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Table of contents 1/2026

ARTICLES

REVIEWS

Is Friedrich Merz the Leader Germany Needs? CDU's Identity Crisis in the Age of Personalization

Martina Beránková, Marcela Konrádová[1]

Abstract

This study investigates how a traditional political party, the German CDU, has responded to increasing public demand for charismatic leadership. By analyzing the leadership of Friedrich Merz through the framework of plebiscitary leader democracy, the research highlights how the CDU has navigated the balance between intra-party authority and broader electoral appeal. This qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews, explores the perceptions, ideas, and priorities of key party politics stakeholders. The findings reveal that Merz has successfully positioned himself within the party by excelling in the four competition values of plebiscitary leader democracy: meritocracy, peaceful conflict resolution, integration, and repoliticization. His election was followed by the CDU's first-ever all-member vote, which marked a departure from previous elite-driven selection processes, granting him a strong internal mandate. However, the study also underscores the challenge of translating intra-party dominance into national electoral success.

Keywords: leader democracy; leader selection; qualities of leader; personal brand; German CDU; Friedrich Merz

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1. Introduction

Democratic leadership begins within political parties. However, many scholars (e.g., Scott, 2018; Illés, and Körösényi 2022; Pakulski and Higley 2008) argue that party politics are going through a process of de-ideologization and convergence. Political families in the classical sense and the traditional ideological cleavages between them are losing relevance. In a globalized and fast-paced world, dealing with diverse challenges such as pandemics, wars, economic crises, and climate change requires a different kind of solution than static and ideological party programs. There is a discussion about a crisis of political leadership (Castells, 2018; Green, 2016; Scott, 2018; Krasteva, 2019; Weinberg, 2022). So, it's not surprising that now more than ever, a modern democratic party is under pressure to procure the best possible leader.

A democracy which is defined by political leadership may be referred to as leader democracy (Weber, 1978; Körösényi, 2007; Kane & Patapan, 2012). Perhaps the most relevant implications of leader democracy are: (1) institutional mechanisms, through which competent, creative and talented people can be placed in leadership positions and are essential for democracy, and (2) an adequate amount of democratic equality must be sacrificed to ensure capable political leadership (Skovajsa, 2019, p. 140). Scholars suggest that politicians, political professionals, political scientists, journalists, and the broader public acknowledging and discussing the shift towards leader democracy may be beneficial (Pakulski & Higley, 2008; Illés & Körösényi, 2022) as its modern revitalization follows the trend of personalization and at the same time tries to describe the real functioning of contemporary democracies. Therefore, this article focuses on the selection of a leader through the prism of their qualities in a modern democracy.

The personality and qualities of political leaders have long been acknowledged as an important element of politics as well as having influence on political attitudes and behavior (Declercq et al., 1975; Lasswell, 1930; Regenstrei, 1965). However, research to date has focused primarily on voters' perceptions of politicians (Garzia, 2011; Pancer et al., 1999; Valgarðsson et al., 2021), and the leader's personality is not a factor at this stage of the political process. Whereas this article goes one level further and is interested in the qualities of a leader in its selection process, it represents a missing link in the existing research, because before a leader's personal brand (Smith, 2009; Kaneva & Klemmer, 2016; Pich et al., 2020) can appeal to voters, it must win the favor of party members and party elites.

This case study focuses on Friedrich Merz, the designated German chancellor and CDU (Christian Democratic Union) party leader as of March 2025. This qualitative study seeks to explore the perceptions, ideas, and priorities of key party politics stakeholders. Merz and his leadership style garner attention as he is set to lead the largest European nation. However, his electoral victory was preceded by a leadership selection process within the party as well as the party's ideological

and programmatic renewal. The authors explore how a traditional center-right political party has responded to an increasing popular demand for charismatic leadership, offering valuable insights for similar parties across Europe.

The aim of this study was not to provide representative statistical data, but rather to achieve a deep understanding of how political actors perceive and carry out the candidate selection process – which qualities they value, which mechanisms they consider fair or effective, and which dilemmas emerge in internal decision-making. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate in this case, as it allows for capturing the complexity, nuance, and contextual embeddedness of such internal party dynamics.

Gaining access to eight party members, who are insiders and experts in their own area may be considered a notable success, given the challenges associated with penetrating elite political structures. These environments are typically opaque, highly selective, and resistant to external inquiry. Establishing the trust required to conduct interviews at this level involves considerable effort, time, and relational capital.

