

Populism through the Eyes of Early-Career Czech Journalists: Dangerous, or Mainstream?

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Abstract: Populism has become a central theme in contemporary politics and media, raising debates about its disruptive potential or normalization within mainstream discourse. This study explores how early-career Czech journalists, who entered the profession after 2011 when Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura emerged as major populist actors, perceive the concept of populism. A total number of 55 respondents completed a questionnaire that combined open- and closed-ended questions. The study is exploratory in design, seeking to map dominant patterns in journalistic understandings of populism and generate a baseline for future research rather than to produce statistically generalizable claims. The sample includes journalists from both public and private outlets across television, radio, print, and online media. The analysis addresses three areas: (1) how journalists define and conceptualize populism; (2) whether they regard it as a threat to democracy or a legitimate political strategy; and (3) whether populist figures are considered more appealing than conventional politicians. Findings suggest younger Czech journalists view populism neutrally, as a pragmatic mainstream strategy, while partially confirming its heightened journalistic attractiveness. This study contributes to the ongoing debate on the relationship between populists and journalists.

Keywords: Populism, Mainstream, Journalism, Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš.

INTRODUCTION

This article is the first part of a broader project examining the relationship between journalists and populist actors in the Czech Republic, a nexus often described as ambivalent. Populist figures are highly newsworthy owing to their provocative behavior and polarizing rhetoric (see Mazzoleni et al., 2003), features that resonate with established news values and the commercial imperatives of media organizations. Yet journalists simultaneously frame populist actors as potential threats to democratic norms and institutions (Stanyer et al., 2019).

The term populist actor here refers to political figures consistently labelled as populist in academic literature and media discourse, whose communication exhibits the core features of populism, most centrally the Manichaeian distinction between a virtuous „people” and a corrupt „elite” (e.g., Mudde, 2017). The two primary actors of interest are Andrej Babiš, current Prime Minister and leader of ANO, and Tomio Okamura, chairman of the Chamber of Deputies and leader of SPD. Despite the growing prominence of social media, traditional news outlets remain a crucial arena through which political actors reach electorates, including populist leaders who portray journalists as adversaries yet actively pursue coverage in mainstream media (Wettstein et al., 2018, p. 477).

Scholarship has documented the complex „love-hate” dynamic between populists and journalists (e.g., Esser et al., 2016; Wettstein et al., 2018; Stanyer et al., 2019), yet systematic analyses in the Czech context remain scarce (e.g., Smolík & Đorđević, 2020). This gap is striking given the centrality of populism in Czech political life since the early 2010s. The rise of Andrej Babiš and his ANO 2011 („Action of Unsatisfied Citizens”) movement marked a turning point: he rapidly ascended to finance minister, then prime minister, and later contested, albeit unsuccessfully, the 2023 presidential election (Suchánek & Michal, 2024, p. 277). A new generation of journalists has thus entered the profession in an environment profoundly shaped by populist politics.

Drawing on a survey of 55 early-career journalists, this study investigates whether populist leaders are seen as integrated into the Czech political mainstream or as destabilizing actors posing risks to democratic governance. It is an exploratory investigation, the first systematic survey of its kind in the Czech context, mapping journalistic attitudes towards populism to provide a foundation for more in-depth follow-up research.

POPULISM AND THE MEDIA

Populism is widely regarded as a contested and ambiguous concept (e.g., Kaltwasser, 2018). Mudde (2017) advances the ideational approach, defining populism as a thin-centred ideology contrasting a morally pure people with a corrupt elite, whereas Weyland (2017) conceptualizes it as a political strategy through which leaders mobilize support by direct, unmediated and often personalistic appeals. Ostiguy (2017) offers a socio-cultural perspective emphasizing style, while Laclau’s (2005) discourse-theoretical approach frames populism as a discursive strategy constructing political frontiers through popular demands. Czech scholarship adopts mainly the political-strategy or the ideational lens, though in political communication, the discursive approach is gaining traction (Křovák, 2024, p. 28).

