"Recall" as an Empty Signifier – The Problem of SPD Party Populism

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Abstract

The article seeks to provide a critical reflection of the recall ("reverse personalized plebiscite") policy pronounced by the SPD political party, rooted in debate in the Czech Republic about the quality of the democratic system and the quantity of democratic mechanisms. Based on Laclau's theory of populism, this article analyzes the speeches given by representatives of the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party which call for an implementation of the recall. The assumption is that SPD is not entirely clear on the purpose and method of instating recall, which is therefore not intended to serve the purpose of extending democracy (in any definition) but is merely an instrument of populism used with no intended effects on political system.

Keywords: CAQDAS, democracy, populism, recall, Freedom and Direct Democracy, SPD party.

Introduction

Before the SARS-COV 2 pandemic, the discussion on "more democracy" had become increasingly generalized in the public sphere. Especially in the Czech Republic, the discussion revolved around the lack of legitimacy of the European Parliament ("Brussels"), the direct election of mayors, and of the head of regional councils, etc. There has been practically no discussion on the quality of the elements of the democratic system. Various political actors[1] have voiced opinions that could be summarized in the following statement: *the more democratic mechanisms people have, the more democratic the system is*. One example of this is the behavior of political parties and movements in favor of

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[1] PSPČR, "Plenary Debate. Session no. 30 and 31," PSP.CZ, accessed February 5, 2021, https://www.psp.cz/.

the institution of a "general referendum." For a broader context, discussions on a general referendum were launched in 2017 by the ANO2011 movement and the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) – Tomio Okamura movement.[2] Before those proposals the law on referendum had appeared in the government's program declaration in 2014.[3]

Negotiations on so-called direct participation elements raise such questions: Do more participation mechanisms truly mean "more democracy"? Is the quality of the present mechanisms being ignored? Can the emphasis on quality strengthen information flows and thus reinforce public discussion? Do the actors who promote new participation mechanisms have clear notions on how they will work? If not, are the slogans on referendums, "direct democracy" and the recall of politicians only populist phrases?

The general referendum is an ongoing and highly popular topic belonging to the so-called direct participation elements. This topic has been dealt with on the Czech political scene many times over, while this institution has also been relatively widely represented in the practice of political systems beyond the borders of the Czech Republic.[4] It seems as if the skeptics among more conservative political scientists are concerned about this direct participatory mechanism, and they also fear the effects of implementing a direct election of the president.[5] In this context, the reason for these concerns is the possibility of instating a referendum, which could potentially weaken contemporary polity.

We are thus working off the following mechanisms: (1) those which assure the primary purpose of democratic survival; (2) the absence of open debate or the spread of populism and fake news can threaten the liberal democratic system;[6] (3) a new element should be accepted into a polity

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[2]   ČTK, "Referendum by mělo být závazné, shodli se Piráti, komunisté, ANO a SPD" [The Referendum should be Obligatory, Pirates, Communists, ANO and SPD Agreed], E15.CZ (February 6, 2018), accessed June 16, 2021, https://www.e15.cz/domaci/ referendum-by-melo-byt-zavazne-shodli-se-pirati-komuniste-ano-a-spd-1343058.

[3]   Vláda ČR, "Programové prohlášení vlády ČR" [The Government Programme], VLADA.CZ (February 14, 2014), accessed June 12, 2021, https://www.vlada.cz/cz/ media-centrum/dulezite-dokumenty/programove-prohlaseni-vlady-cr-115911/.

[4]   Jindřiška Syllová, "Všeobecná referenda ve státech Evropské unie. Ústavní a zákonná úprava. Závaznost a praxe referend" [General Referendums in the States of the European Union. Constitutional and Legal Regulation. Obligatory and Referendums in Praxis], *Srovnávací studie* 1, no. 229 (2017).

[5]   Vít Hloušek, "Přímá volba prezidenta: český context" [Direct Election of the President: Czech Context] in *Postavení hlavy státu v parlamentních a poloprezidentských režimech: Česká republika v komparativní perspektivě* [The Position of the Head of State in Parliamentary and Semi-presidential Regimes: The Czech Republic in a Comparative Perspective], eds. Miroslav Novák and Miloš Brunclík (Praha: Dokořán, 2008).

[6]   Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

(democratic) system only after thorough evaluation of its impacts (in the form of a broad public debate).

We will not relate the aforementioned mechanisms directly to the problem of general referendum, but to a problem which gives rise to analogical questions, i.e., recall, a specific democratic mechanism of a "reversed personalized plebiscite"[7] whose qualitative expression is often problematic among public actors. The recall is thematized in contemporary area studies.[8]

This article discusses specifically the case of the Direct Democracy Party (SPD) of the Czech Republic. The SPD is a populist political anti-immigrant party, which promotes direct democratic participation through new institutions in the Czech political system.[9] The party has its representatives in Czech Chamber of Deputies, but its government coalition potential is low due to the radical political agenda. On the other hand, its chairman Tomio Okamura is one of the most popular politicians in the Czech Republic, and SPD is the second political party (former one was the Dawn of Direct Democracy) which he led to winning seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Thus, SPD has a potential to change some democratic institutions in the Czech Republic via their own deputies in parliament. Moreover, SPD is the only relevant political party that includes the principle of recall in its political manifesto. SPD can be an interesting case in comparison to other similar single-issue or populist anti-immigrant parties across Europe.

