANO 2017).

In order to identify the causes of corruption, the primary actors involved and the specific countermeasures meant to eliminate corruption, the party manifestos draw on three forms of discourse: neoliberal, centrist and populist. Each of them will now be introduced.

Neoliberal Discourse

Drawing on Dardot and Laval (2014), neoliberalism can be understood as a general government model based on free competition and the principle of entrepreneurship. According to this model, the individual is an accountable and financial subject who cultivates their value in the free market without state regulation. Corruption and anti-corruption were portrayed through this lens in some of the party manifestos.

In neoliberal discourse, corruption is construed as a telltale manifestation of the omnipresent bureaucratic apparatus, a vestige of the country's socialist dictatorship which not only managed to survive the revolution of 1989, but which even took on more steam for a number of reasons. However, its power is no longer rooted in the hegemonic position of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia but in the post-revolutionary welfare state and its inefficient redistribution of state wealth. This redistribution is characterized by an opaque patchwork of regulatory measures which spawned complex bureaucracy and the restriction of personal, business, and public administration activities.

The central figure in this construction of corruption is the *official*, equipped with a knowledge of the complicated legal system and tasked with diligently overseeing operations regardless of the interests of other stakeholders. The power wielded by the *official* in this construction is not derived solely from his knowledge of the law, but also from the collectivity of the official body; in this context, the power of one *official* grows in proportion to the number of other *officials*. The larger the collective of *officials*, the greater the room for arbitrariness, including bribery, clientelism and other abuses of official power. In neoliberal discourse, the *official* thus constitutes an unpredictable gatekeeper to the unencumbered realization of private aims. The figure of the *official*, including how it is historicized, is illustrated in the ODS manifesto from 2002, in which the previous four-year term of the minority government of the Czech Social Democratic Party (1998–2002) is compared to the pre-1989 era: *“Under the ČSSD government, the number of government employees and authorities has dramatically increased, as has the power they hold. The relationship between the citizen and the authorities has once again become one of humble supplicant and powerful master. Above all else, this is the reason behind the much-stressed issue of corruption. Not the virtual kind that is merely “cultivated” by the media, but the real kind, which stems from the asymmetric relationship between citizens and officials. It is no longer clear whether civil servants are meant to serve citizens or vice versa. We cannot stand idly by as we regress backwards in time. The less bureaucracy, the more freedom and the less corruption!”* (emphasis added).

In neoliberal discourse, anti-corruption is based on efficiency and personal accountability. Efficiency was thought to be attained by streamlining Czech legislation by weeding out

redundant and opaque laws and procedural guidelines, thereby leaving less room for clerical decision-making and speeding up public administration processes (US 1998; KDU-ČSL 2002; Koalice 2002; ČSSD 2006, 2010; ODS 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010; VV 2010). The same was proposed in relation to the judicial system, as it was overburdened with excess bureaucracy, making it impossible to conduct diligent investigations of serious cases (KDU-ČSL 2013) while also creating space for corrupt practices (Koalice 2002). This was also thought to be remedied by amending or limiting certain procedural laws (US 1998; ODS 2006; ČSSD 2010; KDU-ČSL 2013; Piráti 2017) and secondarily by transferring the administrative workload from judges to judicial officers (US 1998; ČSSD 2006). At the same time, efficiency was to be achieved through the implementation of measures rooted in the logic of transparency, such as ensuring free access to information (US 1998), the digitization of public administration (US 1998; KDU-ČSL 2002; ČSSD 2006; ODS 2010; TOP09 2013, 2017; Piráti 2017), implementation of anti-corruption audits conducted by external auditors (ODS 2006; TOP09 2010), and the adoption of public procurement legislation based on the transparency of all parties involved (ODS 2006, 2010).

The reduction of legislation and implementation of transparency measures was proposed in order to gradually reduce the number of officials, the power they hold, and to increase their personal accountability, for example, in the management of public assets or for the corrupt practices of their subordinates. Personal failings were to be strictly penalized, even through asset forfeiture, as illustrated by the election promise made by ODS in 2006: *"We will enforce the accountability of public officials who manage assets of the state or local government, in the same way that it applies to members of corporate bodies. Whoever incurs any damage will be held liable with all of their assets."* As demonstrated by the above quotation, the call for personal accountability was not limited to bureaucrats but to all public officials, including politicians and judges (US 1998; ČSSD 2006). In this context, the party manifestos also included promises to test their credibility, whether through the call to disclose their declaration of assets, put into practice by the amendment to the Conflict of Interest Act (Koalice 2002), integrity tests (ČSSD 2006; VV 2010), or the introduction of an anti-corruption agent (ODS 2006, 2010). However, such strict controls were by no means to be applied to ordinary citizens, with the exception of those convicted of economic crime (KDU-ČSL 2006), as demonstrated by the following quotation: *"Our goal isn't the mass surveillance of all citizens nor to assume that everyone (or above a certain threshold of personal wealth) were or are involved in unsavory activities, making them obliged to routinely prove the legitimacy of their assets and providing the state with other information that could easily be misused. Such an approach is also very costly for the state and involves the harassment of all upstanding citizens"* (KDU-ČSL 2006).

