

Understanding Corruption Through Political Rhetoric

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Abstract

Corruption cases involving politicians stand out because the accused politicians have more power to deny or tackle such accusations. The article aims to disclose to what extent the corruption scandals can be politicized and what are the real consequences of them in connection with the political culture of the country. By descriptive qualitative analysis of the political discourse in the context of corruption scandals of selected contemporary Czech and Slovak politicians, we also aim to answer how power relations can take a role in corruption discourse. In order to make our analysis more transparent quantitative term frequency analysis is conducted over the samples of reactions of the prominent politicians to the corruption accusations.

Keywords: corruption, political discourse, political victimhood, political marketing.

Introduction

Corruption and its various forms are also almost daily topic of political and public debate, which is strongly shaped and directed by the media. For journalists, corruption, especially in the case of high-ranking politicians, is a desirable topic. On the one hand, we can read and watch reports about acts of corruption, on the other hand, political proclamations about the fight against corruption.

The corruption issue has catapulted from the margins of academic and policy discourse on international affairs to a position as one of the central problems facing transition economies and the developing world today as part of an overall focus on governance in international political economy (Bukovansky, 2006).

Corruption is not only a well-known lexical expression, it is also a social phenomenon (Khondker, 2006; Collier, 2002) researched by scholars from different fields and from different standpoints. However, the study of corruption from the perspective of language has not enjoyed adequate

research and if so, it focuses on the most chronic countries suffering from corruption the most (e.g. African countries: Adebawu, 2012; Ogunmuyiwa, 2015; Krisagbedo et al., 2021).

Breit (2011) employs the tools of critical analysis of media texts with a focus on the discursive construction of corruption. Using media texts on corruption as data, he questions the appropriateness of the discourses and discursive features of media texts. The thesis, which has Norway as context, discursively challenged the ideology and the effect of institutional arrangements and systems of domination on individuals and organizations.

The transformation of corruption in the Albania public sphere during the period 1991–2005 is the focus of Kajsu's research (2013). His paper shows how different articulations of corruption supported different agendas. He argues that through a discourse analysis of corruption it is possible to politicize the concept of corruption instead of reducing it to a static and inherent feature of Albanian culture and society. Although, the works of Breit (2011) and Kajsu (2013) employ (critical) discourse analysis approach, their frameworks and results are not grounded in linguistics.

From a more lexical perspective, Orpin (2005) employs critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to investigate corruption. The paper reports on a study of a group of words semantically related to corruption. Using corpus methodology to manipulate the data, she highlights connotational differences among the words like bribery, corruption, cronyism, graft, impropriety (ies), malpractice(s), nepotism, and sleaze. The paper argues that words (such as corruption) with a noticeably negative connotation tend to be discursively foregrounded when referring to corrupt activities that take place outside of Britain, while less negative words (such as sleaze) are used when referring to similar activities in British contexts. This conclusion appears to substantiate Anders and Nuijten's position that 'there is tendency to treat corruption in the more developed parts of the world as incidental' (Anders and Nuijten, 2007, p.3).

A free series of four texts on the anti-corruption rhetoric of Czech politicians is presented by Naxera (2021) where he explains the breadth and ambiguity of the term "corruption" and also shows how anti-corruption rhetoric can overshadow all other political topics in the debate.

Research aims

Our aim was to observe what kind of statements the politicians try to establish as true and how power relations can take a role in their corruption discourse or to what extent such serious issues can be politicized. Therefore,

the focus is on discourse associated with corruption, especially the one following disclosure of scandals. In view of this, emphasis is given to official statements issued after corruption scandals, in particular as a strategic response from the accused politicians. For this purpose, we have formulated the following research question:

RQ: What are the reactions of the prominent Slovak and Czech politicians to the allegations of corruption?

The data is presented in the form of adjacency pairs showcasing reactions to accusations of corruption practices of a particular politician and counter reactions among the political representatives.

Methodology

There is an importance of critical discourse analysis to examine the politicians' reactions to allegations of any kind, but especially those that seriously violate the law or the principles of ethics, integrity and morality.

Perceiving oneself to be a victim in face of criticism is a common identity position in politics. Armaly and Anders (2022) state that victimhood is a central theme of modern political messaging. Thus, in our paper, within our discourse analysis, we have focused also on manifestations of political victimhood: either an egocentric one entailing only perceptions of one's own victimhood, and one focused on blaming "the system." (Armaly and Enders, 2022, *ibid*).