Despite this fact, the purpose and method for determining the recall supported by the party are not completely clear in their manifestos. This inexplicitness raises suspicions that recall is not intended to serve the purpose of expanding the democratic nature of Czech society, but only to serve as the subject of a populist communication strategy and, moreover, may have – in the end – impact on the system as a whole.

The goal of our analysis is to prove/deny the assumption that the principle of recall for SPD is only one of the elements of an "empty populist communication strategy," and thus confirm or refute the following statement: *The principle of SPD's recall is empty in content and, in terms of its form, it shows signs of populist communication; on the contrary, it does not contain specific criteria for the instatement and ex post evaluation of recall, which potentially threatens the purpose of democratic public communication (i.e.,*

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[7]   David Altman, *Direct Democracy Worldwide* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 15-17.

[8]   Sergiu Mișcoiu, "Recall Practices in Central and Eastern Europe: From Citizen Accountability to Partisan Account Settling," in *The Politics of Recall Elections*, eds. Yanina Welp and Laurence Whitehead (London: Palgrave Macmilan, 2020), 143-158, 144.

[9]   Ondřej Stulík and Petr Krčál, "Surfování na migrační vlně v době populismu: Sekuritizace migrace ze strany poslanců Parlamentu České republiky" [Surfing on the Migration Wave in the Age of Populism: Securitization of Migration by the Members of Chamber of Deputy], *Acta Politologica* 11, no. 2 (2019): 1-17.

carrying out dialogue and strengthening social competencies among citizens). The purpose of verifying the validity of this statement is to point out the possible problematic effects that such an empty term could have on the elemental liberal democratic function – its own survival. Our purpose and the goal of the study is rooted in the broader discussion about "populist/popular democracy" or "citizenism."[10] More specifically, it is based in the discussion around the possible disruption of liberal democratic institutions such as political pluralism, broader public consensus, constitutionalism and protection of minority before majority by the rule of law.[11] In order to fulfill our goal, we are going to use the method of qualitative content and metaphor analysis to determine key meanings via the contextual creation of code structures based on collocation of keywords.[12]

Recall and the Problem of Populism

Recall in Theory

This section does not conceptualize the whole debate on contemporary direct democracy because it is quite vast and non-specific in general. Rather, it depicts only recall theory (with a short historical background) and its chosen practical impacts.

Modern foundations of recall theory can be identified in the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Gramsci, and others.[13] These leftist authors all placed a similar emphasis on revocability and presented recall as a supervisory and corrective tool for capitalist society, and a sort of "safety brake" against the

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[10]   Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2-16.; Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism, and Global Protest* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017); Yves Mény and Yves Surel, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (London: Palgrave, 2002).

[11]   Vlastimil Havlík, "Technocratic Populism and Political Illiberalism in Central Europe. Problems of Post-Communism," *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 6 (2019): 369-384.

[12]   Martin Hájek, *Čtenář a stroj. Vybrané metody sociálněvědní analýzy textů* [A Reader and the Machine. Selected Methods of Social Science Analysis of Texts] (Praha: SLON, 2014), 62.

[13]   Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Občanská válka ve Francii" [Civil War in France], Marxists Internet Archive (2019), accessed June 16, 2021, https://www.marxists.org/ cestina/marx-engels/1871/051871a.html#45; Vladimir I. Lenin, "Draft Decree on the Right of Recall," Marxists Internet Archive (2019), accessed June 16, 2021, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/nov/19.htm; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1921–1926* (New York: International Publishers, 1978), 50.

monopolization of "capitalism power". There are also other theoretical justifications for recall such as that of the American liberal tradition; additional advantages of recall were seen in the possibility of strengthening trust in political representation and balancing the sub-representation of the political system.[14]

Both ideological approaches underline recall as the key element in the debate about the principles of how the institution of representation should operate in a democracy. The debate can be illustrated by two extreme thoughts concerning: (1) whether a representative should have the function of the simple interpreter of the voters' opinion, thus reducing the performance of the political profession to carrying out tasks that coincide with the opinions of the electorate; (2) whether the representative (in terms of his mandate and its whole defined duration) is justified in behaving autonomously and subsequently "confessing" to those who have elected him (and possibly will elect him again). Both positions can have various meanings in terms of their goals, the evaluation of the impacts of democracy on citizens, and primarily on the degree of autonomy with which politicians carry out their function.

The first position (ad 1) can be supported by so called progressivists, who claim that elected and even nominated representatives are servants to the citizens.[15] For these reasons, people should have tools of direct control (including recall) even before the duration for carrying out their mandate expires. The second position (ad 2) is more "conservative" – the true function of the representative in their concept is to provide "political thinking" for his voters and promote interests despite current "popular" public opinion.[16] The interests and wishes of the voter are not always necessarily the same thing and the politician

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[14] William Munro, "Introductory," in *The Initiative, Referendum and Recall*, ed. William Munro (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912), 46-47, 2, 51; James A. Smith, *The Spirit of American Government. A study of the Constitution: Its Origin, Influence and Relation to Democracy* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1907), 354; Robert Paine, "The Development of Direct Legislation in America," in *The Initiative, Referendum and Recall*, ed. William Munro (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912), 116.

[15] Jonathan Bourne, "A Defence of Direct Legislation," in *The Initiative, Referendum and Recall,* ed. William Munro (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912), 194-216; Smith, "The Spirit of American Government"; Steven M. Maser, "Constitutions as Relational Contracts: Explaining Procedural Safeguards in Municipal Charters," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 8, no. 4 (1998): 527-564.