The principles of efficiency and personal accountability also trickled over into proposals on how punitive institutions should operate. These institutions were not to be given any new powers which could potentially restrict civil rights, but rather were to be professionally and materially bolstered so as to effectively combat professional crime (KDU-ČSL 2002; TOP09 2010). The professionalism of criminals then served as justification for the establishment of special anti-corruption task forces in public prosecutors' offices or judicial

panels (Koalice 2002; ODS 2010; TOP09 2010; KDU-ČSL 2013). The powers of these institutions were then to be counterbalanced by strict sanctions for corrupt conduct among their representatives (KDU-ČSL 2002; TOP09 2013).

Centrist Discourse

Centrism can be understood as an eclectic political project inspired chiefly by the ideas of modern liberalism and Third Way politics. Here, the negative effects of free market economics are addressed and sought to be remedied by strengthening communities, moral accountability, and economic management (Heywood, 2003). Corruption and anti-corruption were constructed in this vein in some of the analyzed programs.

In centrist discourse, corruption is construed as the interweaving of economic and political power, a product of the post-revolutionary economic transformation characterized by a tenuous legal framework that facilitated the unfavorable transfer of state property to private hands. The course of this economic transformation established corrupt standards within the country and thus undermined society's belief in a democracy based on the rule of law. Despite its criticism of the country's post-revolutionary trajectory, this discourse does not cast doubt over the basic tenets of representative democracy and market economy. The proposed measures are only intended to correct them.

This construction of corruption was presented using figures such as the *infiltration of organized crime in public administration*, *mafia*, *fraternity*, and *lobbyists*, denoting various forms of the relationship between corruptor and corrupted and alluding to different phases of political development in post-revolutionary Czechia. The metaphors *infiltration of organized crime in public administration* and *mafia* refer primarily to the (alleged) political tolerance of serious economic crime (such as tunneling) during the economic transformation of the 1990s (ČSSD 1996, 1998).³ The term *fraternity* here refers to the national and local clientelistic structures that arose from the "Opposition Agreement," a political agreement between Czechia's two major parties at the turn of 20th century (Koalice 2002; TOP09 2010). An important figure responsible for the interweaving of economic and political power at the turn of the 2010s is that of the *lobbyist*. This figure is portrayed as the embodiment of someone who underhandedly and by any means necessary influences political

³ *The infiltration of organized crime in public administration* is a popular trope in Czech political discourse. In 1998, it appeared in a proposal to establish a parliamentary commission of inquiry in order to clarify the relationship between organized crime and public administration in the "Olomouc Case" (Zbiral 2010). In 2006, this trope appeared in the title of another parliamentary investigation into information about the "Kubice Report." This report summarized the findings of three cases led by the Organized Crime Detection Unit of the Police of the Czech Republic, submitted by the director of the unit, Jan Kubice, to the Defence and Security Committee of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament five days before parliamentary elections. The classified document was immediately leaked to the media. The circumstances surrounding the creation and leak of the report have taken on a somewhat mythical quality in Czechia; they have been a subject of discussion in journalistic works (e.g. Blažek 2009) as well as books penned by politicians with alleged ties to organized crime (e.g. Paroubek 2011).

decision-making for commercial gain and at the expense of public interest. The centrist conceptualization of corruption can be evidenced by the electoral manifesto of TOP09 from 2010: *“Powerful economic groups together with non-transparent groups of lobbyists influence public and government institutions, including political parties and the media. In certain areas and regions, the influence of such individuals has almost escalated into a kind of privatization of public power. Citizens rightly feel that not everyone is equal in the eyes of the law. This undermines the public’s confidence in the democratic system and poses a threat to the fundamental institutions of a free society”* (emphasis added). Some of the above tropes were later updated in populist discourse.