At the core of populism lies a binary opposition between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite. Spruyt et al. (2016, p. 336) define its minimal conceptual content as the belief in two homogeneous, antagonistic groups, with the will of the people upheld as the ultimate source of legitimacy. Populism is also widely held to be closely tied to leadership and charisma (McDonnell, 2016, p. 720), an assumption that is particularly relevant, given the role of two charismatic leaders in the Czech political arena.

The relationship between populist politicians and journalists reflects the broader mediatization of politics, the convergence of media and political logic (Manucci, 2017, p. 469). Media visibility is essential to the electoral success of populist actors, and even where populist messages bypass traditional gate-keeping, legacy media remain vital in disseminating them (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1113). Mény and Surel (2000, p. 126) argue that populist actors feed the media „provocative and fiery statements, and (...) violent attacks on their opponents”, giving them a significant advantage in attracting coverage.

Manucci (2017, pp. 468–469) further contends that media prioritization of conflict and negativity fosters alienation and cynicism, creating fertile ground for populist messages. Esser et al. (2016) distinguish two dynamics here. Populism through the media occurs when outlets provide visibility to populists, reflecting convergence between media logic and populist strategy (Mazzoleni, 2008, pp. 54–55) and creating a favorable environment. Populism by the media arises when journalists adopt populist rhetoric themselves, promoting the people-versus-elites dichotomy (Esser et al., 2016). Mazzoleni et al. (2003) and Krämer (2014, p. 48) call this media populism, the use of populist „stylistic and ideological elements” by media actors; combined with hostility toward outgroups, it becomes right-wing media populism. Bobba et al. (2025) note that this second dynamic has received considerably less attention.

The relationship is also marked by antagonism. Journalists often conceive their role as that of „paladins” of democracy, defending democratic values against the perceived anti-democratic tendencies of populist actors (Mazzoleni et al., 2003, p. 234). Populists, in turn, construct journalists as members of a corrupt elite, delegitimizing critical reporting while exploiting visibility, and accuse mainstream media of serving establishment interests and deliberately misleading the public (Haller & Holt, 2019, p. 1669).

THE CASE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The ambivalent relationship between populism and the media has taken a distinctive form in the Czech Republic since 2011, when entrepreneur Andrej Babiš, one of the country's wealthiest individuals, entered politics by founding ANO 2011. His populist style has been conceptualized in diverse terms: as valence populism, competing on nonpositional issues such as anti-corruption, transparency and moral integrity while stressing anti-establishment motives (Zulianello, 2020, p. 329); as neo-patrimonialism, in which Babiš stylizes himself as a „ruler-patron of society” whose practices surpass liberal-democratic procedures (Stulík & Naxera, 2022, p. 42); and as technocratic populism, rejecting the left-right divide in favor of expert-led, „apolitical” solutions for „ordinary people” (Bušíková & Guasti, 2019, p. 304). These labels illustrate the multidimensionality of his political identity and the difficulty of applying rigid typologies.

Babiš launched his „anti-corruption revolution” in September 2011 (Pšenička, 2021), entered government in 2013, and became Prime Minister in 2017, a tenure coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, for which he was criticized (Císař & Kubát, 2021). Although ANO won most votes in 2021, other parties formed a coalition majority, sending Babiš into opposition (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). His narrative shifted markedly during the 2023 presidential election, in which he instrumentalized the war in Ukraine against his opponent Petr Pavel, a former NATO general; media coverage largely inverted this framing, casting Babiš himself as the warmonger, and he lost the election (Křovák et al., 2025). In 2025, he targeted the EU (without advocating an exit), migration, and Ukraine, departing from anti-elite rhetoric that had become difficult to sustain after eight years in office. His current politics combine anti-elite framing, valence populism, technocratic populism (advocating a government of experts, see Malecký, 2025), neo-patrimonialism (using institutions to reinforce personal wealth; Stulík & Naxera, 2022, p. 43), and nationalism (depicting Ukrainians and other „outsiders” as threats, see Naxera, 2024), a coexistence enabling him to broaden his base even as his credibility as an „outsider” wanes.