[16] Munro, "Introductory", 28, 40; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Ellis P. Oberholtzer, *The Referendum in America. Together with Some Chapters on the Initiative and the Recall* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911); Paula McClain, "Arizona 'High Noon:' The Recall and Impeachment of Evan Mecham," *Political Science and Politics* 21, no. 3 (1988): 628-638; Lonce H. Bailey, "Nicholas Murray Butler: Universal Truths and the Foundations of Republican Institutions," in *Defense of the Founders Republic. Critics of Direct Democracy in the Progressive Era*, ed. Jerome M. Mileur (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 35-60.

holds responsibility to the whole of society (not only to the majority). As a result, citizens at a certain time and for a certain election period can chose their representatives, who act autonomously.[17] The progressivist position understands recall as a positive improvement to democracy, while the more conservative position sees it as a threat to a stable representative democratic system.

Several thinkers and politicians have followed on in the conservative tradition, most significantly philosopher Nicholas M. Butler, who feared the power of the masses and argued primarily for the existence of a system that would protect the individual from the selfish despotism of the temporary majority.[18] Other opponents have pointed out that recalls which are carried out often can lead to political demoralization, and they may become a tool for intimidation and extortion, destabilization of the government,[19] or paralysis of the decision process.[20] In short, implementation of a recall can brings extreme change to the form of government, i.e., an addition to the representative form of government with a direct action by the electorate against elected representatives which is far from representative type of liberal democracy in general.[21] Without historical experience and empirical data, the effects of this "improvement" are unclear, similarly to the limits of temporary politically neutral and indifferent masses when approving definitive decisions.[22]

As is evident, recall is not a unified instrument and there is no agreement on how necessary or dangerous it is. There is also no consensus on how it should be defined.[23] In definition, we follow Matt Qvortrup's typology, which makes it possible to divide recall into two dimensions, i.e., according to who initiates voting and who accepts decisions (see Figure no. 1).[24] For recalls in which the parliament decides, impeachment is involved. Qvortrup divides recalls in which the electorate accepts decisions into direct and indirect types. In order to carry out a direct recall, it is necessary to collect a certain number of signatures, after which a special vote

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[17]   McClain, "Arizona 'High Noon'," 3.
[18]   Bailey, "Nicholas Murray Butler: Universal Truths and the Foundations of Republican Institutions," 35-43; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America.*
[19]   Munro, "Introductory," 51.
[20]   Maser, "Constitutions as Relational Contracts: Explaining Procedural Safeguards in Municipal Charters," 20-21.
[21]   Samuel McCall, "Representative as Against Direct Legislation," in *The Initiative, Referendum and Recall*, ed. William Munro (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912), 164-193.
[22]   Matt Qvortrup, *Direct Democracy. A Comparative Study of the Theory and Practice of Government by the People* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 88; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando: A Harvest Book, 1985).
[23]   Uwe Serdült, "The History of a Dormant Institution: Legal Norms and the Practice of Recall in Switzerland," *Representation* 51, no. 2 (July 2015): 1-12; Don Rowat, "Our Referendums are not Direct Democracy," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 21, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 25-27.
[24]   Qvortrup, *Direct Democracy*, 77-78.

(implemented e.g., in California) can be organized, or an instant recall can take place when a certain percentage of votes are reached. In the case of indirect recall (implemented e.g., in Romania), the parliament initiates the special vote for recall and then hands over the vote to the broad electorate. Moreover: there is also another special type called "total recall", i.e., the recall of the whole legislature.[25] The term "total recall" was used in another sense in Arnold Schwarzenegger's successful campaign for Governor Gray Davis's direct recall in 2003.[26]

For a broader context on Central and Eastern Europe, we can add that, according to Sergiu Mișcoiu, recall is the actual topic of this area, especially because of the delay in constituting institutions and electoral structures, and "the very idea of meddling with the will of the people as expressed through their votes and of initiating a recall procedure encountered strong opposition as it reminded citizens of the top-down practices of the past."[27] The delay is the problem itself and it is bounded up with natural worries about the liberal democratic ethos (see above).

This paper focuses on direct recall, which is initiated and decided upon by the electorate and we are convinced that this form is an extremist one. However, this type of recall does not exist in practice on a national level, as it only applies to the local level, in the case of unitary states, or the state level in the case of federations. Despite this fact, the formal definition of this type is mentioned by the SPD in the context of the national level (see below). The analysis is based on Ernest Laclau's (and his followers) populist communication theory.

In connection to the recall theory described above and the preference for a "conservative" critique, a working definition of recall can be put forward. Recall is a political procedure which allows for a certain minimum number of voters who are dissatisfied with the given political representation and demand a special vote to withdraw a specific politician or official from his post before the end of his given term of office, and at the same time to carry out the election of another politician or official for the vacant post.[28]

Populism as a Communication Strategy

Populism as a subject of research is rather difficult to grasp.[29] At the same time, it is a term which is often used as a label in the rhetoric of political

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[25] Qvortrup, *Direct Democracy*, 84.
[26] Altman, *Direct Democracy Worldwide*, 16; Qvortrup, *Direct Democracy*, 87.
[27] Sergiu Mișcoiu, "Recall Practices in Central and Eastern Europe," 143-158, 144.
[28] David B. Magleby and Paul C. Light, *Government by the People* (New York: Longman, 2009), 36; Qvortrup, *Direct Democracy*, 3; Munro, "Introductory," 1.
[29] Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave, "Populism as Political Communication Style: An Empirical Study of Political Parties' Discourse in Belgium," *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 3 (2007): 2.

struggle, and therefore deserves the sufficient care of researcher during analysis, especially in the area of operationalization.