The data was collected through the Czech and Slovak media – websites of the newspapers, journals, institutions and commentators' blogs. The sources were obtained through an internet search and open access library with a random search. We kept in mind that results of research should be neutral so that certain principles can be set out that have generalization value, regardless of time and context at any given time.

Interpretation of results

Czechia

Andrej Babiš, former Prime Minister of Czechia, chairman of Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO 2011)

Babiš, in his election campaign in 2017 railed against the old order, where *"the vision of the state has been replaced by lobbyists, selfish interests and*

corruption, where the state is run by people who can see no further than their own term in office and who, as a rule, look at politics as a clever way to multiply their bank balance as quickly as possible". (forum24.cz, 2020)

"Everyone was waiting for a change. That someone would finally defeat this unbearable tangle of corruption, clientelism and abuse of state-owned companies," Babiš promised in his pre-election brochure What I Dream About When I Happen to Be Asleep. (forum24.cz, 2020)

"We will not lie, we will not steal, we will fight corruption." (forum24.cz, 2020)

Babiš's positive self-presentation (Van Dijk, 2000), which discusses the individual's action as a member of a group while firmly expressing various ideological notions is evident in Babiš's early statements on corruption issues. Moreover, emphasising negative things about the opponents plays also a vital role in a broader contextual strategy of his rhetoric, referring to negativity, condemnation and other negative stances.

Stork's nest case

Andrej Babiš was accused of falsely creating the impression that the Stork's Nest company, which was connected to Babiš's conglomerate Agrofert, met grant conditions as a small or medium-sized business to fraudulently acquire around €2 million in EU subsidies. Eventhough Andrej Babiš and former Agrofert manager Jana Nagyová were acquitted of subsidy fraud in January 2023, the case will continue as state prosecutor Jaroslav Šaroč has decided to appeal against the first instance verdict in it. Babiš has long repeated that the case is fabricated, he considers it a political process.

"I couldn't keep quiet because this whole process is fabricated. It is a political issue. Not a single piece of evidence has been presented that we have done anything illegal." (noviny.sk, 2023)

"I reiterate that I am innocent and that this is a political prosecution, so wait for my statement. It will be quite extensive," (noviny.sk, 2023)

"I would never have stood here unless I entered politics."

Perceiving oneself to be a victim in face of criticism is a common identity position in Babiš's rhetoric and represents egocentric political victimhood.

"My reaction to the Seznam Zprávy report is not easy. It's my family, my children. But the facts are clear... I reject this manipulation and the blatant pressure exerted by journalists on the law enforcement authorities. I am sorry that there is a hunt for my family, which I have caused them by

entering politics and which is suffering the most" (Facebook profile of Andrej Babiš, 13.11.2018).

"I've been here for six years hearing from the media that I had my son kidnapped by Mr Protopopov. That is a disgusting lie. What greater proof can there be than the testimony of his mother, who is the closest and who lived with him? Our son, Andy, made it up, unfortunately. Here it is in black and white, I only wanted my son to be treated and that's why he hated me" (aktuality.sk, 2023).

"INNOCENT! I am very glad that we have an independent judiciary and the court has confirmed what I have been saying from the beginning. That I am innocent and have done nothing illegal" (Twitter profile of Andrej Babiš, 9.1.2023).

"The media, and especially politicians, said - prosecuted, accused. And over and over again. I hope it will stop, and I certainly don't want or expect anyone to apologize for the untruths. Especially as far as my family is concerned, this is really a very traumatic situation, story and history for us" (ct24.ceskatelevize.cz, 2023).

It is evident that Babiš is trying all the more spasmodically to maintain his anti-corruption pose. It almost seems like Babiš has no choice but to endlessly repeat conspiracy theories, and he must now distance himself from the "insidious" infiltration of glitchers he does not know and has never seen.

Despite a number of problematic aspects, such as the connection between Babiš's business and his political position, conflicts of interest, criminal prosecution, etc., Babiš is still able to play the role of a convincing anti-corruption fighter for some voters. Fifteen years ago, even just the accusation would have been the end of Babiš's political career. However, the rise of populism has all but banished the tradition for politicians to resign in the face of scandal. It now appears a badge of honour to brazen it out, deny all, and turn the accusations on the accusers. Babiš insisted from the start that the allegations were concocted by his political enemies to halt his effort to clean up a system rife with corruption.