His career has been marred by scandals, including alleged ties to the communist secret police, the Stork's Nest fraud trial,¹ and his inclusion in the Pandora Papers (Křovák, 2026). From 2013 to 2023, he owned the Mafra publishing house (iDnes.cz, Mladá fronta DNES, Lidové noviny), whose purchase led to mass staff resignations over his editorial interference (Waschková Císařová & Kotišová,

¹ The Stork's Nest case concerns alleged EU subsidy fraud in which ownership of Babiš's farm was temporarily transferred to family members to qualify for funds designated for small enterprises. Babiš was shielded from sentencing after coalition MPs refused to lift his parliamentary immunity; his former advisor Jana Nagypová received a three-year suspended sentence and a fine, pending appeal (Bádal & Bartosz, 2026).

2022). This ability to shape mainstream media discourse directly distinguished him from many European counterparts.

Around the same time as Babiš, Tomio Okamura entered politics via the Senate in 2012. He is labeled a radical right-wing populist (Zulianello, 2020), and his career has centered on anti-immigration, Islamophobia, hostility to „unadaptable” groups, most notably Roma, and opposition to the EU and NATO, including advocacy for withdrawal referenda (Vít, 2015). His *Úsvit přímé demokracie* (Dawn of Direct Democracy) secured 6.88% and 14 seats in 2013; after intra-party disputes, he founded SPD in 2015, adopting a more radical nativist discourse targeting elites, the media, and immigrants (Kluknavská et al., 2026, pp. 33–34). SPD gained 10.64% in 2017 and 9.56% in 2021, remaining in opposition, and its anti-Roma messaging resulted in a court-imposed fine of three million Czech crowns for incitement to hatred.² Historically characterized by limited coalition potential (Křovák, 2026), SPD nonetheless entered government after the 2025 elections through party-aligned expert ministers, following its merger with Trikolora, the Free Citizens Party, and PRO.

Other high-ranking politicians have also been characterized as populists, including former President Miloš Zeman (2013–2023), who declared his intention to serve as president of the „lower ten million”, contrasting himself with the urban elites he pejoratively termed the „Prague Café” (Buben & Kouba, 2023). In 2017, Zeman met Vladimir Putin in Beijing and remarked that “there are too many journalists and there is a need to liquidate [them]” (Heřmanová & Drahekoupil, 2017). This statement underscores another dimension of the fraught relationship between (populist) actors and journalists.

The focus on Babiš and Okamura is particularly pertinent at present. Following his defeat in the 2023 presidential elections, ANO won every subsequent election, including the 2024 European Parliament elections, after which it co-founded the Patriots for Europe group, the third-largest bloc in the Parliament despite a „cordon sanitaire” imposed by the mainstream European parties (Just, 2025). ANO then won the 2025 general election with a record 34.51% and formed a government with Okamura’s SPD and Motorists for Themselves (Machálková, 2025), a coalition condemned by the so-called „democratic bloc” under former Prime Minister Fiala as an alliance of „populists and extremists” (Pánik, 2025). The new government adopted an openly adversarial stance towards journalists, with Babiš regularly targeting the media at his press conferences and in his Sunday social media videos, prompting more than 20 editors-in-chief of major Czech outlets to issue a joint critical response (Seznam Zprávy, 2026). At the

² In June 2026, a court fined SPD three million Czech crowns for incitement to hatred through racist electoral posters used in the 2024 campaign (Bádal, 2026). Okamura, originally a co-defendant, was shielded by parliamentary immunity gained after the 2025 elections, as Babiš was in the Stork’s Nest case.

time of writing, the government was also advancing a proposal to abolish the public service media license fee in favor of direct state financing, a reform that drew significant scholarly criticism (Urbáníková et al., 2026).

The nexus has been studied comparatively. Stanyer et al. (2019, pp. 36–46) found populism framed predominantly negatively across 13 countries; Czech journalists associated it with strategic communication, identified Babiš and Zeman as the main figures, and named urban elites, intellectuals, mainstream media, and the EU among its targets (p. 41). That study covered only four outlets, whereas the present paper incorporates journalists from 23 organizations. A survey of Czech scholars specializing in populism further revealed widespread skepticism about how the concept is handled in journalism: 63.6% considered Czech journalists to use the term „rather inaccurately” and a further 18.2% described their usage as „absolutely inaccurate” (Křovák, 2024, p. 30). As Stanyer et al. (2019, p. 35) stress, journalists significantly shape public discourse. This study does not assess definitional correctness but rather illuminates how Czech journalists perceive populism and how they contribute to its representation.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The dataset is derived from a questionnaire administered via Google Forms to Czech journalists who began their careers after Andrej Babiš entered politics, with data collected between May 9 and June 18, 2025. The initial target of 35 responses was adjusted, following consultation with the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (WJS) project coordinator, to 10% of the relevant population (≈48 individuals), and was exceeded: 52 journalists from 23 national outlets and three freelancers. The questionnaire combined closed-ended, open-ended, and five-point Likert-type questions.