Populism can be understood according to its content as a specific ideology.[30] It can be defined as a type of behavior of specific actors – usually populist parties and movements or individuals.[31] Finally, it can be understood as a communication strategy with certain patterns or discursive practices.[32] This study, uses the definition of populism as a communication strategy. This choice, contrary to the challenges of identifying the ideology of populism and the relatively narrowly defined actors (i.e., political parties and movements), populism as a communication strategy has an analytical gain. This advantage is the fact that it is not bound to predefined actors and a predefined assumption of complexity (cf. with ideology). The complexity is provided by the possibility of identifying the floating and empty signifiers. By these signifiers, the examined politician through his or her communication creates chained empty or floating meanings, and these meanings create some kind of "mist" in his or her own communication. Methodologically speaking: if the analysis doesn't identify the empty signifier related to recall, and we do not find other specific content of recall on the same analytical level, recall can be claimed as an empty or unanchored floating signifier. If the "emptiness" of recall is confirmed, then it can be concluded that recall is only a commutation tool with value-laden purpose which can serve for uniting a political or social movement.[33] Populism is just based on value-laden purpose, i.e., negative perception of the political elite and adoration of the people.

In addition, populist communication has a relatively stable form, and two mutually connected characteristics characterize its content – i.e., the sweeping

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[30] Margaret Canovan, "Two Strategies for the Study of Populism," *Political Studies* 30, no. 4 (1982): 544-52; Cas Mudde and Rovira C. Kaltwasser, "Voices of the Peoples: Populism in Europe and Latin America Compared," *Kellogg Institute Working Paper* 378 (2011): 5, 7; Andrej Zaslove, "Closing the Door? The Ideology and Impact of Radical Right Populism on Immigration Policy in Austria and Italy," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 1 (2004): 99-118; Jagers and Walgrave, "Populism as Political Communication Style."

[31]   Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1994); Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London and New York: Sage, 2015).

[32] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populistic Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); Yannis Stavrakakis, "Antinomies of Formalism: Laclau's Theory of Populism and the Lessons from Religios Greece," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 3 (2004): 253-67; Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (London: London Junction Books, 1981); Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 542-63; Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000); Niels A. Andersen, *Discursive Analytical Strategies* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2003).

[33] Sergiu Mişcoiu, Oana-Raluca Crăciun and Nicoleta Colopelnic, *Radicalism, Populism, Interventionism. Three Approaches Based on Discourse Theory* (Cluj-Napoca: The Publishing House of the Foundation for European Studies, 2008), 40-41.

adoration of a more broadly defined people and the critique of the political elite.[34] These phenomena can be simplified into the "us" vs. "them" antagonism. Populist actors then attempt to take the role of the protectors of "us," the common people, against enemies. In addition, the necessity of an enemy or even the creation of one is an integral part of populist discursive practices.[35] They use empty signifiers in their rhetoric with the goal of heightening people's dissatisfaction with the given political representation and thus gain more political points.

The Mutual Dependency of Recall and Populist Communication: Necessary Definition Criteria

Recall is certainly not a term or concept that can be labelled as populist. As it was mentioned above, the tradition of recall spans from liberalism to Marxism. These two directions have little in common, but they do share a heightened trust in human rationality if people are given freedom (although the ideologies do not agree further on the form of freedom that should be achieved, i.e., positive or negative). However, recall can be abused rhetorically by populists absolutization of the trust in human decisions, which is additionally strengthened by the total condemnation of the political elite.

Recall is seen as a new tool (in the populist sense) of the people for "broader" democratic governing. This tool should subsequently have the potential to weaken the bad elite, which makes decisions "about us but without us."

The unclear content of recalls, the people, the elite and democracy (apart from the evaluation of these elements) is characterized by non-reviewable generalization in the rhetoric of populists. Words used in context do not contain any message – they are "empty" or "floating" signifiers meant only to leave a good or bad impression without discussion or critical views. Their purpose may be to strengthen stereotypes, which is a political strategy to subsequently reach out to groups of voters.[36] Just like sweeping statements about the elite and the righteous people, recall is similarly good for democracy, but that is all – it does not include clear content, effects on the present system, possible risks etc. We will attempt to verify this assumption about the emptiness of recall similarly to the assumption of recall's linkage to the adoration of the people and the critique

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[34]   Paris Aslanidis, "Measuring Populist Discourse with Semantic Text Analysis: An Application on Grassroots Populist Mobilization," *Quality & Quantity* 52, no. 3 (2018): 1241-63; Simon Otjes and Tom Louwerse, "Populism in Parliament: Comparing Left-Wing and Right-Wing Populism in the Netherlands," *Political Studies* 63, no. 1 (2015): 60-79.

[35]   Laclau, *On Populistic Reason*, 39; Robert R. Barr, "Populist, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics," *Party Politics* 15, no. 1 (2009): 29-48.

[36]   Laclau, *On Populistic Reason*, 40-44.

of the elite. If this emptiness is verified, we can verify the populist creation of SPD's discursive practices.

