



Is there a Pirate Nation, and how populist is it? The case of the Czech Pirates

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Accepted: 26 January 2026
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Abstract

This article examines how the Czech Pirate Party engages with the concepts of “nation” and “people” to assert its liberal and anti-populist stance in the context of rising populist, nationalist and conservative discourses in Czechia since the 2015 refugee crisis. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s theory of imagined communities, Michael Billig’s notion of banal nationalism and work on populism, anti-populism and technopopulism, the study combines qualitative thematic analysis of speeches and statements published on the party’s website (2021–2023) with an examination of 101 posts from its 2021 Instagram election campaign. This allows us to trace how the party constructs national identity and addresses “the people” across institutional and informal arenas of political communication. We argue that the Pirates articulate Czech national identity through what we term “banal Westernist nationalism”, framing Czechia as a rights-based part of “the West”. At the same time, while rejecting opponents’ populism, they deploy their own populist rhetoric, presenting a Western-oriented people opposed to corrupt elites and demanding expert-led governance. We therefore characterise the party’s political style as “anti-populist technopopulism” and discuss its implications for understanding how liberal, pro-European actors in Central and Eastern Europe navigate the intertwined terrains of nationalism and populism.

Keywords Czech Pirate Party · Nationalism · Populism · Technopopulism · Anti-populism · Banal nationalism

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Pirate Parties have emerged across a range of European contexts (see Naxera and Wondreys 2026, in this collection). Most of them, however, have remained peripheral, with platforms focused predominantly on a narrow set of

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Published online: 26 March 2026



issues—digital rights, internet freedom, direct democracy, and transparency—which has confined their influence to relatively niche political arenas (Cammaerts 2015). As a result, they have often struggled to assert themselves within the broader political landscape of their respective countries. There are, however, a few notable exceptions. In the EU, the most important among them is the Czech Pirate Party (*Česká pirátská strana*), which has become a significant actor within the national political arena (Maškarinec 2020; Maškarinec and Naxera 2022; Naxera 2023). The party has undergone a process of institutionalisation within the Czech party system, transcending its initially restricted political community and engaging more extensively with a broader spectrum of political issues, including those arising from new political contingencies. Among these emerging concerns, one of the most prominent has been the growing politicisation of national identity.

In fact, over the past decade—particularly since the 2015 refugee crisis—nationalist politics has gained considerable traction across Europe. This nationalist wave also reached Czechia, where it was accompanied by a significant ideological shift toward conservatism. This shift, which challenges the country’s previously established reputation as one of the most liberal post-socialist states, has manifested itself in the unprecedented salience of nationalist chauvinism (evidenced by the rejection of refugees from Muslim-majority countries), the increasing visibility of the Roman Catholic Church’s conservative agenda in the public sphere, and an anti-EU backlash (Slačálek 2021; Svatoňová, 2021). This development has mirrored—albeit with varying degrees of intensity—trends observed in other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries such as Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary (Barša et al 2021). Owing to their opposition to accepting refugees and to human rights agendas, including LGBTQIA+ rights, these countries have gained a reputation as “rebels against European values”, and the political culture of the entire CEE region has been described as undergoing “democratic backsliding”, marked by a pronounced increase in nationalism, populism, and illiberalism (Vachudová, 2020; Brubaker 2017).

Since the Czech Pirate Party entered Parliament during the resurgence of conservative and nationalist discourses, it too has had to engage with the concept of the nation in the political arena. At the same time, the party has also employed elements of a populist style. Consequently, the question of how the party engages with the concepts of nation and people becomes particularly interesting. In this article, we aim to understand how the Czech Pirate Party articulates these two ideas, as well as how it reacts to conservative articulations of national identity and its politicisation. Furthermore, we also address the interconnectedness of the concepts of “nation” and “people”, thereby contributing to the broader scholarly discussion on the nexus between populism and nationalism (see Anastasiou and Custodi 2024). In other words, we scrutinise whether or not the Czech Pirate Party has developed a distinctive, “pirate” approach to these themes, which is an under-researched topic in the context of pirate politics.

To achieve this, we conduct a detailed examination of party speeches and public statements available on the party’s official website and the party’s official Instagram profile. Utilising qualitative thematic analysis, we explore how the party constructs and communicates the identity of the Czech nation and its people. The findings contribute to the scholarly study of nationalism in Europe beyond the realms of right-



wing and conservative politics (e.g. Perri 2023; Custodi 2024). Additionally, by empirically examining the relationship between the nation and the people, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on less common forms of populism, such as technopopulism (Barša 2024; Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti 2021; Deseriis 2017) and the populism of anti-populism (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2013; Galanopoulos and Venizelos 2022).