A pilot study with eight journalists preceded the main survey. Published through the non-peer-reviewed European Journalism Observatory (Křovák, 2025), it used only open-ended questions to capture spontaneous understandings of populism prior to any structured instrument. Although it did not ask whether Babiš and Okamura were perceived as mainstream actors, respondents spontaneously described them as such. This unanticipated pattern warranted the inclusion of structured Likert-type items measuring mainstreaming and democratic threat, following the empirical logic of the pilot phase and consistent with established mixed-methods practice (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

As Reja et al. (2003, p. 161) note, open-ended questions capture spontaneous responses, whereas closed-ended ones restrict answers to predefined categories. Two closed-ended items were included: the general evaluation of populism (negative, neutral, or positive), and whether populists attract disproportionate journalistic

attention („yes, always”, „yes, in some cases”, „no”). Both were followed by open-ended prompts requiring elaboration, as were personal definitions of populism and explanations for the negative or neutral assessments (no respondent categorized populism positively). Further open-ended questions asked participants to name politicians perceived as populist, and those not usually labeled populist but employing populist rhetoric. Such items minimized researcher influence and diversified data quality (Reja et al., 2003, p. 169). Coding was manual and inductive, with categories emerging from the data rather than imposed prior to analysis (Thomas, 2006, p. 238), then quantified to capture prevalence, while illustrative quotations provide contextual depth.

Respondents also completed six Likert-type items on a five-point scale from „strongly agree” to „strongly disagree”. Following Koo and Yang (2025), these are individual Likert-type items rather than a composite scale: each measures a distinct attitudinal dimension, such as the perceived mainstreaming of Babiš and Okamura or the perceived threat of populism to democracy. Individual analysis is appropriate, and indeed necessary, where items are unique and measure phenomena that cannot be meaningfully combined (Clason & Dormody, 1994, p. 31), so the approach is descriptive, reporting frequencies and percentage distributions per category rather than composite scores or parametric statistics (Koo & Yang, 2025, p. 6). A five-point format balances detail against respondent effort (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014, p. 5).

The study poses three research questions:

- RQ1: How is the phenomenon of populism conceptualized by early-career Czech journalists?
- RQ2: How do populism and mainstream politics overlap in the Czech Republic in the early-career Czech journalists’ perspective?
- RQ3: To what extent are populist actors perceived as more appealing by early-career Czech journalists?

SAMPLE

The empirical foundation comprises 55 journalists employed exclusively in nationwide Czech media who began their careers after 2011, the year Andrej Babiš entered politics. This criterion ensures that all respondents formed professional identities within a media environment already reshaped by populism, capturing a cohort whose routines and perceptions evolved in direct interaction with populist governance, rhetoric, and media strategies. The sample is further limited to journalists covering domestic politics, foreign affairs, and business, the domains most directly affected by populist discourse; lifestyle, sports, culture, and regional reporters were excluded.

The Czech journalistic population is estimated at 2,150 (Worlds of Journalism Study, n.d.); since 18% are aged 18 to 29 and 27% fall within 30 to 39 (Němcová Tejkalová et al., 2025), the relevant pool narrows to about 968. Following consultation with Alice Němcová Tejkalová, a co-coordinator of the WJS, a qualified estimate excluding regional, sports, culture, and crime reporters halves this, yielding roughly 480. The collected sample of 55 thus represents around 11.5% of this group, a conservative figure given that entry into the profession after 2011 effectively excludes journalists above 35 years of age or significantly limits the number of journalists from this sub-group. The questionnaire was sent to 140 journalists (30% of the target), with a response rate of 39.3%. Non-probability sampling methods were employed since no comprehensive database of Czech journalists exists; the author relied on professional networks, snowball sampling, and staff lists, so self-selection bias cannot be excluded.