Indeed, the scarcity of existing studies on intra-party processes reflects these very access barriers. This reality underscores the added value of the present research. The study plays an important exploratory role: it asks initial questions, identifies emerging themes, suggests conceptual frameworks, and provides valuable groundwork for more systematic future research.

In conclusion, this study should be understood as a pioneering qualitative probe into an understudied area of political life – the internal mechanisms of candidate selection within parties. Rather than being dismissed due to its limited sample, it should be recognized for opening up an empirically difficult but theoretically significant field of inquiry.

2. The Importance of the Leader

Democratic political systems and political parties are more or less personalized (e.g., Karvonen, 2009; Marino et al., 2022). Political personalization began as a trend in presidential regimes as a result of the erosion of traditional cleavages, the individualization of society, and the growth of the role of modern media, especially television (Voženílková, 2018). Over time, this trend has spread to parliamentarism and has manifested itself in various dimensions of political reality (institutional, media, behavioral; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). Empirical research in recent decades has confirmed that personalization also applies to the so-called new democracies (Voženílková, 2018). With political personalization, the leader who is now a part of the political brand 'became the program' and came to the fore (Smith, 2009; Guzmán & Sierra, 2009). As personalization progressed, traditional political parties adapted to the importance of political leadership, but also new entities based on the person of the leader began to emerge.

The relationship between the process of personalization and the development of political parties can be seen in the opinions of the political parties. Bobba and Seddone (2011) describe them as personalized and personal. The organization of the party becomes a system of technical experts who support the 'prince' with their communication skills (Panebianco, 1982; Calise, 2005, 2000). Mass parties mobilizing resources have been replaced by strategies similar to political and marketing techniques. Political parties are born as personal structures. Personalization has become a strategic resource that politicians use to bridge the gap created by partisan and social dealignment. This leads to profound changes both in establishing a new relationship between candidate and voter, and in the new ways politicians try to manage the consensus during their term in office (Bobba, 2011, p. 23).

Personalization of political parties can be seen as the link between leader democracy and the personalization of politics in general. Leader democracy is a theoretical concept (see Schumpeter, 1987; Weber, 1978, 2005) which challenges the classical 'Athenian' model of democracy, in which the people are supposed to self-govern and participate in rational decision-making to achieve common good (Held, 2006). According to leader democracy, citizens choose their leader based on their personal characteristics instead of rationally evaluating proposed policies (Shavit & Konrádová, 2025). That is because citizens are only able to judge the performance of a government in retrospect. In the past decade, the subject of leader democracy has reemerged in political science. Current authors such as Körösényi (2007) or Kane and Patapan (2012) have attempted to define democratic leadership. They focus on the inherent tension between democracy and leadership which, according to them, lends more power to the democratic leader than any undemocratic form of leadership could. The power of an elected democratic leader is, after all, demonstrably backed by the citizens – at least to a certain extent. Checks and balances in place should ideally support public trust in the leadership as well (cf. Valgarðsson et al. 2021). The proposed perspective on leader democracy is founded on charismatic party leaders who act as carriers of political personalization. Charismatic leaders are empowered via party leadership selection, which means that leader democracy begins (or ends) within political parties. The charismatic leaders are then used as a heuristic device by voters (Holloway & Hendrie, 2023) – a certain cognitive shortcut which makes decisions about parties' complex policy proposals and positions easier by judging the leader's personal characteristics instead.

In both types of personalized and personal parties, the leader and his (strategy of building) personal brand play a key role (Hughes, 2007; Hughes, Dann & Neale, 2008). A candidate's independent brand is continuing to gain more and more space and attention. In today's world, people vote for a personality they can connect with, not parties that try to lure them with empty promises (Saelens, 2019). Omojola (2008, p. 129) argues that the principle of personal branding

is not only about creating a positive image towards the public. In the context of creating a leader's personal brand identity, it is all about understanding the unique combination of intellectual and emotional elements such as skills, values and passions. Previous research has focused on examining the personal brand of the voter, or comparing it to the personality of the party´s brand (Aaker, 1997).