Based on our analysis, we argue that the Czech Pirate Party articulates Czech national identity through a clear alignment with Western values and orientation. Drawing on Billig's concept of banal nationalism, we conceptualise the party's vision of Czech national identity as "banal Westernist nationalism". Furthermore, we posit that the party employs an anti-populist master frame in its political communication, positioning itself in opposition to the concentration of power under one of the Czech Republic's richest entrepreneurs—Andrej Babiš, leader of the populist party ANO—who served as Prime Minister from 2017 to 2021. While the Pirate Party's critique of Babiš highlights its opposition to "oligarchic" populism, this stance is accompanied by its own populist rhetoric, particularly its appeal to "the people", who are portrayed as united in their moral purity (in contrast to the oligarch) as well as in their desire to be governed by experts. Consequently, we characterise the party's political style as one of "anti-populist technopopulism", underscoring the inherent tension between its anti-populist position and its simultaneous reliance on populist positing of people against corrupted elites, i.e. oligarchs embodied by Andrej Babiš.

The structure of this paper is organised as follows. The next section, *Data and Methods*, outlines the theoretical framework and methodological approach used to analyze the political discourse of the Czech Pirate Party. The subsequent section, *Concepts*, presents the theoretical foundations on which our analysis is based. The section titled *The Ideological Development of the Pirate Party* briefly introduces the party's ideological background, providing essential contextual information. This is followed by *Banal Westernist Nationalism*, which presents the empirical analysis of the party's engagement with the concept of nationhood, both in its ideological positions and rhetorical strategies. The next section, *Anti-populist Technopopulism*, continues the empirical analysis by examining how the Czech Pirate Party articulates the concept of the people. Finally, the *Conclusion* reflects on the broader implications of these findings for understanding the role of Pirate politics within contemporary nationalist contexts.

Data and methods

As stated earlier, the primary aim of this article is to examine how the Czech Pirate Party refers to and conceptualises the nation and the people in its political discourse. To achieve this empirically, the first part of our analysis draws upon a curated collection of 15 texts that comprise prominent party members' public speeches, statements, and interviews published on the party's official website. The selection of this database was guided by criteria aimed at identifying texts of particular relevance to our research inquiry, especially those in which the party engaged with national(ist) issues and themes. In particular, we went through texts published on the party's offi-



cial website and selected every article that mentioned “Czechia”, “Czech people”, “our people”, “our country”, or in which a “we” was used to refer to Czech people as a homogeneous group. All the selected texts were published over a three-year period from 2021 to 2023. It is rather unsurprising that the majority of texts featuring the aforementioned keywords appeared in the speeches of Jan Lipavský, a long-standing member of the Pirate Party and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2021 to 2024.¹ Notably, a significant portion of his speeches were delivered in international forums.

We further extended our research by collecting data from the Pirate Party’s Instagram profile. In particular, our analysis covers the one-month period preceding the 2021 election, which produced a multi-party coalition government that governed the country from 2021 to 2024 (the Pirate Party has since withdrawn from this coalition). The selected timeframe spanned from September 9 to October 9, 2021. In total, we analysed 101 Instagram posts. We chose Instagram as a complementary data source due to its growing relevance in political communication, particularly among younger voters—a key constituency for the Czech Pirate Party. As a visually oriented and informal platform, Instagram also offers insight into the party’s branding strategies and less formal appeals to identity and values, thus complementing the more institutional tone of the party’s official website.

All data were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis, the flexibility of which is particularly suitable for interpretive approaches (Ryan and Bernard 2003; Braun and Clarke 2006; Gerbaudo and Screti 2017). A theme is an idea expressed in a text (Ryan and Bernard 2003, p. 87), which “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 82). Relying on a qualitative coding procedure, we used the data analysis software NVivo to identify the central patterns in the dataset; in particular, we paid attention to the themes of the nation and the people. During the coding procedure, we gradually moved from descriptive open coding, which stays close to the texts and simply identifies the presence of national(ist) vocabulary, towards more selective and theoretically inspired coding that focuses on the processes of signification of the nation and the people in the discourse.

Concepts

In examining the articulation of the nation by the Czech Pirate Party, Benedict Anderson’s conception of the nation proved especially useful. Anderson conceptualises the nation as an imagined political community (though not imaginary), perceived as limited and sovereign (Anderson 2006). Crucially, the nation is “modular”—capable of manifesting in diverse forms depending on context, political actors and ideologies (Anderson 2006: 4). As such, it undergoes continuous historical resignification, often shaped by political agency. In examining how the Czech Pirate Party frames the nation, our focus is thus on understanding their “imagination” of Czechia, includ-

¹ In October 2024, he left the Pirate Party in order to remain in the coalition government after the party’s departure from it.



ing the values and boundaries of exclusion that underpin their national conception. Moreover, our analysis explores the interplay between their imagined nation and the sedimented meanings of the past.