The figure of a criminally prosecuted prime minister in conflict of interest has then created a target for the anti-corruption rhetoric of opposition political actors. As a result, on both sides of the barricade, the issue of corruption plays a significant role in political communication strategies, which limits the space devoted to other, and often many times more relevant, issues:

"The decision of the independent court must be respected. Everyone has formed an opinion on the case, which has been followed by the public for many years, the important fact is that real political struggles in a democracy take place in elections and not in courtrooms. And this great opportunity awaits us this Friday and Saturday. Let's vote and let's deal with the future." Petr Fiala, Prime Minister of Czechia (pravda.sk, 2023)

"It's the return of the subsidy, it doesn't mean a crime couldn't have been committed. It still needs to be remembered. That subsidy was exhausted and it was only returned under the pressure that was associated with the very fact that the matter started to surface." Ales Cimbal, State Prosecutor's Office spokesman (noviny.sk, 2023)

"Don't expect me to react like an amateur detective and ask how it is possible that (the prime minister's) son from his first marriage is allegedly taken to Crimea. It all looks like a wild conspiracy to me. The Czech government will not be shaken by this information, but Babiš could be forced to resign - if his nerves fail. But as someone who has been exposed to a similar situation for 30 years, I can only advise Andrej Babiš not to let his nerves fail." Miloš Zeman, former president of Czechia (pravda.sk, 2023)

"Memories of the kidnapping of the son of the Slovak president in the 1990s. How far can we go before the prime minister uses his office as a shield against the law and our country as a piece on the chessboard of power?" Ivan Bartos, chairman of the Pirates party (pravda.sk, 2018)

Slovakia

Igor Matovič, former Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic, Minister of Finance, currently serving as the Member of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OEANO)

Matovič proposed a reward of 500 euros to every voter who casts a vote in the early elections that Slovakia will face on September 30th this year. Some MPs accused Matovič of electoral corruption. Matovic attempted to push through this proposal twice but the plenary did not move it forward in the legislative process.

As he writes in his explanatory memorandum, the reward would be paid within 90 days after the announcement of the election result. He also states that in the case of the expected participation of about 3 million people, the cost to the state of the reward would amount to about 1.5 billion euros. Matovič justified the proposal as an effort to increase participation in the elections, fearing that a low number of people would turn out to vote.

(startitup.sk, 2023) He considers this to be an incentive, a fair reward and a return on investment.

"It is in line with good management, if Smer-SD and the extremists come to power, they would "steal" more" (tvnoviny.sk, 2023).

"Of course, it is not an insignificant amount. On the other hand, compared to the 30 billion euros that, according to various estimates, the people of Robert Fico and Peter Pellegrini should have deprived Slovakia of during the 12 years of their governments, it is only about 5 percent of their loot" (tvnoviny.sk, 2023).

"In this case, €1.5 billion would be shared by 3 million mostly quite ordinary people. It is therefore a fair investment with an extremely quick return" (tvnoviny.sk, 2023).

"There is a real risk that a million democratically sentient voters will remain frustrated at home and leave the decision on the fate of Slovakia in the hands of people who have been manipulated for three years at the decisive moment. There is a real risk that Slovakia will be torn out of European and Euro-Atlantic structures after the elections and that Slovakia will be tied to Russia (pravda.sk, 2023).

"We will be an expensive bride" (aktuality.sk, 2023).

"Once we say that we have to do everything to make sure that every person comes to fight for Slovakia, because the mafia is grinding its teeth to steal Slovakia from us together with the fascists, we are not joking" (sita.sk, 2023).

"The fact that we will be further excluded from future cooperation after this opinion does not bother us at all. They did it four years ago as well. If they want to exclude us for this public promise and use it as an excuse not to enter into a government coalition with us because we have excluded ourselves, we are ready for that" (sita.sk, 2023).

He rules out the possibility of electoral corruption because he is not forcing voters to give their votes to the OĽaNO movement. One of the types of electoral corruption is the manipulation of voters (Birch, 2009). The techniques involved in such manipulation are designed to alter voters true preferences. The use of state resources to support the campaign of a particular candidate or party. Igor Matovič has clearly named the reasons why he wants to give people 500 euros to participate in the elections. So that they don't vote for specific parties. So he is promising to support specific groups or political parties at the expense of others with these 500 euros per head. And since only certain groups stand to benefit from this proposal, it is therefore not about the public interest, but about corruption.

Regardless of how the voters would have acted Matovic's mistake was not fighting corruption, Matovic's mistake is that he sees politics as a solution to his personal grievances and traumas, as it is evident from his rhetoric. Although the fight against corruption is sincere, he does not present it as a solution to a society-wide problem, but as his own therapy with his experiences and a fight with personal enemies, which again is the evidence of the egocentric political victimhood.

