A Wolf Without Teeth: Electoral Manifestos of the Populist Radical Right Party SPD in the Czech Local Elections[1]

Petr Voda[2]

Abstract

Populist radical right parties often position themselves at the edges of the political spectrum, particularly at the national level, where they adopt strong nationalist, anti-immigration, and anti-elitist stances. However, these positions often lose relevance at the local level. Local governments have limited power over migration, local elites are embedded within their communities, and broader political frameworks remain unchangeable. This article examines how the Czech radical right party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) operated locally in the 2018 and 2022 municipal elections. By manually coding 188 electoral manifestos from 141 municipalities, it shows considerable variation in the party's local strategies. In some municipalities, manifestos contain no signs of populism or radical stances on immigration and nativism. In others, the SPD constructs "the people" and "the elite" in a populist way and adopts clear anti-immigration and nationalist positions, illustrating the diverse nature of its local-level strategies.

2   Assistant professor at the Department of Political Science, Masaryk University, Joštova 10, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic. E-mail: pvoda@fss.muni.cz. ORCID: 0000-0002-9383-376X.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been an apparent shift in voter support toward radical right populist parties across European countries (see Rovira Kaltwasser & Zanotti, 2023), particularly at the national (Garzia, 2023; Halikiopoulou, 2018; Voda & Havlík 2021) and European levels (Luo, 2017; Mudde, 2024). However, this shift is also occurring in local elections (Nyholt, 2024). Unlike at the national level, our understanding of populist parties' behaviour at the local level remains limited. There are studies on technocratic populists (Drápalová & Wegrich, 2021) and the performance of radical-right populist parties (Paxton, 2020; Paxton, 2023; Paxton & Peace, 2021), but research on their policy positions and proposals is largely absent. Such insights could enhance our understanding of the role of radical right populist parties in a multilevel political system and their function in representative democracy.

Paxton (2020) suggests that local government is where core populist demands are most likely to be implemented, as local politics offers more opportunities for rhetoric focused on 'the people' and advocating for their empowerment, especially when direct and participatory democratic methods are involved. Furthermore, local elections tend to favour the expression of localism, which is closely associated with populist attitudes (Kübler, Strebel, & Marcinkowski, 2024). In my view, however, the nature of local politics can be somewhat inhospitable to radical parties. Radical right parties may lack influence in the local political environment because it differs fundamentally from the national level, both in terms of the scope of local government powers and in voter-party relationships. This is especially relevant to the Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD). While the party holds strong anti-immigration positions, municipalities have limited control over migration policy. The SPD is also strongly Eurosceptic and advocates for a referendum on leaving the EU ('Czexit'). Yet EU subsidies are a crucial source of funding for various municipal matters, such as education, housing, renewable energy, and cultural facilities (Spáč et al., 2022), making it difficult to reconcile local needs with a platform of EU withdrawal. Additionally, while the party's name includes 'direct democracy', this is already possible at the local level (Voda, 2022). Similarly, it is challenging to create divisions between 'ordinary people' and 'corrupt elites' in small to medium-sized municipalities, where voters often have personal knowledge of mayors and council members (Šaradín, 2010).

These conditions raise several questions: How does a radical right populist party express its 'radicality' at the local level? How does it convey populism and anti-elitism? And how does it handle national issues of the party like anti-immigration, Euroscepticism, and direct democracy in a local context?

In this article, I address these questions through a qualitative analysis of 188 SPD local party manifestos from the 2018 and 2022 local elections. This case study provides valuable insights for several reasons. Firstly, the SPD is an emerg-

ing case; the party was founded in 2016 following a split from the parliamentary party Dawn of Direct Democracy, so the article covers both local elections held since the party's inception. Secondly, analysing SPD's local manifestos reveals variation that cannot be observed at the national level, as the party operates across different party systems (sometimes alongside even more radical parties), in a variety of localities (centre vs. periphery), and in municipalities of varying sizes and socio-economic contexts. Thirdly, the party fits well into category of radical right populist parties and thus the findings may travel to other cases in the category.

Moreover, there are also some important contextual characteristics of country which enables and/or limits applicability of findings to other countries. Since the populism is kind of scalar phenomenon (Kübler, Strebel, & Marcinkowski, 2024) it is important to note that Czech Republic is unitary state structure with lack of significant regional autonomy. The level of local autonomy is rather modest, but the system of municipalities belongs to the most territorially fragmented systems in Europe (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010). Due to the typical separation and relative closeness caused by the historical manner of settlement, residents of these units established distinct community-based local identities. The ethos of localism was then the driving force behind the spontaneous disintegration of previously amalgamated municipalities after the fall of the communist regime at the beginning of 1990s (Voda et al., 2017). Finally, the local politics in Czech Republic in small and middle-sized municipalities is dominated by local parties and independent lists and party system enhances personalization (Voda, 2022).

This article contributes to the 'localist turn' in populism studies (Chou et al., 2022), which focuses on the local dimension of populism, particularly in urban areas where cosmopolitan values may contrast sharply with populist positions (Mullis, 2021), and on the manifestations of right-wing populism in urban settings (Fainstein & Novy, 2023). Furthermore, local-level analysis can provide insight into the fundamental bases of populism. The current 'geographical' literature (Adler & Ansell, 2019) views populism as a 'politics of place'. While national politics tends to be more abstract, detached from specific places, local politics may reveal a more direct link between place and populist expression.