We also draw on Michael Billig's (1995) concept of "banal nationalism". This term refers to the everyday representations of the nation that cultivate a shared sense of national belonging and identity among citizens, often operating subtly or even subliminally. As the analysis will demonstrate, the absence of overt nationalist rhetoric in the Czech Pirate Party's discourse does not imply a lack of national elements upon closer examination. In this context, distinguishing between "hot" and "banal" nationalism proves particularly valuable. As the analysis will show, the Czech Pirate Party expresses Czech national identity by closely aligning itself with Western values and orientation. Drawing on Billig's concept of banal nationalism, we label the party's articulation of Czech national identity, as it emerges throughout our empirical analysis, "banal Westernist nationalism".

As for the articulation of the "people" in the party discourse, our analysis builds upon the theoretical framework developed by scholars within the Essex School tradition. This perspective views populism as a form of politics aimed at representing "the people" as a broad, powerless collective, set in opposition to an elite characterised as a small, illegitimately powerful group, with political demands framed as expressions of the popular will (Laclau 2005; De Cleen 2017; Stavrakakis 2017). In the context of the so-called Central Eastern European "populist moment", populism is often conflated with concepts such as racism, nationalism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism (Brubaker 2017). This conflation arises largely because much of the scholarly focus has been on relevant populist actors who, following the 2008 economic crisis, increasingly adopted ethnocultural nationalist discourses (Barša et al 2021; Barša, 2024). However, this emphasis risks overlooking cases where populism manifests in forms that deviate from this dominant model, a gap that our analysis seeks to address.

In doing so, we incorporate the insights of scholars examining the intersections of populism with technocracy, conceptualising these intersections as practices of "technopopulism" (Barša 2024; Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti 2021; Deseriis 2017). We define technocracy as a form of governance based on the claim to neutral, evidence-based decision-making, carried out by experts rather than partisan politicians. This notion of technocratic authority differs from other forms of elite rule in its reliance on scientific, managerial, or legal expertise as the main source of legitimacy. While we adopt the term technopopulism to refer to the fusion between such technocratic claims and populist appeals to "the people", we are also aware of the term's ambiguity. In some strands of literature, the prefix "techno-" has been used to denote the centrality of technology (rather than technocracy) in political discourse (Deseriis 2017). We acknowledge this ambiguity and suggest that in the case of the Czech Pirates, the term is particularly fitting precisely because both meanings are present: the party embraces digital technology as a core identity marker, while also mobilising expert-based authority as a legitimising frame in opposition to populist opponents.

Finally, since the notion "populism" often emerges in the party's discourse as a pejorative term to label the adversary, we also build on scholarly works on anti-populism. Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2013) describe anti-populism as a discursive strategy that often generates its own caricature of the populist enemy (p. 122).



Such a strategy delineates political entities into two categories: “liberal democratic parties”, deemed favourable, and “populist parties”, considered unfavourable. Consequently, the term “populism” often functions as a derogatory label employed by liberal elites—including political scientists, journalists, politicians, and activists—to denounce and marginalise political phenomena they oppose, including socialism and communism. Paradoxically, the logic of this discourse may also bear a striking resemblance to that of populist rhetoric. A small group mobilises the people to save them from a corrupt populist leader and his willing servants, who in this discourse occupy a role analogous to that of the “elite” in populist narratives (Kim 2024). Although studies of anti-populism in the Czech context remain relatively limited (Kim 2024; Havlík and Kluknavská 2022), existing research offers valuable descriptive insights, highlighting themes such as the connection between anti-communism and anti-populism (Kim), or the emphasis on technocratic and expert-led solutions (Havlík and Kluknavská). Until recently, however, these studies have paid less attention to the structural parallels between populist and anti-populist discourses. The recent work by Kluknavská and Havlík (2024) marks an important shift, showing that despite anti-populist actors’ emphasis on rationality and expertise, their communication style often mirrors that of the populists they critique. In line with this emerging perspective, our article explores how this dynamic is reflected in the rhetoric of the Czech Pirate Party.

The ideological development of the Czech Pirate Party

Before we proceed to the analysis, we briefly introduce the development of the party’s ideology to familiarise readers with the context. The Czech Pirate Party, established in 2009, originated from the free software movement and activism against internet copyright enforcement. Since its foundation, the party has positioned itself as a break from traditional political ideologies, rejecting the left–right division and promoting a new generation’s political consciousness shaped by cyberspace, encapsulated in their slogan, “the internet is our sea”. The party’s initial primary focus was advocacy for internet democracy and transparency, which shaped both its internal organisational structures and its interactions with other political actors.