In centrist discourse, anti-corruption is rooted in the regulation and cooperation of society-wide anti-corruption forces. Regulation was to be ensured by adopting legislation in order to set the ground rules for how public assets should be managed (ČSSD 1998), preventing abuse of the financial system in the laundering of illicitly obtained funds (ČSSD 1996, 2002; KSČM 1998), enforcing the criminal liability of legal entities (ČSSD 2002) and clearly delimiting the scope of activities of lobbyists in relation to political representation (ČSSD 2010; KSČM 2013; KDU-ČSL 2017). The call to regulate the convergence of economic and political power was also perceptible in the justification of some of the laws which were construed as anti-corruption measures in other discourses as well. For example, the Conflict of Interest Act was framed as a tool for controlling the income of public officials in neoliberal discourse (Koalice 2002; ODS 2006), while centrist discourse characterized it more broadly as a tool against *“the misuse of information and positions in the transition of high-ranking public officials and politicians from the public to the private sphere”* (ČSSD 2006).

In centrist discourse, the implementation of anti-corruption was not meant to stem from the unilateral decision-making of government parties but was rather envisioned as the joint effort of society-wide anti-corruption forces including official institutions (government, civil service, political parties, law enforcement agencies), the private sector (enterprises) and civil society (NGOs, the public). This alliance was to be demonstrated by official institutions through the adoption of transparent measures based on open government practices (such as budget transparency, contract registers, online auctions, codes of ethics), allowing for the more meaningful involvement of civil society in overseeing the management of public assets (SZ 2006; ČSSD 2010, 2013; TOP09 2010, 2013; Piráti 2017). Additional proposed measures included the implementation of mandatory asset declarations for public officials (ČSSD 2006; SZ 2006) and legislation to protect whistleblowers (KDU-ČSL 2013, 2017; Piráti 2017). Transparency was also demanded of the private sector, requiring that companies demonstrate good repute and a transparent ownership structure when conducting business with the state (ČSSD, 2006). This also extended to the public, requiring citizens to prove the origin of assets under certain circumstances (ČSSD 1996; KDU-ČSL 2013). Such circumstances included, for example, *“the acquisition of movable or immovable property, company shares and securities totaling more than ten million Czech crowns”* (KDU-ČSL 2013). Furthermore, the cooperation of anti-corruption forces was not limited to national efforts but was also to draw on international expertise and commitments (ČSSD 2006; SZ 2006).

The creation or reformation of supervisory, administrative, police and judiciary institutions was to help regulate the interweaving of economic and political power and facilitate the cooperation of anti-corruption forces (ČSSD 1998; KSČM 2002; ČSSD 2006; SZ 2006). These institutions were to work fairly, abiding by the axiom that “*all are equal in the eyes of the law*” (ČSSD 2006), to symbolize support for exposing, investigating and prosecuting corruption regardless of the social status of the corrupting or corrupted party. In this respect, justice was also to be achieved with the help of new legal tools, such as the institution of the Crown witness on one hand (ČSSD 2006), or strict sanctions against corruption in the police force on the other (SZ 2006).

Populist Discourse

Following the work of Mudde (2004), populism may be defined as an ideological project which “*separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’*”. Consequently, populists argue that politics should not be an expression of elite interests, but should serve the general will of the people.

Populist discourse, similarly to centrist discourse, construes corruption as the interweaving of economic and political power. In contrast to the centrist discourse, the blame for this state of affairs is assigned to the post-1989 corrupt political elites. After 1989, the traditional political parties in government made the convergence of economic and political power possible and were thus to be ousted by entirely new or hitherto unelected political parties unscathed by a corrupt past, which promised to represent ordinary, law-abiding citizens. This criticism of the country’s post-revolutionary developments paved the way for three different political objectives in populist discourse, from establishing a government of experts as in the case of ANO, to transforming the political system as in the case of VV and SPD (cf. also Naxera 2021a), to changing the economic system as articulated by KSČM.