The sample reflects the institutional and ideological diversity of Czech nationwide media, spanning television, radio, print, and online formats. Public service broadcasters (Česká televize, Český rozhlas) account for 10 respondents, alongside private broadcasters (TV Nova, CNN Prima News), conservative (*Echo24*), liberal (*Deník N*), right-wing (*Hrot24*), and left-wing (*Deník Referendum*) outlets, mass-market platforms (*Seznam Zprávy*, *iDnes.cz*, *Blesk*), business-oriented outlets (*E15*, *Forbes*, *CzechCrunch*), and a specialized environmental medium (*Obnovitelně.cz*), with three freelancers likewise included. Demographic and professional information is summarised in Table 1.³

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample (N = 55)

Variable	Distribution	Notes
Age	20–33 years; Mean 27.22; Median 27 (15 respondents, 27.3%, aged 27).	A relatively homogeneous group.
Gender	Male: 52.7%; Female: 47.3%; Other: 0%.	WJS3 estimates 56.7% male, 43.3% female.
Education	56.4% university degree (media focus); 25.5% university degree (non-media); 3.6% post-secondary vocational school; 14.5% secondary education.	Over four-fifths hold a university degree.
Focus of reporting	Domestic politics: 50.9%; Foreign politics: 30.9%; Business: 18.2%.	Beats most directly shaped by political discourse.
Experience	0.5–10 years; Mean ≈ 5.35; Median 5.	A generation formed after 2011.

Source: Own elaboration

³ The same respondents also completed a parallel set of questions addressing their perceptions of the role of journalism. This second dataset was presented at the 2025 MEDIG conference and is currently under peer review as a separate manuscript.

RESULTS

A total of 61.8% of the respondents perceive populism as a neutral phenomenon, an ordinary part of politics, whereas 38.2% view it as negative and threatening to democracy. None evaluates populism positively. These proportions remain consistent across education levels: 62.5% of those with secondary education, 61.3% of university graduates in media-related fields, and 57.1% of graduates from other disciplines consider populism neutral. A modest gender difference appears, with 34.5% of male respondents versus 42.3% of female respondents seeing populism as negative. A follow-up Likert-type question revealed that 52.7% of the journalists „strongly agreed” or „agreed” that populism poses a danger to democracy (see Figure 1).

Those who view populism negatively argue that it erodes respect for democratic institutions and fosters societal division. As Respondent 47 noted: *„Society is held together, among other things, by shared values. Yet these values are gradually disappearing among populists, as their strategies are designed to offer supporters whatever happens to be ‘in vogue’ at the moment. I would sum up populism with the saying: ‘whichever way the wind blows, that is the way I will go.’”*

Respondents’ definitions varied considerably. Only one explicitly cited Mudde, labeling populism a (thin) ideology, while nine (16.4%) defined it as a political strategy. The most common view, expressed by 32 respondents (58.2%), was that populism seeks to maximize voter support by any means. As Respondent 12 stated: *„(Populism is) a political strategy that subordinates everything to pleasing voters.”* Respondent 44 emphasized the role of opinion polls, with populists using topics popular among voters despite their unreality or the concealment of their consequences.

A second recurrent theme was oversimplification: 26 journalists argued that populists offer overly simple solutions to complex problems, 20 highlighted the division of „us” versus „them”, and 19 named „the people” and 18 „the elite” as key categories. Respondent 4 offered a comprehensive definition: *„Populism essentially divides society into a kind of vague pure people and an equally vague malevolent corrupt elite. Populists identify themselves as a kind of warriors on behalf of these people, their discourse involves simplifying complex problems, blaming others (elites) for these problems, and offering simple and often unrealistic solutions.”*

Eighteen respondents underscored lying and empty promises as central features. Respondent 18 put it directly: *„Populists lie and distort the facts.”* Respondent 17 highlighted another difficulty: *„Not every citizen can recognize that this is populism.”* Nine respondents similarly emphasized the subtlety and unrecognizability of populism for „ordinary people”. Other aspects mentioned at least five times included manipulation (8), ignoring relevant issues (6), and focusing on irrelevant topics (5).