From the beginning, the Czech Pirate Party’s ideology has integrated elements of both right- and left-wing libertarianism, with social liberalism as its primary foundation (Charvát, 2015). Early internal ideological conflicts led to the departure of key right-libertarian figures, resulting in the dominance of social liberalism with left-libertarian tendencies, along with a strong mistrust of state power. Ivan Bartoš, who served as the party leader from 2016 to 2024, came to symbolise this alternative and anti-establishment identity; his dreadlocks symbolised a connection to alternative culture and generational dissent.

The Czech Pirate Party entered Parliament in 2017, securing 10.79% of the vote and finishing third. Their campaign focused on anti-corruption, portraying the whole political establishment as corrupt and promising transparency through the use of the internet. Central to their message was a “problem-solving” approach, later developed into the idea of “politics based on data”. While some of the party’s policy proposals,



such as universal basic income, were radical, they received little emphasis in the party's political communication, which instead centred on competence, anti-corruption, and digitalisation. Moreover, they often had seesawing stances on key issues, ranging from opposing racism but rejecting EU refugee quotas, to promoting "ecology without ideology".

For the 2021 election, the Pirates formed an electoral coalition with the smaller centrist party STAN (Mayors and Independents). This coalition, known as PirStan, aimed to assert influence within the anti-Babiš bloc, competing with the conservative Spolu ("Together") bloc, which included ODS, KDU-ČSL, and TOP09. As the leader of both the Pirate Party and the coalition, Ivan Bartoš sought to position PirStan as a competent, mainstream liberal alternative to Babiš's populism. This strategic shift diminished their anti-establishment appeal while reinforcing their commitment to a technocratic approach, as demonstrated by their extensive 900-page electoral programme with numerous footnotes. Additionally, the Pirates moderated their anti-establishment rhetoric to align with efforts to defend democracy. In this context, Babiš labelled them as "neo-Marxists", prompting the Pirates to respond with a solution-oriented ("data-based") approach and to distance themselves from leftist associations.

Following the 2021 election, Andrej Babiš's government was succeeded by a coalition of parties collectively referred to as the "anti-Babiš bloc", reflecting the bloc's discursive stance against populism. This coalition's success came at a significant cost to the Pirate Party. Although the PirStan coalition received 15.6% of the total vote, preferential voting among supporters heavily favoured STAN candidates, resulting in only 4 of the coalition's 37 parliamentary seats going to the Pirates. Consequently, the Pirate Party became a dependent and, at times, politically marginal partner within the governing coalition.

This shift led to disillusionment within the Pirate Party, sparking calls among some members for a "back to the roots" approach, albeit with diverse interpretations of what these roots entail. For some, this meant a return to "internet freedom", yet changes in the digital landscape rendered such demands less pertinent. As the Pirates aimed to represent social liberalism for younger generations, they proposed regulations such as progressive taxation and a property tax that contradicted their libertarian, anti-establishment foundations. Following their opposition to Babiš and Putin's invasion of Ukraine, their focus shifted to defending liberal democracy against "populism" and the "totalitarian threat", although remnants of their anti-establishment ethos and claims for participatory democracy complicated this transition. For instance, before entering government, some Pirate politicians criticised human rights violations against Palestinians and held an unenthusiastic stance on NATO. However, upon assuming office, the party increasingly stressed Czechia's alignment with the West and NATO in particular, abandoned pro-Palestinian stances, and strongly identified with the cause of Ukraine.



Banal Westernist nationalism

The first noticeable observation from the empirical analysis is, to put it plainly, the relative absence of overt nationalism or even the explicit framing of the nation within the Pirate Party's discourse and ideological framework. The party does not rely on patriotic rhetoric, and references to national identity and pride do not have a central role in its political communication, in clear contrast to the emphasis placed on these themes by various right-wing parties across Central Europe. For example, in the few hundred texts we reviewed, only 15 explicitly referred to the Czech nation or Czechia when discussing the collective identity of the population.

However, at a deeper level of analysis, which this paper seeks to undertake, one can identify implicit and more subtle references to national pride and identity within the party's communication. Firstly, the concept of Czech nationhood, along with its sense of belonging, emerges distinctly in the party's commemoration of significant dates and figures closely tied to Czech collective memory. This form of national commemoration is rooted mainly in themes of humanism, independence, and resistance. For instance, Lipavský often drew on the national trauma brought by the totalitarian past and depicted the Czech nation as the victim of foreign occupations and used historical injustices to legitimise Czechia's commitment to support Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression:

“Russian aggression is arguably the most dangerous challenge to world peace in decades. Today it is Ukraine, tomorrow it may be another country. In August 1968, it was Czechoslovakia that was invaded by Moscow-led troops. The suppression of the so-called Prague Spring, the violent interference in the peaceful life of another state, made my country an occupied colony. (...) Russia cannot (...) once again steal the territory of another state” (Česká pirátská strana, 29 June 2022).