The article is structured as follows: First, I conceptualize radical right populist parties and outline their general programmatic profile. I then summarize what is known about SPD's policy offerings at the national level. The article subsequently explores how populist politics are adapted at the local level. This theoretical section is followed by a description of the data and methods used. The next section presents the main findings, and the final part concludes the article.

2. Electoral Manifestos of Radical Right Populist Parties

First, a conceptualization of radical right parties and populism is needed. The literature provides a relatively concise list of core features of radical right party politics. Key among these are populism and nativism. This list is expanded to include hostility toward migration and foreigners (Fenger, 2018), and democratic reforms promoting direct democracy (Best, 2020).

2.1 Populism

In this article, populism is understood in line with the classic work by Mudde (2004), who identifies the cleavage between 'the good and rightful people' and 'the corrupt and self-interested elite' as the foundation of populism. In other words, populism rests on two central ideas: anti-elitism and people-centrism (Mudde, 2004). It can be seen as an appeal to a more-or-less defined people against established power relations and the perceived dominance of certain beliefs, values, and societal ideas (Canovan, 1999). However, the notions of 'the people' and 'the elite' are not fixed (Canovan, 2004) and may be constructed differently across contexts (Pollock et al., 2015). At the local level, populist narratives of 'ordinary people' may include references to local communities threatened by an 'elite' perceived as out of touch.

2.2 Nationalism and Nativism

Conceptually, populism and nationalism are somewhat similar and overlap to an extent. Both emphasize the sovereignty of 'the people' (de Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017), but they differ in how this idea is applied. Brubaker (2020) offers insights into these differences. The term 'the people' can be dual, referring either to a sovereign 'demos' or nation (the collective whole) or to a subset within society, where the 'common people' are contrasted with an elite. Populism appeals to 'the people' as a sovereign demos, emphasizing the restoration of true democracy, while nationalism appeals to 'the people' as an ethos, emphasizing the restoration of a pure nation (Brubaker, 2020). Nationalism often refers to a country's 'golden age' (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022). Though connected, nationalism and nativism differ primarily in focus: nationalism looks inward, whereas nativism primarily targets out-groups. Nativism can be understood as an 'intense opposition to an internal minority based on its foreign connections' (Higham, 2002, p. 4) or as 'hostility to anything perceived as alien and threatening to national cohesion' (Betz, 2017, p. 335). Higham (1999, p. 384) states, 'nativism always divided insiders, who belonged to the nation, from outsiders, who were in it but not of it'. Populism often employs nativism to frame minorities as sources of injustice and corruption (Riedel, 2018).

2.3 Anti-immigration

Today, nativist hostility is commonly expressed through anti-immigrant attitudes targeting immigrants or immigrant communities within the country (Lippard, 2011) or, as in the Czech Republic, immigrants yet to arrive. Anti-immigrant sentiment is driven by the belief that immigrants threaten the social and cultural fabric of the country, creating societal divisions (Lippard, 2011). Additionally, the perception of immigrants as posing economic, political, or cultural threats to natives' group position plays a crucial role in fuelling anti-immigration attitudes (Higham, 2002).

2.4 Promotion of Direct Democracy

In populism, the idea of popular sovereignty is closely tied to mechanisms that enhance the expression of the people's will. Consequently, promoting direct democracy is a central political expression of populism (Tormey, 2020). The demand for referenda aligns with Rousseau's vision of the popular will being expressed in frequent assemblies, a model best suited to small and proximate communities (Lauglo, 1995). Mohrenberg, Huber and Freyburg (2021) also find a connection between populist attitudes and support for direct democracy among citizens. Thus, populist parties may be inclined to promise the introduction or strengthening of direct democracy, as their voters lean in this direction. This link should be especially strong for non-technocratic populist parties (de Blasio & Sorice, 2018), which use direct democracy as a tool to empower citizens. However, Gherghina and Pilet (2021) note an almost tautological issue, as questions measuring populist attitudes are similar to those assessing preferences for direct democracy. It is important to note here, that unlike on national level, the local referenda are already within legal framework at local and regional level (Jüptner, Valušová, & Kruntorádová, 2014)

2.5 Euroscepticism

For some populist parties, Euroscepticism is central to their ideology, as seen with the UK Independence Party (UKIP) (Lynch & Whitaker, 2013). Vasilopoulou (2018) highlights the close relationship between Euroscepticism and radical parties (including populist radical right parties), which often critique the EU from a sovereignty-based perspective grounded in ethno-cultural values. These parties portray the EU as a threat to national sovereignty, accusing its policies of dismantling state authority, encroaching on national territory, and contributing to cultural disintegration within Europe and its nation-states. At the local level, such narratives can be silenced by important flows of EU subsidies aiming primarily into less developed areas. On the other hand, EU-funded projects may be framed

by radical right actors as symbols of external control, excessive bureaucracy, or favoritism toward specific groups. This dynamic resonates with broader populist interpretations of infrastructure and governance, where public investments are portrayed as arenas of elite domination and mismanagement (Turner, 2020; Beveridge, Naumann, & Rudolph, 2024). Similar to how PRR parties politicize national infrastructure or energy transitions (Kammermann & Dermont, 2018), local debates over EU-funded projects provide opportunities to translate abstract sovereignty-based critiques into concrete, place-based grievances.