Brand personality is a concept which describes how consumers (in this case voters) assign human-like characteristics such as youth and sincerity not only to individuals, but also to inanimate brands (such as political parties) and personal brands of individuals (such as political leaders). Aaker (1997) defined five dimensions of a brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. The five dimensions have since been operationalized for use in political branding by multiple authors across the world. Smith (2009) modified it for the reality of British politics, notably adding a sixth dimension of 'uniqueness' and changing the more general dimension of 'competence' to 'leadership'. Smith's (2009) six dimensions, updated for political branding, are: honesty, image, leadership, spirited, toughness, and uniqueness. Žižlavský and Eibl (2011) have modified Smith's scale for the political and social context in the Czech Republic, leaving out the added dimension of "uniqueness". The different operationalizations were applied to both leader and party brands and do not present fundamental changes to the original five dimensions. For the purpose of this study, Smith's (2009) broadly acknowledged six dimensions will be used as a tool for the open coding of interview responses related to brand personality. While it may appear that Žižlavský and Eibl's (2011) version could be applied to German politics more accurately due to the cultural proximity of Czechia and Germany, the only significant difference would be the absence of evidence of the brand personality dimension 'uniqueness'.

The emphasis is, therefore, on the co-branding relationship between the party and the leader (Armannsdottir, Pich & Spry, 2019). While in some cases politicians' personal brands can harm the party, in other cases they allow parties to create a co-branded product around the human element. Political parties and politicians have recognizable personalities (Smith, 2009, p. 214) and complementing the party brand with a personal politics brand allows them to differentiate themselves from each other. Thus, it is desirable for parties to strategically make their leader a personal brand, or to use a politician who is already profiled as a personal brand as a leader (Žižlavský, 2012, p. 233). On the other hand, some research has shown that candidates whose characteristics are not associated with their party have an electoral advantage (Hayes, 2005). The advantage of using co-branding in politics is that the renewal of the leader allows for a rapid repositioning within the political market. The leader's personal brand acts as a guarantor of change, and without the leader's presence, repositioning and rebranding efforts would likely take more time and be more difficult to inform and convince voters of the change (Žižlavský, 2012, pp. 233–234).

Political leaders find themselves devising ad-hoc policy packages to respond to the issue at hand. Pakulski and Higley (2008, p. 47) argue that this further underlines the importance of leaders. They are trusted by voters to find solutions to yet unknown future crises and to react swiftly and efficiently – instead of enacting long-planned policies. The relationship between the personalization of politics and the spectacle of world leaders has been explored by Balmas and Sheafer (2013), who have empirically proven that media coverage of foreign countries has been increasingly focusing on government leaders at the expense of the countries' broader political, cultural and social landscapes.

Two important questions for consideration are where to find a good leader and who is a good leader? Appropriate leadership selection is a key objective of political management of the party, which is a field of both practice and research focusing on how political subjects (in this case parties) utilize different management methods to achieve their goals through their representatives. Lees-Marshment (2020, pp. 4-5) pinpoints how the recruitment of 'the right people for the job' is a major concern of political practitioners. Scholars have previously examined candidate selection processes and their political consequences in mainstream parties (Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Kenig et al., 2015), and recently in populist parties (Caiani et al., 2021; Höhne, 2021). However, these and other studies do not focus on the quality of the leader, but purely on the processes and mechanisms of their selection. Therefore, we consider this text, despite its limitations (see chapter 3.3), to be highly useful for discussing the deepening trend of personalization of politics not only in relation to voters (externally), but also within political parties.

There is no standardized training for a future party leader, just the general assumption that being a parliamentarian for several years should sufficiently prepare the candidate (Lees-Marshment, 2020, p. 6). Despite the lack of formal training, the party leader instantly becomes a top-level manager (Lees-Marshment, 2020, p. 9). They oversee the selection of ministers and candidates, they help define the policies the party is promoting and must ensure party members remain united on key issues. In terms of political marketing, the party leader becomes the face or even the program of the party, the most important person to bring across the message to the media and voters (Cross & Pilet, 2015, pp. 2–3). Therefore, candidate selection would depend on the selectorates' political goals: obtaining office would require competence and unity; vote maximization would favor electability; while policy prioritization would focus on candidates representing the policy preferences of party members (Vandeleene & van Haute, 2021).