Among the most frequently referenced figures on the Pirate Party's social media are Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first Czechoslovak president following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Václav Havel, Czech intellectual, former dissident and the first democratic president after 1989. In their Instagram tribute to Havel, posted on the day of his birth in 2023, the party shared a black and white photo of the former president accompanied by a comment highlighting the role of human rights in the Czech intellectual tradition: “Freedom. Openness. Human rights.³”. Similarly, in their Instagram post celebrating the 105th anniversary of the establishment of the first Czechoslovak Republic (28.10.2018), the party posted:

“Today we celebrate not only the establishment of the state, but also the people who contributed to Czechoslovakia. With their memory in mind, let us also think about the future. We must always honour democracy and humanism. To create a prosperous country that offers decent conditions and equal rights for all. A country that is part of a democratic world and an inspiration to its neighbours. It is in our hands.”



These illustrative examples show how the party constantly portrays Czechia not as an isolated nation with its own distinctive values, but as part of a larger union of states bound by a shared commitment to human rights and democracy. The idea of the Czech nation then consists of an equivalential chain between democratic values, human rights, and past injustices that the population shares as a group trauma.

Similarly, when the Pirate Party discusses Czechia as a nation-state, focusing on the country rather than on the (national) people, it often frames it within the framework of international cooperation on human rights protection. In debates over issues such as same-sex marriage, trans rights, violence against women, or the Child Ombudsman, which represent their domestic agenda, Pirates frequently contend that Czechia is trailing behind international norms. For instance, in her speech on trans rights, MP Klára Kocmanová claimed: “We are one of the few countries in Europe that still requires them [mandatory sterilisations] for official gender reassignment” (Česká pirátská strana, 26 October 2022). Similarly, party member and Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Zuzana Freitas Lopesová criticised Czechia for being behind in introducing the institution of a children’s ombudsman: “This is something in which we as the Czech Republic have a significant deficit, but we should not underestimate children, they are observant partners” (Česká pirátská strana, 24 November 2022).

By framing human rights shortcomings as a matter of national shame, and their overcoming as a matter of national pride, the Pirates emphasise the significance of international competition. They portray Czechia as an aspirant to the ‘club’ of Western democratic nations, striving for acceptance but often falling short in key areas, allegedly due to the years of the populist and corrupt Babiš’s government and President Miloš Zeman. This is evident in Lipavský’s statement: “We want to restore the Czech Republic’s credit in the area of human rights” (Česká pirátská strana, 29 June 2022). By aiming to “restore” this identity, he implies it is something once held (particularly in the 1990s during Havel’s presidency), lost (during the years of previous governments), and now sought after. Aligning with the “West”, the Pirates evoke the “catching up” narrative common among post-socialist liberal elites, who assert that their country “belongs to the West” but lags in the moral-political ideals of democracy and human rights (Kalmar 2022). This articulation suggests a hierarchical structure in the international community, with Western nations seen as superior to their Central and Eastern European counterparts in the semi-periphery (Gagyi 2016).

On the other hand, the “catching up” narrative is frequently balanced by invoking the nation’s strong moral integrity, often through references to collective memory and past injustices, particularly those experienced under socialist totalitarianism. Within this framework, Czech national identity is articulated as that of a historical victim of Soviet dominion which now positions itself as a moral beacon in opposition to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This stance was highlighted by Lipavský in his UN address, where he stated:

“The Czech Republic has taken in over 400,000 Ukrainian refugees, the highest number per capita. (...) Russian aggression is arguably the most dangerous challenge to world peace in decades. Today it is Ukraine; tomorrow it may be another country. In August 1968, it was Czechoslovakia that was invaded by



Moscow-led troops. The suppression of the so-called Prague Spring, the violent interference in the peaceful life of another state, made my country an occupied colony” (Česká pirátská strana, 22 September 2022).

Accordingly, the Pirates’ discourse suggests that while Czechia lags in areas related to gender, sexuality, and transgender issues, it leads in its resolute condemnation of Russian aggression and its unconditional support for Ukraine, which should be seen as a matter of national pride.