Respondents also identified actors they regard as populist. Andrej Babiš was mentioned 52 times, followed by Tomio Okamura (42) and Donald Trump (12), for a total of 24 figures named. Former president Miloš Zeman was mentioned only once, while Filip Turek, an MP for the Motorists for Themselves, was mentioned 10 times. A further 43 politicians were identified as not typically classified as populist but employing elements of populist discourse; nine were mentioned more than once, with Petr Fiala, prime minister at the time of the data collection, cited most frequently (18 times) and labeled as populist on five occasions (see Table 2).

Table 2. Political actors mentioned more than twice in the questionnaire

Populist politician	Mentions	Non-populist politician	Mentions
Andrej Babiš (ANO)	52 (94.5%)	Petr Fiala (ODS)	18 (32.7%)
Tomio Okamura (SPD)	42 (76.4%)	Vít Rakušan (Mayors and Independents)	11 (20.0%)
Donald Trump	12 (21.8%)	Marian Jurečka (Christian Democrats)	7 (12.7%)
Filip Turek (Motorists for Themselves)	10 (18.2%)	Jana Maláčová (SOCDEM)	6 (10.9%)
Alena Schillerová (ANO)	7 (12.7%)	Danuše Nerudová (STAN)	4 (7.3%)
Kateřina Konečná (KSČM)	7 (12.7%)	Jan Grolich (Christian Democrats), Emmanuel Macron, Ivan Bartoš (Pirates)	3 (5.5%)
Jana Maláčová (SOCDEM)	5 (9.1%)		
Petr Fiala (ODS)	5 (9.1%)		
Viktor Orbán	4 (7.3%)		

Source: Own elaboration

Whilst no substantial gender differences appeared in the overall perception of populism, female respondents more consistently identified Okamura as a populist (84.6% vs. 69.0%) and named Kateřina Konečná, chair of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, nearly three times as frequently as men (19.2% vs. 6.9%), suggesting a broader application of the label across party lines. These differences are not statistically significant, given the sample size, but point to a fruitful avenue for future research on gender and political labeling in journalism.

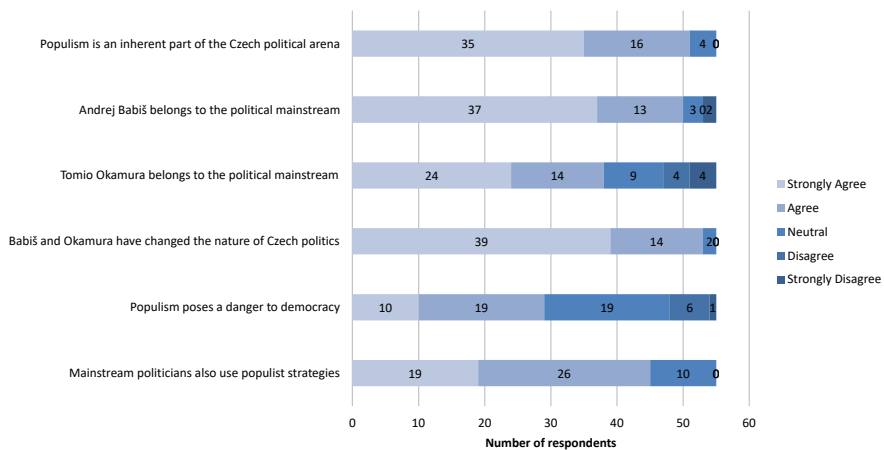
Chi-square tests and a Mann-Whitney U test assessed whether these patterns varied across subgroups, examining perception of populism and perceived media attractiveness by gender, education, reporting focus, and experience. None yielded statistically significant differences (all $p > 0.05$), suggesting that

the dominant pattern, populism as a neutral, mainstream phenomenon with conditional journalistic attractiveness, is consistent across the sample.