3. PRR on local level

Analyzing local electoral manifestos is relatively uncommon, though recent studies have started to explore this area. These studies typically focus on the structure of political space (Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Reuse, 2024) or on the localization of pledges (Voda & Vodová, 2024; Otjes, 2024). However, there are also works that provide insight into the specifics of radical right populist party (PRR) manifestos at the local level.

As it is stated in introduction, some specifics of local politics may be not very favourable for radical right parties to express their policy preferences. In this respects, main factors is local political agenda. Municipalities (not only in the Czech Republic) are primarily responsible for securing every-day needs of municipalities such as schools and kindergartens, waste collection, managing of roads, pathways and local transport, spatial planning and managing of municipal budget. Obviously, all these tasks enable parties to offer 'populist' solutions but the space for 'radical-right' solutions is rather limited. Municipal competencies do not include migration, relations to European Union and referendum as basic tool of direct democracy can be relatively easily forced just by group of citizens.

On the contrary, current literature mentions several was how radical right populist parties may strengthen their appeals in local politics.

Firstly, some scholars (Akın & Bulut, 2019; Chou, Moffitt, & Busbridge, 2022; Katz & Nowak, 2018; Griggs & Howarth, 2008) see localism as important part of populism or at least as concept closely related to populism. Normatively, localism forms an antithesis to the cosmopolitanism. In American literature, populism and localism are closely related. According to Barndt (2022) localism is an ideal of life associated with the land, hard work and simplicity, and the acceptance of natural limits. On the other hand, localism may take the form of narrow-minded parochialism, prejudice, and distrust of outsiders (Macedo, 2021).

Another analytical direction examines the relationship between populism and infrastructures such as energy, water, transport, and social services, based on the idea that socio-spatial cohesion is significantly shaped by infrastructure (Turner, 2020). Infrastructure offers right-wing populists a means to advance

nationalist goals. For example, policies on infrastructure can support right-wing populist causes like defending car transportation against metropolitan liberal elites and opposing anti-car movements. Infrastructure allows PRR to frame climate change and environmental issues as a struggle between elites and the people. Atkins and Menga (2022) note that a hallmark of right-wing populism is the dismissal of climate science and environmental policy.

Beveridge, Naumann, and Rudolph (2024) summarize recent findings on interactions between PRR and various forms of infrastructure. In energy policy, PRR parties resist urban transitions from fossil to renewable energy sources (Kammermann & Dermont, 2018; Fraune & Knodt, 2018) and support car infrastructure over efforts to promote public urban transport and biking (Filion, 2011; Kiss et al., 2020). In social policy, these parties oppose accommodations for refugees (Waldron, 2021) and demand exclusive access to schools and healthcare for 'native' citizens (Sant & Brown, 2021; Peker, 2021; Speed & Mannion, 2020). In public administration, PRR parties challenge diversity and gender-awareness initiatives in public services (Peters & Pierre, 2019) and resist democratic oversight of urban policing and sustainable infrastructure in urban planning (Fainstein & Novy, 2023).

The local level, therefore, offers additional channels for expressing anti-elitism. First, populists may target municipal administrations as an attempt to 'take back' the state and replace the influence of previous, allegedly corrupt administrations (Thompson, 2017). Yet, populism often lacks a systematic approach to replace administrative functions with any form of 'populist governance' (Peters & Pierre, 2019). Second, the local level enables populists to leverage liberal education policies, as education is often depicted in populist narratives as ideologically controlled by elites (Sant & Brown, 2021).

4. Introduction to the case of the SPD

The SPD emerged in May 2015 after Okamura and his closest collaborator, Radim Fiala, were expelled from their previous party, Dawn of Direct Democracy. For this article, three features of the SPD are particularly important. First, the use of populist elements by the party at the national level offers an initial picture of the extent to which SPD qualifies as a radical right populist party. Second, the party's ideological profile at the national (and regional) levels serves as a benchmark for analysing the content of local-level manifestos. Finally, the organization of the party itself provides context for how local electoral manifestos are developed.

The SPD is classified as populist in several studies (Hloušek, Kopeček, & Vodová, 2020; Kim, 2020; Voda & Havlík, 2021) due to its strong anti-establishment appeals, which construct a moral division between two homogeneous groups: the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008).

The party's notion of the 'elite' includes Czech political elites, the European Union, global elites, Czech NGOs, and Czech mainstream media, emphasizing an antagonistic relationship between these elites and the Czech 'people' (Hloušek, Kopeček, & Vodová, 2020).

The SPD has adopted policies typical of radical right populist parties elsewhere. Alongside narratives about corrupt and incompetent politicians and calls for direct democracy measures, the SPD emphasizes immigration as a core issue, presenting strong nativist claims and framing immigration as a security, cultural, and economic threat to the Czech nation (Havlík, 2015; Caiani & Kluknavská, 2017). Kim (2020) examined the discourse of Czech populist parties and found that the SPD delineates a populist opposition between 'the people' or 'citizens' on one side and 'political dinosaurs', traditional 'parties', or 'godfather party mafias' on the other. The SPD also articulates an exclusionary stance towards 'non-working "unadaptables"', blending hyper-neoliberal welfare chauvinism with anti-minority illiberalism. Similarly, Charvátová and Niklesová (2024) found that nativism is a key element in the party leader's messages to voters during the 2021 parliamentary elections.