In populist discourse, the actors involved in corruption are described using the already familiar figures of the *mafia* (SPD 2017) and *lobbyists* (VV 2010; KSČM 2013; ANO 2017), though other figures representing the interweaving of economic and political power also come into play here. The most prominent appears to be that of the *godfather*. Godfathers are defined as representatives of enterprises who bid on public contracts but at the same time have ties to governing political parties at the turn of the 2010s (ČSSD 2013; KSČM 2013; ANO 2017). Other terms also emerge in this context, such as *oligarchs* (ČSSD 2013), *covert groups* (ANO 2017) and *corrupt political elite* (KSČM 2013). These tropes also appear in various collocations such as *partisan godfather mafia* (SPD 2017), alluding to the conspiratorial and criminal nature of corruption. However, populist discourse is not limited to the use of metaphors. Personification became a new practice in identifying the perpetrators of corruption: alleged corruptors are even mentioned by name in one of the party manifestos. The construction of corruption using populist discourse, including personification, can be found in ANO’s 2017 electoral manifesto. In the text, chairman Andrej Babiš recounts his motivation for entering politics by associating *godfathers* and *lobbyists* with the administration of Prime Minister Petr Nečas (ODS), which culminated

in the government's resignation in 2013 and early elections, stating: *"Our movement was founded to protest the corruption of traditional political parties that pretend to be on the left or right. In protest of the godfathers and lobbyists running the country through the Prime Minister's mistress [...] Isn't that absolutely insane? You see, and we've been living with that for...how long? 29 years. In 1989 we hoped, and also believed long afterwards, that we would finally rid ourselves of this horrible system of corruption. But we haven't. We're still fighting it today. Unfortunately [...] We know that the government is not really being run by the Prime Minister but by various covert groups, lobbyists and advisors. Go online and look up Radek Pokorný or Miloš Růžička. Maybe then you'll see who's really pulling the strings here"* (emphasis added).

Similarly to neoliberal discourse, anti-corruption in populist discourse was based on efficiency and personal accountability, though substantial updates were made. Populist discourse essentially equates efficiency with transparency. Although various transparency measures were also proposed in neoliberal and centrist discourse, populist discourse rendered them a key element in the organization of public administration and economic-political relations. Ties between economic and political actors were to be made more transparent by implementing measures based on open government (budget transparency, online auctions, online public procurement, codes of ethics, anti-corruption audits) (VV 2010; ANO 2013; SPD 2017) and legislation designed to regulate the funding of election campaigns and lobbying (VV 2010; KSČM 2013). Transparency was also used to frame election promises regarding mandatory asset declarations. This obligation, as in the case of neoliberal and centrist discourse, was to apply to all public officials, though here it also extended to all wealthy individuals, requiring that they retroactively prove the origin of their assets (KSČM 1996; VV 2010; SPD 2017). As evidenced by the election promise made by SPD in 2017, an explicit parallel was drawn between wealth and the non-transparency associated with the convergence of economic and political power: *"We are pushing for citizens with assets totaling over 20 million Czech crowns to disclose the origin of their assets, and unlike all of the other parties, we ask for retroactive proof. If the legal acquisition of assets cannot be proven, a 100% tax will be imposed. Thieves must return whatever they have stolen! We cannot let the political-corruption mafia get rich at the expense of other citizens."* Transparency in the private sector was also highlighted, requiring companies to demonstrate a transparent ownership structure when conducting business with the state (VV 2010; KSČM 2013).

Personal accountability was primarily directed at public officials whose work was to be legitimized or delegitimized through various forms of direct democracy, from the direct elections of presidents, governors and mayors to various types of referendums (general, regional, municipal, intra-party) to the revocability of politicians, judges and prosecutors (VV 2010; ČSSD 2010; Úsvit 2013; SPD 2017; KSČM 2017). Three political parties thus explicitly articulated direct democracy as their primary political aim (VV 2010; Úsvit 2013; SPD 2017). In addition to direct democracy, the personal accountability of politicians was also to be ensured by limiting parliamentary immunity and keeping a roll-call voting record (VV 2010) and the accountability of officials was to be secured via the Civil Service Act (VV 2010; KSČM 2013, 2017; ANO 2013, 2017).

In populist anti-corruption discourse, the supervisory and punitive function was to be executed by the reformed Supreme Audit Office (VV 2010; ANO 2013, 2017) along with new or depoliticized special police and prosecution units (VV 2010; KSČM 2013; Úsvit 2013; SPD 2017; ANO 2013, 2017). In this context, steps were also proposed for preventing the reorganization of special police units designed to cover up the corrupt practices of political elites (VV 2010; ANO 2017). Reduced bureaucracy, new powers, and professional and material reinforcements were also proposed for supervisory and punitive institutions (VV 2010; KSČM, 2013; Úsvit 2013; ANO 2013, 2017). New criminal law tools were also to aid in this endeavor, such as the institute of the Crown witness and effective remorse (VV 2010; ANO, 2013). However, in terms of transparency, measures regarding the handling of illicitly obtained police information such as wiretaps, were ambiguously construed. This practice was approved for use by the media when obtaining such information for the purpose of reporting on cases of corruption (VV 2010) but condemned in the event that police information was obtained by private security services for unspecified, private purposes (ANO 2017). Exposed cases of corruption were, similarly to other discourses, subjected to severe punishment, namely strict financial sanctions including the forfeiture of assets (VV 2010; KSČM 2013, 2017).