Both the remembrance of important historical dates and figures that symbolise a uniquely Czech past, as well as the framing of the country’s identity through the theme of human rights, reflect what Billig (1995) termed “banal nationalism”, referring to routinised and commemorative representations of the nation that foster a shared sense of national belonging among citizens. In this context, while the Pirate Party’s discourse does not exhibit elements of “hot” Czech nationalism, which clearly distinguishes it from the nationalist parties and leaders in CEE, there is evidence of banal nationalism. This is consistent with the scholarly literature on the institutionalisation of progressive ‘rebel’ parties across Europe, which often involves the adoption of non-controversial forms of banal nationalism (see Rojas-Andrés et al 2024, p. 15, for the case of Podemos in Spain, and Custodi and Padoan 2023, pp. 9–12, for the case of the Five Star Movement in Italy).

However, even when commemorating key historical events and figures, the Czech Pirate Party does not merely evoke Czech national identity as a form of banal nationalism. Instead, they emphasise Czechia’s alignment with “Western civilisation”, to the extent that this affiliation becomes a defining aspect of the banal nationalism they project. For instance, the opposition to Soviet occupation in 1968 is framed as reasserting this belonging, while Havel is celebrated as a hero for symbolising its restoration. National symbols, therefore, function less as expressions of the uniqueness of their national identity and more as markers of national alignment with the West. Accordingly, we propose defining the Pirate Party’s politicisation of the Czech nation as “banal Westernist nationalism”. In other words, the imagined community in the party’s communication is simply “the West”.

This banal Westernist nationalism is evident in the party’s discourse and holds a significant ideological dimension: It is infused with Western liberal values (regarding gender identity, sexuality and human rights) that shape the party’s vision of what Czechia aspires to become and what it should represent. It is connected with the idea that these values can be challenged both by non-Western powers like Russia or China and by not fully Westernised European societies such as Hungary. To sum up, the party’s “banal Westernist nationalism” functions to reproduce and normalise the image of Czechia as a Western nation as well as to mobilise its supporters to defend this “Westernness”. Accordingly, the Pirate Party fully adheres to the long-established Western-oriented foreign policy of Czechia (Pick and Handl 2004; Slačálek 2010). Historically, the emphasis on human rights, a core element of the “Havel-like foreign policy”, has primarily advanced a Western-centric agenda, aligning with the United States and distancing from Russia and Arab countries. Since 2014, this Westernist stance has been increasingly underscored by the anti-populist camp, largely in response to the rise of regional populism and, more specifically, Putin’s military



actions in Ukraine. As we have seen, the Pirates sometimes try to fill this narrative with new progressive content (same-sex marriage, trans rights, etc.), but most often they accept the conventional meaning of it.

“For the people, without corruption”: anti-populist technopopulists

When it comes to the articulation of “the people”, rather than portraying the Czech people according to national uniqueness, the Pirate Party aims to resonate with the domestic electorate by characterising the populace as “decent people who desire an uncorrupted government.” Thus, the party puts “the people” in opposition to “corrupt elites”. This approach emerges clearly in their official party statement: “We want a state that thinks about the people and serves the people, not the economic interests of one holding company or a handful of oligarchs” (Česká pirátská strana 2021).

However, despite its professed commitment to civil rights and its efforts to position Czechia as a prominent advocate for human rights in the international arena (as discussed in the previous section), the party, alongside its coalition partner STAN, formed a governing alliance with the SPOLU coalition following the 2021 elections. The SPOLU coalition consists of the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL), a conservative party, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), a Thatcherite conservative right-wing party, and TOP 09, a centre-right party with liberal stances on some issues. Notably, the most prominent figures of Spolu, including Prime Minister Petr Fiala (ODS), have publicly opposed abortion, same-sex marriage, and ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the past, which are precisely the issues that the progressive Pirate Party was trying to push through. In addition to Petr Fiala’s public support for Italy’s far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, these parties maintain both personal and professional ties to ultraconservative religious organisations, members of which work for their MPs despite criticism from some civil society actors. Moreover, numerous prominent politicians within this coalition have expressed radical nationalist stances against migrants, particularly those from Middle Eastern and African countries, starkly contrasting their welcoming approach toward Ukrainian migrants.²

The formation of the SPOLU coalition, which was publicly announced before the election, was undoubtedly pragmatic, and it is not uncommon for coalitions to include ideologically diverse parties. However, the establishment of a viable and credible coalition requires the existence of shared foundational principles or objectives, at least at the discursive level. The aim of this section is to draw on the findings of the 2021 election campaign and point out what were these common denominators that could ensure the coalition’s coherence and maintain its public trust. In line with the Essex School’s theory, we argue that forming coalitions is not achievable solely