The SPD's ideological profile at the national level is well-documented. Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová (2020) outline the party's priorities since its inception, noting a particular emphasis on immigration, which aligned with the context of 2015 when Europe experienced an unprecedented influx of refugees from Africa and the Middle East. Although the Czech Republic was not a primary destination, immigration became a highly discussed topic. Furthermore, the issue of (illegal) immigration was linked to Euroscepticism, Islamophobia, and terrorism concerns. SPD officials even organized anti-immigration demonstrations, employing populist appeals by defining immigrants as a homogeneous group that stands against the interests of ordinary Czech people (Hloušek, Kopeček, & Vodová, 2020).

The SPD's attempts to establish itself at the local level have had limited success in the 2018 elections (Hloušek, Kopeček, & Vodová, 2020), with slight improvement in the 2022 elections. Although the party fielded almost 5,000 candidates in the 2018 local elections, it won only about 3.2% of the vote and gained around 150 council seats. Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová (2020) attribute this limited success to two factors. First, the party's strong identification with Okamura, who did not stand for local election, and the alienation of the SPD electorate from local politics (Stauber & Cirhan, 2024). Second, the party's emphasis on immigration did not resonate as strongly with voters in local elections. Most SPD councillors remained in opposition at the local level, with only a few exceptions, such as Kladno, Krupka, Otrokovice, and Orlová. However, SPD was eventually replaced in Kladno and Krupka coalitions. In the 2022 local elections, the SPD won 550 councillor seats in 221 municipalities. Although these results remain low compared to other established parliamentary parties and are similar to the Pirate Party, SPD officials interpreted the outcome as a victory for the party.

4.1 Party Organization

The SPD has established a relatively robust, three-tier structure with a party chair and presidium at the top, regional organizations defined by the country's 14 regions in the middle, and district clubs at the lowest level, aligned with administrative districts (Stauber & Cirhan, 2024; Hloušek, Kopeček, & Vodová, 2020). Importantly, the absence of a local party structure means that all members within a district are closely interconnected. Regional organizations hold strong authority over district clubs, which were not established in all districts. In June 2019, of the country's 78 districts, only 16 had elected leadership, 45 had only a coordinator chosen by the presidium, and 17 had no club at all (Hloušek, Kopeček, & Vodová, 2020). This changed significantly in 2022, when only 10 districts were managed by a coordinator, and 9 had no club. Following the election, the party statutes were updated to permit the establishment of local clubs.

Given this top-down structure, it is likely that local manifestos within each region are influenced by regional organizations. Although exact procedures for drafting local manifestos are not publicly known, the national manifesto is controlled by the presidium. Rules for regional and local manifestos are also set by the presidium, making it plausible that local manifestos are reviewed by higher levels of the party (despite frequent errors and unclear wording, suggesting limited scrutiny). Furthermore, both regional branches and the party presidium have the authority to dissolve lower-level organizations, as seen when the regional organization in Moravia-Silesia and the district organization in Brno were dissolved due to candidate disputes in the 2018 local elections. In Pardubicky region, members were expelled for creating unauthorized campaign materials (Hloušek, Kopeček, & Vodová, 2020). This structure compels local members to align closely with the party line.

5. Data and methods

The primary source of information for this study is a corpus of local electoral manifestos from the SPD. Since there is no centralized project archiving local manifestos in the Czech Republic, I conducted my own data collection using several methods. Majority of manifestos come from search the municipality name along with 'SPD' in Facebook. I also checked profiles of regional party organizations, which allowed me to collect 134 manifestos via Facebook. The second source was municipal information leaflets through which I acquired approximately 30 manifestos. The final source was the party's official website, from which I obtained six manifestos. Additionally, some local SPD branches (16 in total) have their own websites with manifestos hosted outside the main domain. The exact sources are included in the data table.

In total, I collected manifestos from 86 out of the 164 municipalities where the SPD fielded candidates or joined coalitions in the 2018 elections and from 102 out of 242 municipalities in the 2022 elections. However, there is a notable variation in coverage by municipality size and election year. For the 2018 elections, I was missing nearly all manifestos from the Královéhradecký and Moravskoslezský regions, as the regional and district organizations there were dissolved during the 2018-2022 term. Nevertheless, the coverage includes all major cities and a representative sample of municipalities of varying sizes.

For the 2022 elections, only one manifesto is missing from municipalities with over 50,000 residents. However, I collected only five manifestos from municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. This is partly due to the tendency in smaller municipalities not to issue formal manifestos, as local elections there often focus on candidate experience and competency rather than policy documents. Thus, the politics in these areas is often based on personal connections and familiarity rather than written platforms. The data gathered provide significant insights into the party's policy proposals in municipalities with populations over 3,000, with near-complete coverage in municipalities above 20,000.