Table 2 below summarizes the content of all three discourses.

Table 2: Discourses of Corruption

	Location of Corruption	Causes of Corruption	Definition/ Understanding of Corruption	Solutions
Neoliberal	Public administration	Vast bureaucracy Patchwork of regulatory measures	Abuse of public office for private ends	Streamlined public administration (reduction of legislation; implementation of transparency measures) Increased accountability of public officials (vetting process; strict sanctions) Professionally and materially bolstered criminal justice institutions Special anti-corruption task forces Strict sanctions for corruption for criminal justice representatives

	Location of Corruption	Causes of Corruption	Definition/ Understanding of Corruption	Solutions
Centrist	Interaction between the private and the public sector	Criminally motivated penetration of the state	State capture by the various criminal and non-criminal actors	Regulation of private-public interaction (legislation) Cooperation of public and private anti-corruption forces based on transparency (budget transparency, contract registers, online auctions, codes of ethics) New or reformed supervisory, administrative, police, and judiciary system Strict sanctions for corruption for criminal justice representatives
Populist	Traditional political parties	Corrupt political elites enabling criminal penetration of the state	State capture by the conspiracy of corrupt political elites and various criminal and non-criminal actors	Efficient public administration based on transparency (open government, mandatory asset declaration) Increased accountability of politicians and public officials (direct democracy) Depoliticized and modernized special police and prosecution units, and reformed Supreme Audit Office Financial sanctions for corruption for public officials

Conclusion

The electoral manifestos of Czech political parties and movements between 1990 and 2017 present corruption primarily as a security issue. However, this says very little about which specific practices were equated with corruption by Czech political actors during the years 1990–2017, including who was deemed responsible for corruption, the driving mechanisms behind it, as well as the countermeasures proposed to voters promising to eradicate corrupt conduct. Based on our analysis, we identified three dominant patterns of thought – discourses – from which the answers to the above questions were generated. We defined these discourses as neoliberal, centrist and populist.

In neoliberal discourse, corruption was localized in public administration and represented by the figure of the *official*. In centrist discourse, corruption was identified at the intersection of economic and political power and was represented by terms such as *infiltration*, *mafia*, *fraternity*, and *lobbyists*. In populist discourse, corruption was concentrated among post-1989 political elites who facilitated the interweaving of economic and political power; here, corruption was represented using updated tropes from centrist discourse, where the meaning of these terms was reinforced through the use of creative collocations connoting criminal conspiracy.

In neoliberal discourse, the main causes of corruption were identified as the proliferation of extensive bureaucracy and the growing patchwork of regulatory measures. Here, corruption was understood as the abuse of power by public officials who possess knowledge of this complex system. In both centrist and populist discourse, the main causes of corruption were construed as criminal penetration of the state. However, in populist discourse, traditional political elites were blamed for the penetration. Compared to the other discourses, the personification of corruption was a novel addition here. Consequently, corruption was understood as state capture by various criminal and non-criminal actors in centrist discourse, and as conspiracy between criminal and non-criminal actors together with traditional political elites in populist discourse.

In neoliberal discourse, corruption was to be combatted by streamlining public administration and increasing the personal accountability of public officials. Streamlining here referred namely to the reduction of redundant legislation and the implementation of transparency measures. Personal accountability was then to be ensured through vetting processes and strict sanctions against professional failings that result in financial loss. Corruption was to be prosecuted by professional and well-equipped punitive authorities.

In centrist discourse, anti-corruption was based on legal regulations and the cooperation of official, commercial and even civil anti-corruption forces. This cooperation was to be underpinned by the transparent conduct of all parties involved. Exposed cases of corrupt conduct were then to be prosecuted by new or reformed state institutions in a just manner, regardless of the social status of the perpetrators.

Populist anti-corruption, similarly to neoliberal discourse, were rooted in efficiency and personal accountability. Efficiency was to be achieved through a broad set of transparency measures and personal accountability was to be ensured through various elements of direct democracy. Corruption was then to be combatted by the establishment or depoliticization of well-equipped punitive institutions. Similarly to neoliberal and centrist discourse, corruption was to be severely punished, including through the use of financial sanctions.