Based on previous context, if the relationship between the emptiness of populism and recall is confirmed, we can assume, that recall is a concept that populists have misused in their rhetoric via the following logic: the people are the supreme arbiter, they are above the bad elite, and therefore should be the ones to decide on the matter of recall.

Those characteristics may be, in our argumentation, fulfilled through the populist communication of SPD, especially in the recall case, because compared to the current system setting, the implementation of "empty recall" appears to be a significant systemic policy change. The Czech political system is set up as a standard system of checks and balances, where the people are sovereign, from which the legitimacy of political power derives, but on the other hand, the political decision is in the hands of the elected elite, controlled by legal power and taking place within the constitutional framework. The transfer of fundamental power to recall politicians towards the people is thus a shift in systemic balance.[37]

Of course, it is impossible to predict the future and claim that recall will have a harmful effect on (liberal) democracy in the Czech Republic. However, it can be stated that in the modification in which it is represented by the SPD, i.e., as the populist instrument described above, it can start the process of fundamental change within the political system. At such a moment, constitutional democracy would get serious damage in the form (in the extreme case) of ochlocracy based on the mantra *vox populi, vox dei*. In such a case, it could re-write the political system as a whole.

SPD's Rhetoric – Pioneer Study
of the Recall Populist Problem

Raw Data and Data Corpus

The first step of our analysis is to create a data corpus. The raw data corpus (1) is formed by statements which the given actors have presented on their websites and social media. Important characteristics of the data include: (1) self-representation, which is not disrupted by another person's views (as is common with other media presentations, e.g., interviews); and (2) mutual cohesion in which the contents of certain communication channels are

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[37]   Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

transmitted, elaborated upon, referred to, and to a large degree overlap. If the collective body of the SPD party is not listed as the author of the analyzed content, our analysis will focus on the statements of representatives of two of the party's leaders – Tomio Okamura and Radim Fiala. Tomio Okamura carries out the function of chairman of this political movement and Radim Fiala holds the post of first vice-chairman. It is worthy to note that both individuals pledged all of their assets as a guarantee for the movement's loan, which went to fund the election campaign before the parliamentary elections in 2017.[38]

In total, the basis of the raw data is made up of six components: SPD's website, which contains the official political manifesto of the party (namely, "SPD's political program," "Foreign policy," "Czech Republic – our safe home, our successful future," and "The meaning of life for all of us are healthy and educated Czech children and youths")[39] and stances on various topics; Tomio Okamura – SPD's Facebook profile; Freedom and Direct Democracy – SPD's Facebook profile; Radim Fiala – SPD's Facebook profile and Tomio Okamura's Twitter account. The examined period is from the creation of the given profiles or accounts, i.e., from January 2011, when Tomio Okamura's Facebook profile came into existence until the data was collected, i.e., June 2019. Moreover, Radim Fiala's Facebook profile contains posts dating back to February 2011; SPD's party Facebook dates back to May 2015, and Okamura's Twitter to January 2016. The whole sum of the raw data comprises 3,138,197 words. The size of individual sections is summarized in Figure 2, in which it is evident that Facebook is Tomio Okamura's primary tool of communication.

Data corpus is based on collocations of the frequency of key words in the raw data. Key words and their collocations were selected by considering populist theory (see above) and the subject of research, i.e., recall. By doing so, the theory of populist communication and the phenomenon of recall in the assumed populist sense of its use have been integrally linked. In what regards the extent of raw data, this analytical reduction was necessary. The analytical reduction affected all necessary contexts and subjects (in the sense of context triplets[40] that appeared during "human reading" in the sense of checking found contexts).

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[38] ČTK, "Okamurovo SPD si vzalo na volební kampaň půjčku 18 milionů korun" [Okamura's SPD took out a Loan of 18 Million Crowns for the Election Campaign], Aktuálně.cz (February 14, 2017), accessed June 12, 2021, https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/okamurovo-spd-si-vzalo-na-volebni-kampan-pujcku-18-milionu-k/r~991dcbb0f2dd11e6bb37002590604f2e/.

[39] SPD, "SPD Programme," SPD.CZ, accessed June 12, 2021, http://www.spd.cz/program.

[40] For more see: Paris Aslanidis, "Measuring Populist Discourse with Semantic Text Analysis: An Application on Grassroots Populist Mobilization," *Quality & Quantity* 52, no. 3 (2018): 1241-63.

Keywords were "elites," "people," and "recall." Keywords were searched for in the form of lemmas and single occurrences in the collocation of one sentence were recorded. The data corpus created in this manner contains 248 sentences (see Figure 3). We were reading those sentences not in isolation but in the full context of their occurrence in +/- 5 more sentences for mapping equivalency context content.

Content Analysis of Data – Revealed Meanings

The empirical corpus contains 248 sentences with an own specific meaning. In order to interpret the meaning of sentences, it is necessary to aggregate them into the meaning codes. We have selected the analysis of linear metaphors (in the form of triplets) to aggregate meanings. The use of metaphor analysis makes possible to interconnect two contexts into an equal relationship.[41] This relationship then simplifies the meaning and the meaning's context in the sentence (as a primary data unit for analysis).[42]

We then understand one overarching meaning as one category of code. Open coding, which is verifiable via available raw data, was carried out in this manner. Naming categories therefore correspond to the scheme of the "something is something" metaphor and is based on "to be" (is/are; see Table 3) equivalency. At the same time, these categories correspond to the selected theoretical framework (divided into two components: adoration of the people and anti-elitism).