Figure 1:
Distribution of Manifestos Across Municipality Size Categories
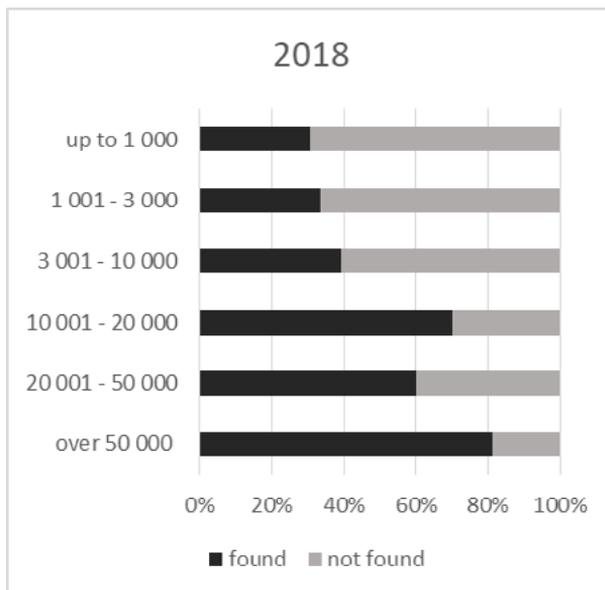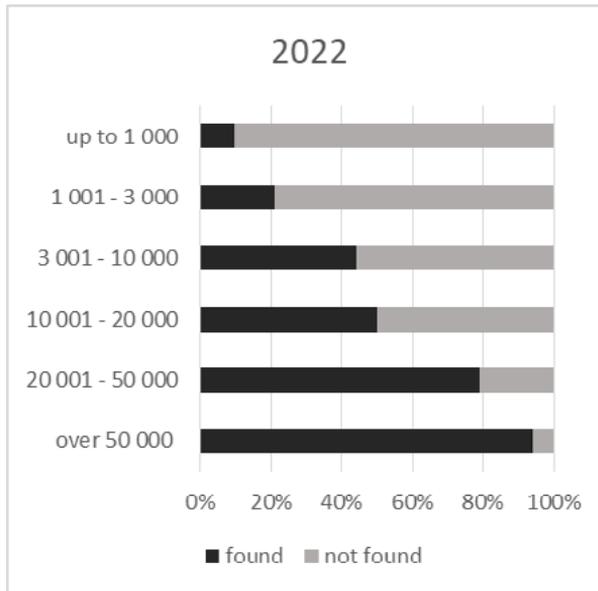
Source: The author.

I used qualitative coding to analyse the manifestos, a method that enables a nuanced interpretation of the data beyond the specifics of individual documents, allowing for a higher level of abstraction in creating the coding categories (Harrison, 2013). The analysis of electoral manifestos is a well-established method for estimating party positions and policy salience (Akkerman, de Lange, & Rooduijn, 2018). However, local manifestos differ in content and style from those at the national or regional levels, making standardized coding schemes such as the 'Manifesto Project' or 'MARPOR' unsuitable. Furthermore, my research questions focus not on positions or salience but on how the party incorporates various concepts associated with radical right populism. For these reasons, I developed a custom coding scheme by thoroughly reading all documents and creating categories that fit the target concepts. The coding categories are designed to facilitate comparisons across municipalities and over time.

In practice, I categorized each sentence or paragraph into one or more coding categories. Besides the main categories of interest—construction of 'the people', anti-elitism, nationalism, Euroscepticism, and direct democracy—I also coded each sentence by policy area, such as security, transparency, transportation, schooling, and housing. During the initial reading, I divided nationalism into subcategories: anti-immigration and nativism (see coding scheme in appendix 1). The coding was tested by independent coder on 10 manifestos with agreement rate 91.3%.

In this study, the entire manifesto serves as the unit of analysis. Previous studies have shown that individual sentences, due to their brevity, are not

adequate for capturing the ideological nuances of populism (Rooduijn, de Lange, & van der Brug, 2014). Puleo and Piccolini (2022) argue that, for heterogeneous documents of varying lengths and structures, analysing the entire document as a single unit is more effective. For each manifesto, I assessed the presence and intensity of key programmatic features (anti-elitism, nationalism, nativism, Euroscepticism) based on the coding of shorter passages. However, it is worth noting that these manifestos are often very brief and lack in-depth explanations of their claims, sometimes offering only subtle references to populism or nationalism. Furthermore, the language used is often marred by errors and misplacement of commas, making comprehension challenging at times.

6. Findings and discussion

6.1 Construction of 'the people'

The populist construction of 'the people' is mostly absent from the 2018 election manifestos, with only six manifestos showing any indications of this. When it does appear, it is usually in a narrow form, suggesting that 'the people' share a common interest that the party implicitly (Mladá Boleslav, Kladno) or explicitly (e.g., 'we know what bothers all of us' — Nymburk) aims to serve. Another approach links the party directly to the people, as in 'we are one of you' (Slaný) or 'your city and our common lives here' (Rožnov pod Radoštěm). In one case, the manifesto even refers to the party itself as made up of 'ordinary citizens' (Moravská Třebová 2018).

In 2022, however, the populist construction of 'the people' is far more prevalent across electoral manifestos, with a broader set of phrases referencing the people. Some manifestos still suggest that the entire municipality constitutes a single people with shared interests (Štěpánov, Klokočí, Střemy). Typically, the first part of the manifesto defines who SPD claims to represent, with the term 'people' now applied more specifically, denoting 'our' decent working citizens, elderly people, families with children, and disabled individuals. This definition appears throughout the documents in various policy contexts: security (Jilemnice), public spaces for 'polite' citizens, and housing for 'polite families'. There is, however, a notable exclusion of ethnic minorities, immigrants, and members of the elite from this vision of 'the people' (the exclusion of these groups is detailed further in the following section).