In response to RQ2, 14 journalists stated that populism has always been present in the Czech political arena, and 9 argued that even mainstream parties employ populist strategies. The Likert-type items support these claims: 51 of 55 (92.7%) strongly agreed or agreed that populism is an inherent feature of Czech politics, and most affirmed that mainstream politicians use it. Thirty-seven respondents (67.3%) strongly agreed that Babiš belongs to the political mainstream, and 24 (43.6%) said the same of Okamura. The highest proportion of journalists (strongly) agreed that both leaders had reshaped the Czech political arena.

Respondent 2 observed: „Populism is currently a standard part of mainstream domestic and global politics. While it has always existed to some extent, it does not necessarily pose a threat to democracy. For example, the Czech Republic’s defense issues are not at risk under the ANO movement’s government. However, a populist government will simply not communicate about them.” Despite criticism of his foreign policy, Babiš has consistently insisted on remaining in the EU and NATO.

Figure 1. Journalists’ Agreement with Six Statements on Populism and Its Key Actors (N = 55)



Source: Own elaboration

Five journalists added that the duty to provide context makes populists more attractive as targets for polemics. Respondent 4 stressed incumbency rather than populism per se: „Populists are more attractive if populism is not the only thing that makes them interesting. For example, Andrej Babiš is written about more because he is a populist, but he was also the prime minister and leads the strongest movement...” adding that Tomio Okamura in the past lacked coalition potential was thus not as interesting for journalists.

Turning to RQ3, 14.8% of journalists stated that populists are „always” more attractive to the media, 68.5% „in some cases,” and 16.7% not at all. Twenty-two respondents agreed that populists behave more outrageously than mainstream politicians, while 28 confirmed that such behavior fuels clickbait headlines. Other explanations, such as populists being easier to reach, were mentioned only three to five times. As Respondent 13 put it: *„An annoying loudmouth always attracts more attention than a calm pragmatist.”* Respondent 36 elaborated: *„The media landscape has changed, and content is largely determined by how people click on texts. Populists make strong statements, attract attention, and so they often receive much more attention.”* Respondents 17, 31, and 32 agreed that traditional politicians’ more measured style makes them less appealing to readers.

DISCUSSION

The data for RQ1 show that younger Czech journalists rarely engage with academic definitions of populism. Only one respondent explicitly drew upon the ideational approach advanced by Mudde (2017), while a larger group conceptualized populism in terms of strategy (Weyland, 2017). The dominant understanding was that populism represents a pragmatic technique to maximize electoral support by adapting messages to voter preferences, frequently at the expense of coherence, feasibility, or truth, an interpretation resonating most closely with Weyland’s approach. Other recurrent themes included oversimplification, the binary opposition of „the people” versus „the elite” (cf. Spruyt et al., 2016), and empty promises, alongside dependence on polls and emotionally charged rhetoric, which align with the literature on the communicative style of populism (e.g., Ostiguy, 2017; Manucci, 2017). Respondents did not reproduce more theoretically sophisticated approaches such as Laclau’s (2005) framework, nor did they mention charismatic leadership. This predominance of pragmatic descriptions may reflect journalists drawing on their experience covering daily politics rather than on political theory, and may indicate a generational normalization of populism.

The findings for RQ2 suggest that early-career journalists overwhelmingly consider populism a fundamental aspect of Czech politics, with over 90% agreeing that it is part of the political arena (see Figure 1) and a majority placing both Babiš and Okamura in the mainstream. This contrasts with earlier findings by Stanyer et al. (2019), in which Czech journalists described populism more negatively and identified Miloš Zeman as a key figure. Zeman’s absence here reflects both his retirement from active politics and the fact that a younger generation now perceives populism less as a dangerous anomaly than as an ordinary aspect of democratic competition. These findings echo arguments about the

mainstreaming of populism (Bušíková & Guasti, 2019; Schwörer, 2021; Stulík & Naxera, 2022), and several respondents stressed that mainstream parties, including the traditional party ODS, employ populist communication strategies, a perception also noted by Křovák and Charvát (2022). Populism is thus no longer associated solely with actors on the political margins but constitutes a common rhetorical repertoire across party lines. Further research could examine how this relates to the long tenure of Babiš as minister of finance and prime minister, which accustomed journalists and the public to populist styles of communication, and whether the „Anti-Babiš” strategies of his opponents, grounded in personalized critique and polarizing rhetoric, themselves contributed to the normalization of populist discourse.