Research on candidate selection in mainstream parties shows that selectorates have adopted specific formal and informal conditions such as membership seniority, party involvement, support from party factions, previous legislative experience, and incumbency (Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Pilet et al., 2015). The increasing attention on candidates' personal qualities has been accompanied by the argument that these expectations and evaluations have become even more

important over time, as partisanship in the electorate has declined dramatically (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Mair & van Biezen, 2001). Illés and Körösényi (2022) defined four values of competition in (plebiscitary) leader democracy, a pioneer attempt to set standards of democratic leadership. The following criteria represent more than mere rules of competition. They can also be interpreted as qualities of personal brand thanks to which an individual may succeed as a 'true' democratic leader:

- Peaceful Conflict-Resolution: Competition in elections provides a method for peaceful leadership selection and conflict resolution. It is a way for the electorate to express their views and maintain hope for future victories, akin to sports fans supporting their teams. A democratic leader is therefore required to respect the result of free and fair elections. This aspect of competition ensures that the losing side respects the election results (Illés & Körösényi, 2022, pp. 433–434).
- Meritocratic Selection: Political leaders are selected based on their merits and qualities. Voters aim to choose leaders who are qualitatively superior to represent them. The meritocratic effect may be compromised in highly polarized politics where loyalty can overshadow performance, but certain leader qualities like endurance and rhetorical skills remain essential (Illés & Körösényi, 2022, pp. 434).
- Integration: Leaders act as entrepreneurs of identity, crafting and molding collective identities and integrating various perspectives and interests. This integrative function is valuable in politics as it mobilizes different groups of followers for collective aims. However, it can also lead to polarization (Illés & Körösényi, 2022, pp. 434–435).
- Repoliticization: Competition serves as a counterbalance to depoliticization by challenging the status quo and subverting institutionalized norms. It brings politics back into spheres that may have slipped out of democratic control, such as globalization and technocratic decision-making. However, questioning the rules of the game too much can undermine the peaceful nature of competition (Illés & Körösényi, 2022, pp. 435).

The values stipulate a need to balance between peaceful resolution and the potential for polarization, between meritocratic selection and the influence of partisan loyalty, and between repoliticization and the stability of democratic norms. While the authors suggest that these trade-offs require further theoretical work to fully understand and address the challenges and dangers of leader democracy (Illés & Körösényi, 2022, pp. 436), the four criteria present a pioneer attempt to set standards of individual democratic leadership.

3. Research Design

Leader democracy and the closely connected question of charismatic leadership remain highly relevant in current public discourse. The main objective of the study is to explore how a traditional political party responds to the present-day popular demand for charismatic leadership. Party leader selection also poses a unique opportunity in terms of rebranding, as parties receive heightened media attention especially around the time of a leadership change (Somer-Topcu, 2017). The goal is to explore the logic of the selectorate that wants to find the ideal candidate for a party that is aware of the real functioning of democracy (i.e. the importance of the leader) in terms of Illés and Körösényi (2022) and Smith (2009). Whereas the logic of the selectorate is complex, the research questions cover a wider range of characteristics of the process:

1. *How do party voters, party members and the party elite perceive leader democracy in the political communication and political management of their party?*
2. *How do party voters, members and the elite perceive the leadership of Friedrich Merz?*

This qualitative study seeks to explore the perceptions, ideas, and priorities of key party politics stakeholders. The chosen method is semi-structured interviews (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Bryman, 2012).

3.1 Case Selection

Widely recognized as the antithesis of Angela Merkel and formerly considered an uncharismatic, unlikeable politician, CDU leader Friedrich Merz was set to become German chancellor as of March 2025. This role came with immense expectations, given Germany's economic struggles and the pressing security threats confronting Europe. To better understand Merz' leadership style, it is helpful to take a closer look at his road to success and leadership style within the CDU.

The CDU has been a major political force since the establishment of the German Federal Republic, having led 17 out of 25 federal governments. It is part of the center-right Christian democratic political family of people's parties (Freire & Tsatsanis, 2015). As of 2025, the European People's Party has been the largest group in the European Parliament since 1999 (*EPP Group in the European Parliament*, eppgroup.eu, retrieved Oct 2, 2025). This makes the CDU a well-suited subject for a case study, as it is a prime example of a traditional government party which, while staying a relevant player, is currently facing the challenges of decreasing membership and fragmentation of the political landscape.