² Bařa (2024) highlights that during the refugee crisis of 2015–2017, the nationalist xenophobia exhibited by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) was no less pronounced than that of the populist ANO party movement and its leader, Andrej Babiř, against whom all the currently governing parties later allied. While in 2021 election campaigns, Babiř was frequently depicted as a Czech equivalent of Viktor Orbán, the leader of ODS—often portrayed by the Czech media as a respectable democratic figure—visited Hungary and was photographed alongside Orbán’s notorious anti-refugee fence in 2015. Despite this, the main mottos of SPOLU’s campaigns was: “I want a Prime Minister I am not ashamed of” and “We belong to the West”.



on the basis of ideological similarity among groups. Instead, these groups may also come together within the coalition, or, in the words of the Essex School, create a chain of equivalence among different political projects, to oppose a common enemy, or a more complex constellation of adversaries (Laclau and Mouffe 2014). Supporting this argument, we contend that the formation of the coalition was facilitated by the deployment of an “anti-populist master frame”, which emerged in response to the oligarchic and populist tendencies of Babiš, his mismanagement of the Covid-19 crisis, and allegations of corruption. He became a central figure of critique in the campaigns of most major political parties, including the Pirate Party, which adopted the typical political logic of anti-populism, i.e., a communication style that contrasts “decent, democratic, genuine politicians” with “corrupt populists”. As we argue, while condemning ANO and specifically Babiš as “populist”, the Pirates engaged in populist politics themselves.

A significant portion of the Pirate Party’s 2021 election campaign focused on diagnosing the perceived issues within the country. These challenges that the party identified were corruption, the (legacy of) communism, populism, national debt, and polarisation, and all of them were largely embodied in the figure of Babiš, who became an empty signifier connecting the chain of equivalence among the mentioned issues. In other words, he functioned as a metonym for the broader systemic problems. The antagonism toward Babiš was not merely the result of strategic framing by political actors; it arose within a broader context of democratic crisis, shaped by several scandals involving both the Prime Minister and the administration of the former president Miloš Zeman.

The socio-political climate was further shaped by the initiatives and engagement of Czech civil society actors. During the tenure of Babiš as Prime Minister (2017–2021), a new grassroots movement known as the “Million Moments for Democracy” initiative (*Milion chviliek pro demokracii*) emerged and rapidly gained substantial political salience. The movement launched a sustained campaign, including a petition demanding Babiš’s resignation, and organised a series of demonstrations against the “populist” leader. The movement framed its efforts as a defence of Czech democracy, positioning itself as a response to perceived threats to the rule of law and democratic governance in the country. In other words, Babiš’s government created momentum for the movement and for liberal parties such as the Pirate Party to portray themselves as defenders of democratic values against the concentration of power in the hands of a few corrupt actors. The most substantial of these demonstrations attracted up to 300,000 participants, an unprecedented turnout that marked it as the largest public event since the Velvet Revolution—illustrating the movement’s importance in shaping the Czech political debate. In fact, it took place on the anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, symbolically linking its own “struggles for democracy” against Babiš to the struggle for democracy under the communist regime. The anti-communist sentiment was also a key component of the movement’s mobilisation strategy, as Babiš has been accused of serving as an agent of the Czechoslovak communist regime (Šipöczová, 2023). Thus, he embodied the two main evils in the Czech public sphere: “communism and populism”. Due to the anti-populist atmosphere largely shaped by this popular movement, anti-populism became the dominant ideology of the coalitions SPOLU and PirStan. Despite the Pirate Party actively contributing to the anti-



populist discourse, it also engaged in populist rhetoric in its own “pirate” way (Barša, 2024).

As Barša (2024) points out, the party’s political style can be characterised as a form of technocratic populism, which conceptualises the populace as a collective entity seeking to entrust governance to experts, unlike the people voting for traditional “far-right populist parties” who want the government to be of the people and run by “common sense”. To oppose the “populist” ANO, the Pirates effectively constructed a discursive opposition between the interests of the “common people”, who wish to benefit from the knowledge of efficient and educated politicians, and those of “corrupt politicians”, who lie and steal. Despite the fact that ANO had never defined “the people” in ethno-nationalist terms (Babiš is from Slovakia), the Pirate Party often portrayed Babiš as the Czech equivalent of the Hungarian Viktor Orbán, well-known for his ethnonationalist rhetoric and illiberal style of governance.