In Chabařovice, 'the people' are described as having 'common sense'. However, the explicit phrase 'ordinary people' appears only in one manifesto (Společnost kde vládnou běžní lidé — Kutná Hora). This characterization, however, recurs in other policy areas across documents, including security (Jilemnice), public spaces for 'polite' people, and housing for 'polite families', among others. In some

cases, the manifestos refer to the party as a defender of the common interests of ordinary people (Neratovice, Rumburk).

6.2 Construction of 'the elite'

While the definition of 'the people' is generally explicit and clear, the conception of 'the elite' appears only sparsely and mainly in opposition to 'the people'. This elite is framed as an abstract group in an antagonistic relationship with the people. In the 2018 manifestos, the elite is depicted in various forms, including political actors like local representatives (Rožnov) who are expected to follow the people's will (Hranice 2018), the broader political establishment (Votice 2018), 'political dinosaurs' (Slaný), entrepreneurs (Litoměřice 2018), 'godfathers' and 'political mafia' (Plzeň), and 'oligarchs and lobbyists' (Most). By the 2022 elections, this list expands to include the national government (Ostrava 2022, Šilheřovice, Uničov), 'chosen officials' (Kladno 2022), municipal administrations (Šilheřovice 2022, Ivančice 2022), 'financial interests of lobbying groups' (Pardubice 2022), and the wealthiest citizens (Třebíč 2022).

It is noteworthy that only occasionally is the current 'local government' seen as an enemy of the people. Similarly, the national government is only targeted in a few municipalities, and only in the 2022 elections. In 2018, the government included the populist ANO party and Social Democrats, which made it a less straightforward target for populist rhetoric compared to the 2022 government led by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS).

A specific approach to opposing the elite involves a demand for the direct and material accountability of elected representatives and administration members (without specifying for what). Although local governments lack the power to enforce this, similar promises appear in several municipalities (Žatec, Brno, Kopřivnice, Bojkovice). Additionally, there is a call for replacing politicians on the boards of municipal companies with specialists, adding a technocratic element to this stance (Drápalová & Wegrich, 2021).

This does not imply an absence of criticism toward current municipal leaders. Such critiques vary from implicit, vague accusations ('we are not going to build further over-expensive, wasted buildings' — Hradec Králové 2022; 'not repeating failed projects' — Blansko; 'no stealing' — Znojmo), to critiques of specific projects (Bělá 2022, Přelouč 2022, Bruntál 2018) and responses in particular situations (e.g., failed response to the energy crisis — Chomutov). Some critiques ascribe negative characteristics like passivity (Klokočí), incompetence (Prostějov 2018, Ivančice 2022), unkept promises (České Budějovice 2018, Koryčany 2022), and 'populist waste of money' (Ostrava 2022).

In summary, the party often leverages specific municipal issues to create an 'enemy of the people'. However, the identity of this enemy is frequently left vague, and information about their actions is only occasionally provided. The

critique is mostly broad and generalized, directed not at specific parties or individuals, but rather at shadowy actors, the administration, representatives, or the establishment in general.

6.3 Nativism and nationalism

The nativist elements are strongly evident in SPD's local manifestos. Some explicitly convey anti-immigration stances, preferring native citizens over any external group in various areas (e.g., Pardubice 2022: 'We will prevent preference for foreign nationals at the expense of our own citizens'). In several municipalities' 2018 manifestos, the SPD presented itself as a movement for the nation, while in 2022, it aimed to bolster national and regional identity. Subtler nativist undertones emerge, particularly regarding foreign companies' roles in energy and water supply. Notably, some documents explicitly distance themselves from racism (though followed by implicitly racist statements), and one includes an implicit rejection of xenophobia (České Budějovice 2018).

There is significant variation in the prominence of this issue across municipalities and over time. In 2018, explicit opposition to foreign immigrants appears in over two dozen manifestos; in 2022, only three manifestos make similar mentions. The shift is not only quantitative but also rhetorical. In 2018, SPD's local branches varied widely in tone—from liberal calls for mutual coexistence in a pluralistic society (České Budějovice), to slogans like 'no illegal immigrants in our municipality', specific rejections of Muslim immigrants (Chomutov, Varnsdorf) and economic migrants (Zlín), to extreme statements framing migrants as invaders (Brtnice) or even as a "jihad" threat (Jihlava). Some manifestos go as far as claiming to prevent 'murdering, raping, and stealing by "immigration immigrants"' (Votice). In contrast, by 2022, SPD manifestos mainly express opposition to the establishment of new asylum centers for illegal immigrants, with some additionally targeting foreign workers (Pardubice, Holýšov, Bruntál, Žatec).

Three explanations may account for this change. First is the shifting salience of immigration; while the 2018 elections followed the peak of North African and Middle Eastern migration into the EU, these numbers were much lower in 2022, partly due to the pandemic. Second, the nature of immigration concerns shifted: previously driven by fears of Muslim immigrants, immigration in 2022 was largely driven by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With Ukrainian refugees—mostly women and children from similar cultural backgrounds seeking safety—it became harder to object to their presence. Third, local SPD branches may be moderating their image, reflecting on their limited success in the 2018 elections. After only securing more than one council seat in 30 municipalities and participating in local governments in just a few, SPD underwent notable personnel reshuffling; in most major cities, only a few top five candidates remained on the lists between 2018 and 2022.