The data confirm that populists are regarded as more attractive media subjects, though not unconditionally: 68.5% indicated they are „sometimes” more attractive, while only 14.8% considered them always more appealing. Journalists cited their tendency to behave provocatively, provide quotable soundbites and make scandalous claims, all of which fulfill established news values of conflict, negativity, and immediacy (cf. Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Esser et al., 2016). Respondents repeatedly stressed the economic pressures facing Czech newsrooms, where content is increasingly driven by digital clicks and populists are perceived as useful sources of attention-grabbing material, which resonates with Esser et al.’s (2016) argument that populist figures are attractive not only because of their political significance but because they align with the commercial imperatives of news production. Several respondents also emphasized that attractiveness depends not solely on populist style but on incumbency and political relevance: Babiš, as a prime minister and leader of the largest parliamentary party, inevitably draws more coverage than Okamura, who, despite becoming the chair of the Chamber of Deputies, remained much less relevant in real decision-making. Journalistic attention to populists is therefore mediated both by structural factors of newsworthiness and by the broader political context.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals a paradoxical stance among early-career Czech journalists. They conceptualize populism as a rather neutral phenomenon, a pragmatic strategy rather than a threat to democracy, yet acknowledge that it can be dangerous, with more than half agreeing that it undermines democratic norms (see Figure 1). This duality, called a love-hate relationship by the author, reflects the ambivalence documented in comparative studies (Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Wettstein et al., 2018) but suggests that the normalization of populism may be more advanced in the Czech context.

Such normalization might shape how journalists report on politics: if populism is understood as ordinary, journalists may be less inclined to critically interrogate its consequences; alternatively, familiarity may enhance their critical literacy, enabling them to detect manipulative strategies more easily. Distinguishing between these possibilities requires further research, as does the question of how journalists' understandings of populism influence actual reporting practices. Content analysis could reveal whether Czech news organizations reproduce populist frames, resist them, or combine both (cf. Bobba et al., 2025), while comparison between older and younger journalists would illuminate generational differences and cross-country research would show whether the normalization observed here is specific to the Czech media environment or reflects a broader European trend (e.g., Wettstein et al., 2018). More attention should also be paid to the economic conditions of Czech journalism and their role in amplifying or constraining populist visibility, and researchers should revisit the case to see how journalists react to the aggressive behavior of Babiš's new government.

As an exploratory study, the findings should be understood as a first systematic mapping rather than a definitive account; their value lies in identifying patterns and raising questions that future research can pursue with greater depth. In sum, early-career Czech journalists perceive populism primarily as a political strategy, view it as deeply integrated into mainstream politics, and acknowledge its particular media attractiveness. Their perspectives highlight the normalization of populism within the Czech political arena and raise important questions about journalism's future role in shaping democratic discourse.

Still, the findings of this study must be interpreted in light of certain limitations. First, coding was conducted manually and solely by one person, which may introduce a degree of subjectivity, yet the limited number of open-ended questions made consistent coding feasible without multiple coders; such single-researcher inductive coding is well established in small-N studies aiming to identify recurring patterns rather than statistically generalizable claims (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, responses were translated from Czech into English, which might have caused some loss of nuance without compromising the substance of the data. Open-ended questions also yield more episodic responses than semi-structured interviews, the methodology of the closest comparable study (Stanyer et al., 2019); this is inherent to the survey format rather than a shortcoming, since the design prioritizes breadth, capturing patterns across 55 journalists from 23 outlets.

Finally, excluding the 40+ age group, who may hold different views on populism, Babiš and Okamura, limits generalizability to the entire Czech journalist population, although the views of a generation likely to remain active for decades are vital for understanding the future Czech journalistic landscape. Response bias is a further concern: despite assurances of confidentiality, journalists may

have moderated their answers out of fear of being identified or of presenting socially desirable views (Grimm, 2010). Lastly, the author cannot verify whether respondents used external sources, despite instructions not to do so, although all data are treated as originating directly from the participants.

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