For a summary of the analytical categorization of data and creation of a code according to the method described above, we have created Figure 4, which shows that the most abstract context of codes is represented most commonly.

Content Analysis of Data via Metaphor Analysis

The previous section of the analysis has given us the option to describe contextual relationships. The theoretical framework of *Adoration of The People* and *Anti-elitism* is the basis for the content analysis of the data corpus.

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[41] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); Georg Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); Helen Sharp, Mark Woodman, and Fiona Hoveden, "Using Metaphor to Analyse Qualitative Data: Vulcans and Humans in Software Development," *Empirical Software Engineering* 10, no. 3 (2005): 343-365.

[42] Justin Grimmer and Brandon M. Stevart, "Text as Data: The Promise and Pitfalls of Automatic Content Analysis Methods for Political Texts," *Political Analysis* 21 (2013): 267-297; Fabrizio Sebastiani, "Machine Learning in Automated Text Categorization," *ACM Computing Surveys* 34, no. 1 (2002): 1-47.

The first theoretical framework, *Adoration of The People*, summarizes the group of statements that glorify the people as an independent entity whose interests are important. We can divide adoration of the people into categories: (1) *recall is the participation of citizens* – emphasizes the direct involvement of citizens in the administration of public affairs, including the positive influence on the growth of voter turnout; (2) *recall is national sovereignty* – assumes the metaphorical image of the connection of the institution of recall with strengthening national sovereignty (also very often linked to the negative stance against the European Union); (3) *recall is the trust of citizens*, which speaks of the influence of the given institution on strengthening trust among citizens in politics and strengthening trust in society; (4) *recall is in the interest of the people*.

The second theoretical framework *Anti-elitism* is created by the following categories: (1) statements covered by the metaphor *recall is work and a fulfilled promise*, which says that, thanks to recall, it is possible to withdraw politicians who do not keep their promises or do not work; (2) *recall is a tool against the elites*, i.e., a tool that can be used to remedy an extensive set of mistakes that the elites make (from a poor economic situation to the danger of the migration crisis); (3) *recall is a transformation of politics* and a tool to stabilize the political environment, which the present elites are not providing; (4) *recall is a solution to the crisis of the elites*, which contains subcategories of statements on various types of crises (economic, political, social, moral, migration and others), the cause of which are the elites; and finally (5) the category of *elites are evil* or statements that generally confirm the rhetoric mentioned above via a negative definition stance against the elites.

Recall as an Empty Signifier – Interpretation of Categories Relation[43]

Adoration of the people manifests itself in several categories that are semantically linked to the perception of democracy. This is chiefly evident in the category of the participation of citizens, which, however, is limited in the rhetoric of SPD's representatives only to implementing direct democratic elements (without further explanation of the process of its implementation or subsequent effects). Specifically, this involves the "direct election" of politicians, referendum, and recall, of course. Switzerland is portrayed as the model for direct participation elements. Furthermore, recall is contextually linked to the sovereignty of the people; SPD promotes a referendum on exiting the European Union (EU) and other referendums on other international

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[43] Context and clauses which have been cited are based on dataset (see above).

agreements. SPD takes a negative stance against the EU and its goal is to "return" sovereignty to its citizens.[44] Recall is a tool to reach national sovereignty. The next context listed is that recall strengthens trust amongst citizens in the system, as it should lead to

> "…a significant strengthening of trust among citizens, returning to them the necessary feeling and interest that they are taking part in the administration of public affairs and are truly making decisions about these affairs themselves, which should significantly raise voter turnout."[45]

The element of trust is linked to the feeling of responsibility instilled in politicians by a recall. Thus, if a citizen has the possibility to recall, he or she knows that politicians are more responsible and the knowledge of this responsibility among the elite (which SPD calls a kind of "massive self-reflection") will inspire greater trust among citizens in the political system and will also cultivate citizens.

The element of control is important. Primarily, recall is the possibility of having control over politicians and responsible politicians should control the whole system, e.g., the police. In the ascertained context, SPD's politicians point out the possible positive role of the elites, which is, however, the result of recall. Without recall, this positive role would not be possible, and recall is a tool for the stabilization of democracy thanks to the check and possible correction of the bad decisions made by politicians.

In order to link all contexts together, it is necessary to complete the complex image of who "the people" are. SPD's representatives understand the people equivalently as citizens and voters, or also taxpayers. In a minimum of cases, the "people" are linked to individuals/politicians.

According to SPD, people should realize that they are being cheated by political cynics; they are not foolish; they make their living in a decent manner through honest work; they are also standing up to Brussel dictate; they complain of the arrogance of power and dictatorship; they also unfortunately have no idea what true democracy is. The people are *perhaps* foolish, but not foolish enough to let their country and state be plundered.[46]

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[44] Vladimír Naxera, Viktor Glied, Ondřej Filipec and Małgorzata Kaczorowska, "To Protect National Sovereignty From the EU? The 2019 EP Elections and Populist Parties in V4 Countries," *Revista UNISCI* 54 (2020): 71–106.

[45] Tomio Okamura, "Tomio Okamura Facebook Page", @tomio.cz (January 6, 2018), accessed August 23, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/ posts/ 1870451406298999.