Nonetheless, SPD still employs anti-minority rhetoric, particularly targeting the Roma minority. These messages are often subtly embedded, with phrases like opposition to 'positive discrimination based on race or ethnicity', references to 'parasites on the social system', or calls for 'no housing for those who destroyed their flats'. Additionally, the exclusion of both ethnic minorities and immigrants is implied through the frequent preference for "our citizens" (Ostrava 2022, among many other manifestos). However, in Vsetín, the party does advocate for including members of the Roma community in the city police.

The exclusionary stance extends to education, where SPD calls to end inclusion practices in schools, which implicitly means segregating children with disabilities, specific learning needs, and those from foreign or Roma backgrounds. Additionally, schools are targeted with promises to reinforce national traditions and reject 'multicultural ideology'.

An element of nationalism is also present in SPD's reference to a 'golden age', though instead of focusing on national history, the rhetoric centers on a golden age of the city. SPD offers a positive vision of improved quality of life, prosperity, and happiness for all, often accompanied by a nostalgic reference to the city's former prosperity (e.g., 'bringing back forgotten prosperity and glory to the city'). This approach aligns with Anderson and Secor's (2022) concept of 'discursive emptiness', allowing for affective unity around returning to past ideals. However, this narrative may be inconsistent with other manifesto points, particularly in areas with a history of post-WWII German population expulsions.

Finally, nativism is also evident in SPD's preference for local businesses and resistance to privatization of municipal infrastructure. Many manifestos propose 'de-privatizing' water resources currently managed by the French company Veolia (Zlín), highlighting the strategic importance of water and advocating for municipal ownership of water infrastructure (Příbram, Most, Olomouc). In Ostrava, SPD argues that water resources must be preserved for 'our people' and future generations, while in Napajedla and Most, there is concern over profits leaving the country. A similar but broader demand in Prague 2018 urges all multinational companies to 'take less from our people and give more back to the city'.

6.4 Euroscepticism

Addressing euroscepticism on the local level presents a challenge for a radical right populist party like SPD. While the party maintains a strong anti-EU stance nationally, calling for 'Czexit' and blaming the EU for a host of issues—migration, COVID vaccination, inflation, and energy crises—municipalities rely heavily on EU subsidies for investment projects. The pragmatic solution, seen in most municipalities, is to remain silent on EU criticism. However, some manifestos openly acknowledge the importance of EU subsidies in general (Brno, Olomouc, Šternberk, Břeclav, České Budějovice) or for specific purposes like housing development

(Skalice u České Lípy) and educational improvements (Olomouc, Šternberk). In České Budějovice, SPD even expresses a desire to increase participation in the Erasmus program to exchange knowledge with other EU cities.

Conversely, several manifestos align more closely with the national SPD's Eurosceptic position. These manifestos oppose perceived threats to Czech traditions from 'Brussels bureaucrats' (Blansko, Vyškov), resist 'senseless' EU directives (Zdice), blame the EU for immigration issues (Brtnice, Jihlava), view the Czech government as simply executing EU interests (Šilheřovice), and oppose adopting the Euro (Třebíč). Some even propose removing EU flags from public buildings (Třebíč, Vsetín) and declare opposition to regulations seen as limiting local car use (Ostrava), with a few municipalities outright calling for a referendum on EU membership (Bojkovice).

These varied stances suggest that local branches of SPD are tailoring their messaging to different audiences: some manifestos seem crafted to reassure higher party officials of their loyalty, while others are designed not to alienate or overly engage local voters in municipal elections.

6.5 Direct Democracy

Although direct democracy has been possible since 1990, SPD manifestos often promise to "enable" referendums at the local level. However, most references to direct democracy are vague, promising that voters will have a say on important issues without clearly specifying what those issues are. The manifestos contain a wide range of generalized phrases, such as 'important questions', 'key matters', 'most important investments', or 'things going around'. Only about a quarter of the references provide specifics, with referendums mostly proposed for decisions on cultural or sports facilities, infrastructure projects, or bans on gambling.

SPD rarely includes further democratic innovations, such as mini-publics or participatory budgeting, which are more typically associated with the Pirate Party. This may be due to a strategic emphasis on referendums as a populist measure that conveys power to 'the people' without fully committing to other participatory governance structures. This pattern is in line with previous research on the relation of populist radical right towards direct and deliberative democracy (see Gherghina Close & Carman, 2023).

7. Quantitative overview

The interpretation primarily focused on answering the question of how the SPD expresses populism and radical-right political stances. However, since the analysis encompasses all available manifestos, it is worth adding quantitative information about the investigated aspects of the party manifestos. A simple quantitative

overview (see Table 1) reveals considerable differences in party positions at the local level. In 2018, there was a strong presence of direct democracy promotion, nativist, and anti-immigration appeals in the manifestos, while formulations that could be seen as expressions of populism were relatively rare. Conversely, populist elements appear in almost half of the manifestos written for the 2022 local elections. Nativist elements remain present to a similar extent as in the previous elections, but references to direct democracy and anti-immigration appeals drop considerably. These changes may reflect shifts in the salience of certain issues or the party's effort to become a significant actor at the local level. However, the exact reasons for these changes remain an open question for further research.