Accordingly, the campaign primarily focused on highlighting the party’s “untainted image” and the professionalism of its members. This was demonstrated by campaign videos comparing the English-language proficiency of its members with that of prominent ANO figures, presenting Pirates as highly educated and professional public speakers while portraying ANO members as unprofessional amateurs. In a significant pre-election televised debate, the party leader concluded his final speech by saying: “We will not steal and lie.” Their motto in the 2024 regional elections was “For the people without corruption”. This combination of expertise and digitalisation, together with the appeal to the people and the opposition to corrupt elites (who steal and lie), suggests that the party’s discursive style fits within the category of technopopulism, based on the belief that the “government of the people, by the people, for the people” can be achieved through technocracy (Deseriis 2017). In summary, while it is acknowledged that the Pirates do not construct “the people” in ethnonationalist terms, they nonetheless frame them through the lens of banal Westernist nationalism, as previously discussed. Moreover, they present the people as a homogeneous group defined by their exploitation at the hands of an incompetent and corrupt elite. Notably, these two elements—their populist rhetoric and banal Westernist nationalism—are interconnected, each shaping and reinforcing the other.

Because the party combines a technopopulist style with an anti-populist master frame, we use the term “anti-populist technopopulism” to describe its way of engaging with the notions of nation and the people. Although conflating populism with ethnocultural nationalism is problematic and ultimately incorrect, it is also true that it is difficult to conceive of “the people” without, at least to some extent, invoking a sense of national belonging (see Anastasiou and Custodi 2024). As a result, the Pirate Party’s banal Westernist nationalism provides a symbolic repertoire that facilitates its engagement with populist politics. Moreover, it also allows alliances with political actors who, despite explicitly opposing some of the party’s progressive values—crucial for the party’s identity—share the Western-oriented vision of what the country ought to be. Although it manifests in banal ways reminiscent of those analysed by Billig (1995), the (Westernist) Pirate Party’s banal nationalism is a key element in relation to both the party’s political identity and its strategic partnerships.



Conclusion

This article pursued two primary objectives. First, it sought to analyse how the Czech Pirate Party engages with the concept of the nation in the context of rising nationalist politics. Second, it examined the party's discourse within the so-called populist moment in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), exploring the interconnection between its engagement with national identity and populist appeals. The analysis focused on public statements published on the party's website between 2021 and 2023, as well as the party's Instagram communication, with particular attention to the 2021 election campaign. This campaign led the Pirates to join a coalition with ideologically diverse parties, particularly those differing on core progressive values such as women's and LGBTQ+ rights and solidarity with immigrants.

We argued that the formation of this coalition was made possible by the anti-populist framing that accompanied the Pirate Party's articulation of the Czech nation as "humanist", "democratic", and ultimately "Western". In doing so, the article challenges the dominant perspective that equates nationalism and populism exclusively with authoritarianism, ultraconservatism, and illiberalism.

Our point of departure was the observation that, in many analytical frameworks, nationalism and populism are used interchangeably to describe authoritarian, ultra-conservative, and exclusionary political practices (Barša et al 2021). As Barša (2024) argues, this conflation—especially common in the CEE region—results from definitions of populism and nationalism that are heavily shaped by the Hungarian and Polish contexts, where the populist governments of Fidesz and PiS have adopted unmistakably authoritarian tendencies (Kovács and Trencsényi 2020). However, such analyses, often influenced by anti-populist discourse in liberal media and academia, obscure alternative forms of nationalist and populist practices within the region.

Our analysis revealed that while the Pirate Party rarely employs overtly nationalistic rhetoric, it does articulate Czech national belonging in more implicit ways. When referencing Czechia or the Czech people, the party consistently frames the nation as part of the Western international community. In its discourse, "the West" is a symbol of freedom, democracy and human rights, and the recurring claim that "Czechia belongs to the West" serves as a subtle but powerful assertion of national identity. We have termed this framing banal Westernist nationalism, as it functions as a low-key reminder of Czechia's place within the Western political and cultural sphere.

We further argued that the Czech Pirate Party's alliance with coalition partners—despite differences on issues such as gender, sexuality and migration—was largely driven by shared opposition to former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (ANO). Frequently portrayed in Czech liberal media as an "undemocratic populist" and likened to Viktor Orbán, Babiš served as a unifying antagonist for the coalition. This alignment, along with the specific post-election distribution of power in which no party could dominate or "blackmail" others, facilitated the coalition's formation. Despite their opposition to Babiš as a corrupt populist, we contend that the Pirates deploy their own version of populist rhetoric. Accordingly, the Pirate Party frames "the people" as Western-oriented and as desiring governance by experts and technocrats rather than by "corrupt amateurs". In this sense, the party's political style can be characterised as anti-populist technopopulism—a hybrid discourse that merges technocratic ideals



with a selective populist appeal. Ultimately, the Czech Pirate Party exemplifies how liberal, pro-European actors in CEE can strategically navigate nationalist and populist terrains—not by rejecting these discourses entirely, but by reshaping them to fit a liberal and technocratic vision of democratic governance.

Funding Open access publishing supported by the institutions participating in the CzechELib Transformative Agreement.

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