[46]   Tomio Okamura, "Tomio Okamura Facebook Page", @tomio.cz (January 6, 2018), accessed September 12, 2020, https://m.facebook.com/179497582061065/ posts/ 1077624008915080.

The chain of meanings in terms of the relationships of categories in statements made by SPD's representatives is as follows: the people are sovereign because they make decisions. Recall is a tool to fulfill sovereignty and it strengthens faith among citizens in the system, which is identified with the self-reflection of politicians (elites). Fulfillment of sovereignty contributes to the stability of the system. The system is stable because decisions are made by the people, which is virtuous and not completely foolish; the people are bothered by interventions into sovereignty from the outside, but also from within by political elites.

The result of the interpretation in terms of the theory of populism is as follows: recall is an empty signifier and merely an undefined tool for an undetermined sovereignty. Recall is meant to invoke self-reflection; nonetheless, it does not differ in any way from the intention of regular elections after the regular expiration of a mandate. The ascertained context is in agreement with the theoretical definition of populism, because it is an evident adoration of the people against the elites (even despite several marginal mentions of the foolishness of the people).

The final primary theoretical framework is *anti-elitism*. According to the context created by SPD, politicians often do not work, do not hold their promises or betray and disappoint citizens. It is necessary to pay politicians, but politicians do not necessarily work (or they work poorly or abuse their positions). Recall is one of the possibilities for remedying this situation. This remedy is possible thanks to the aforementioned responsibility, which should urge politicians to "practice what they preach." The empirical corpus does not contain other original content that might be linked to responsibility for work and promises. Recall is a tool against elites and at the same time a transformation of politics and a way to solve the crisis of democracy, because it is a tool of true democracy. Occurrences of recall in connection to the elite analogically copy the aforementioned meanings. In the words of Tomio Okamura: "Our country must belong to the people and not only to several politicians."[47]

According to Okamura, elites are evil because they do not work, they do not keep their promises, deceive, and betray people. A good recall is a tool against the bad elites. Recall is good because it is a tool of true democracy that leads to the elite's responsibility to be better. The result of interpretation in terms of the theory of populism is, recall is an empty category (signifier), and merely a vaguely defined tool to control the bad elite.

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[47]   Tomio Okamura, "Tomio Okamura Facebook Page", @tomio.cz (October 24, 2013), accessed August 23, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/posts/691418230868995.

If we link all interpretations of the context created in the empirical corpus, then these interpretations imply that recall is a tool of "true democracy" that strengthens the responsibility of bad elites by providing the positively perceived sovereign people with the opportunity to control the elites.

Conclusion and Discussion About Populist Democracy

SPD reflects on what recall is, and it does so in full accordance with its definitional criteria (see above; if we dismiss the fact that recall is one of the possible theoretical types). The problem, however, is that the principle of recall is empty in content, as it does not determine specific rules for the implementation and ex post evaluation of the effects of recall. SPD as a political actor with the ambition to gain and exert executive power does not elaborate on this concept further, which may evoke a paradoxical situation if an SPD actor implements recall: democracy could contain empty mechanisms without responsibility for their effects, such as tyranny of the majority and the denial of a moderated conflict of interests in a pluralistic society – well, if we apply those vague principles, we can deny democracy at all. Argumentation in favor of recall contains a stance against elites and, on the contrary, adoration of the people, which is a typical sign of populist communication. The only more specific definition offered by SPD is that recall is a tool of true democracy and true democracy is one in which the people rule.

Recall is an interesting democratic mechanism, but if it is to avoid endangering the democratic system or its own survival after implementation, it is necessary to take properly into consideration its possible effects (both intended and unintended). In order for the democratic system to survive, open pluralistic debate on these effects and other issues must exist. Effects can be qualitatively expressed, and such an expression is a question of the assessment of political actors and their electors. In short: in order to make decisions, voters should not only know what purpose this new democratic participative element should serve, but also whether it will be in accordance with other mechanisms and civil rights. SPD does not offer this, although it should be the logical task of its representatives for the good of its own voters.

SPD limits its rhetoric to stating that, through the people, recall should function as a tool against the elites and as a tool of "right/true democracy." True democracy is "more democratic" because it "has" an additional mechanism – recall. This corresponds to the following notion: the more democratic mechanisms people have, the more democratic the system is. In connection with this method of SPD's argumentation, this statement can be seen as populist and as the threat of the purpose of democratic public communication.

The statement defined in the introduction – that the principle of SPD's recall is empty in content, while in terms of its form it shows signs of populist communication and contains no specific criteria for the instatement and ex post evaluation of the recall, which potentially threatens the purpose of democratic public communication (carrying out dialogue and strengthening social competencies among citizens) – has been confirmed.

Populist behavior can appear as a threat to existing mechanisms of representative democracy, because the recall of a politician could be voted upon without public discussion. Without the content of recall, it is simply not possible to establish the conditions of its application. Public discussion in this case should be understood as unnecessary and even excessive. Liberal democratic political systems as a defense against the tyranny of the majority and the moderation of conflicting interests among individuals, which are inherent to modern democracy, would be at risk of losing their meaning. Democracy would remain an empty expression, because it would contain only empty mechanisms without purpose. For sure, public debate is not the only component of democracy, as other authors who focus primarily on the issue of populist democracy have pointed out.[48] Overlapping consensus and constitutionalism are also key elements that have been mentioned in the analysis, while emphasizing the primacy of communication over them. In addition, this paper's contribution adds to the discussion on the broader concept of populist democracy using the example of the communication of SPD's members.