Table 1:
Frequency of populist and radical right elements within manifestos

Year	2018	2022
The people	13	43
The elite	7	9
Anti-immigration	24	4
Nativism	30	32
Euroscepticism	5	5
Direct democracy	57	27
Number of manifestos	86	102

Source: The author.

Furthermore, for a party to be considered a radical right populist party, populist elements should align closely with nativist/nationalist stances. However, the simultaneous occurrence of these elements is observed in only a relatively small fraction of the analyzed cases. It appears that the party struggles to uphold its 'national' identity, as the most common scenario (found in 2/5 of cases) is one where both populism and nativism are absent from local electoral manifestos. Although one of these elements is present relatively often (each in about a quarter of cases), the overall pattern indicates that, despite the literature highlighting ways in which radical right populists can leverage local conditions to promote populist and nationalist visions, SPD, or at least the party's local actors, seem unable or unwilling to adopt these strategies.

Table 2:
Occurrence of populist and radical right appeals in manifestos

Populism	Nativism	% of cases
yes	yes	14.0
yes	no	19.7
no	yes	26.6
no	no	39.9

Source: The author.

8. Conclusion

Although the main argument of the article suggests that radical right populist party can find that expressing the national political stances may be hard at local level, the findings show that SPD's local branches often incorporate populist, nationalist, nativist, or Eurosceptic elements into their local election manifestos. The manifestos frequently construct a 'people vs. elite' narrative, contain strong anti-immigration rhetoric—sometimes with Islamophobic undertones—and advocate implicit or explicit preferences for 'Czech' or 'our' people. Euroscepticism is also evident, manifesting in symbolic gestures like calling for the removal of EU flags or criticizing 'Brussels bureaucrats'.

However, not all SPD manifestos include these elements. In fact, only about a quarter of manifestos contain distinctly radical-right or populist rhetoric, and only 35 manifestos (around one-sixth) combine a populist framing with nationalist or nativist statements. In some cases, nationalistic elements are present without overt populism, or vice versa; in other cases, both are absent. From this perspective, the party can seem like a "wolf without teeth," with local branches unable to match the strong populist, anti-immigration, and nationalist rhetoric seen on the national level. There is no clear pattern in how these positions appear: municipalities of various sizes (e.g., Prague and Chroboly), party strength, pre-election coalitions, and centrality (e.g., Krnov, Chomutov vs. Prague, Brno) exhibit same levels of populist and nationalist themes. Thus, the influence of local context on SPD's rhetoric remains an open question which has to be addressed in further research.

These findings contribute to political science by showing that radical right populist parties selectively adapt national-level rhetoric at the local level. While SPD local branches often incorporate populist, nationalist, nativist, or Eurosceptic elements, many manifestos lack these features, highlighting the constraints of local political agendas and organizational capacity. The observed inconsistencies and moderation in local rhetoric underscore the pragmatic tailoring of messages to municipal audiences. Overall, the study advances understanding of multi-scalar

populism, illustrating how ideological themes are scaled, adapted, and sometimes diluted across territorial levels, and raises new questions about the role of local context in shaping populist expression.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. It focuses exclusively on SPD in the Czech Republic, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other radical right or populist parties and national contexts especially because of rather specific nature of Czech local politics. The analysis relies on manifestos, capturing intended messages rather than actual behavior, broader communication strategies, or voter reception. Additionally, the study provides only a snapshot of two election cycles, leaving temporal dynamics unexamined. Finally, the causal role of local context—such as voter preferences, demographics, or economic conditions—remains unclear.

Additionally, the manifestos reveal contradictions and inconsistencies, reflecting what Beveridge, Naumann, and Rudolph (2024) observe about right-wing populist party rhetoric: often vague and sometimes contradictory. For example, in some areas, SPD calls for restrictions on public drinking, while in others, it promises to lift them. Speed limits are requested in some places but opposed in others. Contradictions even appear within single manifestos, such as promises of 'education without ideologies' alongside calls for teaching patriotic, democratic, and national traditions. The urban planning stance in Pardubice exemplifies this inconsistency: the manifesto opposes industry lobbying while inviting the regional chamber of commerce to participate in planning. However, explicit conspiracy theories or nonsensical claims, such as opposition to 5G networks or references to a 'great reset', are rare.

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Appendix 1: Coding scheme

Category	Definition
Populist people	A reference to citizens (people, inhabitants) as homogenous group, may include adjectives such as all, our, decent, ordinary, etc., or enumeration of a broad wide range of categories
	implicit or explicit assertion that citizens share the same interests
	an appeal for cohesion between people
	labelling of party candidates as ordinary people
Elites	an anti-citizen group
	rejection of political control
	mention of a 'chosen' group
	town halls or governance are against people
	the representatives or the government decide against the citizens
Immigration	rejection of (illegal) migration, or building facilities for migrants
	rejection of foreign workers
Nativism	preference of Czechs over foreigners (in work, schools, health care)
	Beneš Decrees
	rejection of foreign ownership (typically in the water industry)
Inadaptable	inadaptable citizens, Roma, homeless, drug addicts, parasites, criminals
	refusal of positive discrimination
	Demanding non-pressure and labour morality
	rejection of inclusion in education
Euroscepticism	rejection of the EU, the Euro, the European flags
	portrayal of other EU countries in negative light
Referendum	contains the word referendum or direct democracy