Unlike Kajsiu (2021), who analyzed political constructions of corruption and anti-corruption in the context of specific ideological projects in Columbia, Ecuador and Albania, our discourses reflect the more general patterns of thought that informed the anti-corruption policies of political parties and movements throughout different periods of time. Despite the differences in research design, some of the findings presented by both studies—based on research examining three different cultural contexts—can be compared.

What we identified as neoliberal discourse bears a certain resemblance to the “hard neoliberalism” represented by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama (Kajsiu 2021, pp. 40–42), while centrist discourse corresponds more to the “moderate neoliberalism” of Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos (Kajsiu 2021, pp. 38–39). These similarities can be demonstrated, for example, by how transparency is construed in these discourses. In Czech and Albanian neoliberal discourse, transparency is construed as a tool for modernizing public administration. In Czech centrist discourse and Colombian moderate liberal discourse, transparency is presented as an essential ingredient in good governance. Both studies also confirm that transparency is best understood primarily as an “administrative tool” for the implementation of variously motivated political ideals (Florini 2007, p. 338).

Differences can then be found in the meaning of socialist discourse. Certain segments of the 21st-century socialist discourse presented by Kajsiu (2021, pp. 36–38) in relation to Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa can also be found in some of the passages of Czechia's traditional left-wing party KSČM. However, this party's localization of corruption and justification behind the proposed countermeasures are instead more in line with neoliberal, centrist, and populist discourse. In a Czech context, populist discourse appears to be a more salient source of anti-corruption discourse than socialism (cf. Havlík 2019; Naxera 2022).

In addition to international comparisons, our findings may also contribute to a better understanding of the development of Czech politics following the events of 1989. All three discourses offer up an interpretation of post-revolutionary Czech history that is inextricably tied to serious crime. This understanding is aided through the use of corruption figures—such as *mafia* and *godfathers*—referring to specific corruption scandals that attracted considerable attention from the media at the time. This construction may be the product of certain local and global political circumstances.

In the Czech context, considerable significance was ascribed to economic crime, including corrupt practices, even before 1989 (Walter 1988; Kupka et al. 2022). This took on new proportions following the economic transformation of the 1990s, which, according to Czech security forces, was rife with illicit practices (see Kosik et al. 1996). The insufficient criminalization of these practices bred a long-standing sense of discontent among the lay and expert public, which was articulated by the Czech media (Kupka and Divišová 2022, pp. 6–8). This potentially informed the political commitments to address the issue, as suggested by the use of media metaphors and the personification of corruption practices in party manifestos.

At a global level, the corruption witnessed in the 1990s was perceived as one of the most pressing security threats – alongside organized crime and terrorism – to the expansion of liberal democracy following the fall of the Iron Curtain (cf. Ledeneva et al. 2017). The local and global context came together in 1998 when the Pre-accession Pact on Organized Crime was signed by EU candidates and member states. Czechia thus undertook to implement EU anti-corruption measures which reflected the recommendations put forth by global anti-corruption initiatives (Marquette 2003; Bewley-Taylor and Woodiwiss 2005).

In line with current research, our study demonstrates that constructions of corruption are always intertwined with specific historical and sociocultural conditions (Ledeneva 2009; Tjnzler et al. 2012). Beyond existing knowledge on corruption, we could say that corruption has become one of the primary lenses through which the negative effects of the post-communist transition are interpreted. In this respect, corruption can be read as a historical discourse.

Our study also contributes to existing research by highlighting the intertextual nature of anti-corruption. However much we have tried to analytically differentiate the discourses presented in this study, in reality, these discourses react to each other and prescribe to one another; they thus create a tangle of different often interconnected, and even often contradictory, definitions and measures. In this respect, our study also has political relevance. The implementation of what may at first appear to be technocratic measures, such as open government, can be a means to fulfilling various political aims, including illiberal ones.

Further research into political constructions of corruption should include an empirical exploration of other post-socialist countries. Such cumulative knowledge could help gain a deeper understanding of the implications of corruption for the political developments in this particular context, characterized by the recent rise of populist parties signaling an “illiberal turn” in politics (cf. Kube and Loli 2020).

The findings furnished by this study also highlight the importance of media discourse as a source of political representations of corruption, which is well in line with findings from other contexts, where the media is defined as an “*enabler, barrier and interpreter*” (Berti et al. 2020: 113; cf. Tumber and Weisbrod 2004) in relation to corruption. A more thorough investigation of the media’s influence on portrayals of corruption presents another subject of interest when researching social constructions of corruption in a Czech context.

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