Democracy is the rule of the people, but it is a rule that falls within the contours of a constitutional system, one which SPD wants to transform by instating the element of recall. However, SPD does not say anything more about recall than that it is good in and of itself. Such an empty definition makes (rational) discussion on the quality of such a mechanism impossible, as there is "nothing to discuss." The populist shortcut is mirrored in this problem. Nonetheless, more democratic mechanisms do not necessarily spell better democracy but have a potential to destroy it. We do not know if Okamura and other politicians from SPD understand the threat of their manifestos to liberal democracy, or not. On the other hand, this article has tried to expose the major problem between their purpose and the reality of the system in this case (which can be replicable and serves as an alarm for other liberal democratic societies).

The populist shortcut (which is not paradoxically empty, in this case in comparison to other) is evident in the statement made by Tomio Okamura,

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[48]   Havlík, "Technocratic Populism and Political Illiberalism in Central Europe. Problems of Post-Communism"; PAPPPAS, Takis S. Pappas, "Populist Democracies: Post-Authoritarian Greece and Post-Communist Hungary," *Government and Opposition* 49*, no. 1 (2014): 1-23; Daniele Caramani, "Will vs. Reason: The Populist and Technocratic Forms of Political Representation and Their Critique to Party Government," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 1 (2017): 54-67.

which we feel is important to quote here as a summary of the relationship of this representative to the content of democracy:

> "Any place where the recall of politicians is implemented, the fake argument that people abuse this institution is invalid. After all, there is no opportunity for its abuse based on the principle of democracy. If citizens rule, then they should have the final word. And if a relevant majority of them decide to change a law or recall their representative in whom they've lost trust, it is an expression of the democratic will of the citizens and not an abuse. On the contrary, the abuse of power is the creation of such conditions that allow legislators to break their electoral promises and electoral manifestos without fear and cyclically deceive people without repercussions. That is the true abuse of democracy".[49]

The conclusions of this analysis are linked to the broader effort to point out the specificities of populist communication in the Czech Republic and of the populist democracy.[50] Recall is one of the possible tools which can be abused in the rhetoric of populist actors logically not for its non-existent content, but to strengthen the stereotype of "more democracy spells better." This study has attempted to set up the replicable step-by-step methodological approach which can be applied to similar political actors across Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.

While analyzing data on the SPD, we encountered topics such as immigration, Islam, the European Union, inadaptable citizens, etc. Some of these topics have already been dealt with, while others are still waiting to be analyzed, which would contribute to greater transparency of the content of political communication (not only) in the Czech Republic. For instance, we recommend focusing on Tomio Okamura's Facebook page, which is the largest communication platform for the presentation of SPD's ideas in terms of its extent of data. This paper has presented the method which is based on an engaged qualitative evaluation of the content of authentic statements. It is necessary to point out that expressions such as recall may be "taken hostage" by populists.

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[49] Tomio Okamura, "Tomio Okamura Facebook Page", @tomio.cz (June 18, 2013), accessed August 23, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/posts/627738530570299.

[50] Vladimír Naxera and Petr Krčál, "This is a Controlled Invasion: The Czech President Miloš Zeman's Populist Perception of Islam and Immigration as Security Threats," *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* 12, no. 2 (2018): 192-215; Martin Kubánek, "Role populismu ve volebním marketingu hnutí ANO před parlamentními volbami v roce 2013" [The Role of Populism in the Election Marketing of the ANO Movement Before the Parliamentary Elections in 2013], *Central European Political Studies Review* 18, no. 4 (2016): 319-353; Ondřej Stulík and Petr Krčál, "Surfování na migrační vlně v době populismu: Sekuritizace migrace ze strany poslanců Parlamentu České republiky" [Surfing on the Migration Wave in the Age of Populism: Securitization of Migration by the Members of Chamber of Deputy], *Acta Politologica* 11, no. 2 (2019): 1-17.

Annexes

Figure 1.

		Who initiates?	
		People	Parliament
Who decides?	People	Direct recall (e.g. California)	Indirect recall (e.g. Romania)
	Parliament	Citizen initiated impeachment (e.g. Uganda)	Impeachment (e.g. USA)

Source: Qvortrup, *Direct Democracy*, 78.

Figure 2.

Section of the raw data	Number of words
Facebook – Tomio Okamura	2 255 305
Facebook – Radim Fiala	409 540
Facebook – SPD	323 069
SPD website	102 216
Twitter – Tomio Okamura	28 156
Σ	3 138 197

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the analyzed collected data.

Figure 3.

Section of data corpus	Number of clauses
Facebook – Tomio Okamura	228
Facebook – SPD	10
Facebook – Radim Fiala	8
SPD website	2
Twitter – Tomio Okamura	0
Σ	248

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the analyzed collected data.

Figure 4.

Framework	Subcategory created based on context
Adoration of the people	Recall is the interest of the people
	Recall is a control by the people
	Recall is the participation of citizens (people)
	Recall is national (people) sovereignty
	Recall is the trust of citizens (people)
Anti-elitism	Recall is a tool against the elites
	Recall is a solution to the crisis of the elites
	Recall is work and a fulfilled promise
	Elites are evil
	Recall is a transformation of politics

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the analyzed collected data.