Reactions:

"I don't give a damn about the whole OLaNO with their idiotic proposals. Fourteen cents. Ask Heger how those people in poverty are supposed to manage," Robert Fico, the chairman of the Smer-SSD party (tvnoviny.sk, 2023)

"We can all see that this is clear electoral corruption, he convinces us that it is not," Branislav Grohling, MP, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party (ta3.com, 2023)

"He must have gone mad. 500 euros from the state for participation in the elections. He must have gone mad. If I didn't know I had the microphone on, I would say it differently." Ondrej Dostál, the chairman of the Civic Conservative Party (OKS) (ta3.com, 2023)

"The festival of stupidity in the Parliament continues." official statement of the Progressive Slovakia party (ta3.com, 2023)

Overall interpretation

Corruption cases cannot be understood without the discourses that give them meaning. Discourses contain the conditions of possibility of what can and cannot be said.

The growing emphasis on the issue of corruption in political competition has also confirmed the prominence of this issue in the parties' election manifestos as well as in the speeches by politicians or the reactions to accused colleagues. Nevertheless, it has influenced not only the transformation of anti-corruption rhetoric, but also the shape of Czech and Slovak politics up to the present day-regardless of whether we understand it as corruption or not. The very fact that most of the main protagonists were acquitted by the courts has significantly reinforced the belief among many voters that corrupt politicians, unlike the "common man", are unpunished. Thus, new actors could emerge proclaiming that they stand on the side of the people against the corrupt elite.

In terms of political strategies, it is important to be interested in how the issue of corruption is used by politicians in political struggles - for example, by positioning themselves as anti-corruption fighters or by labelling their opponents as corrupt or corrupting individuals. Here we find one possible explanation for why loud anti-corruption rhetoric may not be translated into real political action. If corruption serves only as an issue in the electoral struggle, one cannot expect much of a successful anti-corruption agenda as it is evident in Andrej Babiš' case.

The ability to label almost any political competitor as corrupt, or their activities as corrupt, is facilitated by the complicated meaning of corruption. So what does corruption actually mean? According to an often quoted definition, corruption is an act that deviates from the formal obligations of the (corrupt) individual's public role for reasons of private gain. In other words, corruption is the abuse of public position or resources for one's own enrichment.

Apart from being somewhat academically dry, the definition is also rather abstract. It is clear that the concept of corruption, so defined, is an umbrella term for a range of specific activities and practices - from bribery to nepotism, and embezzlement. The meaning is contextually variable, often in relation to the speaker's position - with a certain degree of exaggeration we can say that this is an example of an "irregular verb" timed in relation to the actor's person: "I draw/invest/do business/do politics", "you abuse", "he corrupts/is corrupt". If the concept of corruption is not filled with a specific and unchanging meaning, it can be used to operate on all sides and against all political competitors.

But is the subsidy to the Stork's Nest corruption, as some Czech political representatives claim? Or is it "just" a fraud, as the state apparatuses believe in the indictment? Is the whole case just a "dispute over a subsidy", as Miloš Zeman states? Or is it simply an investment, and a beneficial investment for all, as Andrej Babiš says - and adds that "the corrupt are the others"? These examples already show that the concept of corruption, despite its vagueness, is burdened with such a negative meaning that it can easily serve to delegitimise a political opponent. So anti-corruption rhetoric need not be innocent and apolitical in any way. On the contrary, it is politicized to the highest degree. If corruption is the "greatest evil", the clash between the "anti-corruption warrior" and the "corrupter" is de facto a clash between "good" and "evil". If one is "corrupt", can such a person govern at all? Is the "rule of evil" legitimate?

Conclusion

The use of corruption as a political topic has considerable dynamics - in the vocabulary and communicative repertoire of Czech and Slovak politicians the term gradually has been customized.

This is happening regardless of the type of actors or their political or ideological orientation. Strong statements against corruption, manifestations of anti-corruption resolve, and rhetorical linking of other political actors to corrupt activities have become evergreen in party programs, government documents, party communications on social media, and presidential speeches, interviews, and texts.

A number of new political actors, who challenge the existing political establishment from outside the system, explain their entry into politics as a reaction to "the corruption of politicians that simply could no longer be watched". In many cases, corruption becomes the main issue that new groups seeking to gain political power articulate to the electorate. The anti-corruption agenda of these actors is often quite vague, but it includes various versions of the statement that "unlike all other politicians, we are not corrupt (and we work for the people)". Corruption thus also becomes an essential marketing slogan and a theme in electoral competition, which is able to reach and mobilise voters.

Corpus resources:

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