3.2 Methods and Data

The interview guide was divided into five thematic areas based on the four aspects of competition in plebiscitary leader democracy (Illés & Körösényi, 2022) and political brand personality (Smith, 2009). Several questions are stipulated for each thematic area. For each of the five areas of the interview guide, keywords that are likely to appear in the responses were predicted based on media and academic discourse on the topics. The interview transcript will be searched for the specific keywords in the first round of open coding. The list of keywords is a tool to help categorize responses and will be expanded if unexpected patterns appear in the answers (Bryman, 2012, p. 569). Therefore, the keywords below do not represent whole codes but rather components from which more complex codes will be created. The codes are later combined into higher order, more abstract codes to help sufficiently analyze results and recognize relationships between phenomena (Bryman, 2012, p. 577).

Table 1:
The Interview Guide

Aspect of Competition	Questions	Keywords
Peaceful Conflict-Resolution	How does the leader's communication style contribute to resolving conflicts within the party? Can you provide examples of how the leader was able to present a united front during internal party disputes? How does the leader's communication style approach existing conflicts within society?	understanding listening mutual together reconcile connect solution hope future constructive
Meritocratic Selection	What merits do you think are crucial for a party leader? How does the leader's image and communication towards the party members reflect their qualifications for the role? How does the leader's public image and communication towards the voters reflect their qualifications for the role?	skill qualification merit excellence prestige experience success award education career

Aspect of Competition	Questions	Keywords
Integration	How does the leader's communication incorporate the diverse voices and interests within the party? Can you describe how the leader's messaging works to unify the party's various factions and supporters? Can you describe how the leader's messaging works to reach different voter groups?	unity diversity group wing federal state social conservative liberal young old women men children family community business city country identity east/west
Repoliticization	How does the leader bring attention to neglected political issues? How has the leader communicated to define new political opponents? In what ways has the leader's personal brand been leveraged to reinvigorate the party's political agenda?	distinguish define boundary priority competition identity offer ideology enemy ally fight
Branding, Brand Personality	How would you describe the brand personality of the party leader? How would you describe the brand personality of our party? In what ways do you think the party leader's personality traits align with the party's brand? How has our party's brand personality evolved in recent years, and what role has the party leader played in that evolution?	honesty spirited image leadership toughness uniqueness

Source: Authors.

The relationships between codes emerging from the five thematic areas of the interview guide will be closely analyzed, with a particular focus on patterns that illustrate the communication practices of Friedrich Merz.

In the second round of coding, the researchers grouped these keyword-based transcript segments into more complex codes that captured recurring themes and meanings across interviews. These codes were then refined and clustered into broader, higher-order categories to reflect the underlying concepts relevant to the

research questions. This process allowed for both theory-driven and data-driven insights to emerge. Coding was conducted in German to preserve the nuance of the original responses then later aligned with the English-language theoretical framework. The resulting English codes were organized by respondent group and thematic area. This structure supported the identification of patterns in how the respondents perceive the leadership of Friedrich Merz.

Figure 1:
The Coding Structure – example

Speaker	Supporter 1	Supporter 2	Member 1	Member 2
MERITOCRACY				
codes German	Charisma - besser geworden, aber noch nicht charismatisch, nahbarer, menschlicher, Selbstironie (X Erwartungen) Führungsstärke - zu wenig, fehlen klare Positionen (X Erwartungen), Offenheit ja, z.B. ggü. Merkel-Menschen	holt sich die richtigen Leute = Managerkompetenz, spricht unagenehme Dinge klar an / kann nicht vereinigen / erfolgreich / nah an den Problemen der Menschen / gibt klare Antworten zu den entscheidenden Fragen / muss nicht von allen geliebt werden	Führungsstärke (gleichen Kurs fahren) / besser geworden - sinnvollere Aussagen dann treffen, wenn es Sinn macht	zuhören / klare Kommunikation (nicht wie Scholz, der nichts sagt), keine populistischen Unwahrheiten - Merz hat es mit der Zeit gelernt / souverän und inhaltlich stark in der Debatte mit Habeck/ Partei grundsätzlich wereint
codes English	down-to-earth, sincere, spirited, confident, real, excellence - rhetoric, success - business, improved performance, good listener	managerial competence, clarity, success, down-to-earth, secure, authentic	leadership, secure, improvement	clarity, expert competence, down-to- earth, improvement
PEACEFUL CONFLICT RESOLUTION				
codes German	cool bleiben, nicht auf Konflikte eingehen, Souveränität (X Vorwürfe - implusiv), Selbstbewusstsein / alle in der CDU haben sich gut mit dem Sieg von Merz arrangiert / Konfontativ ja, ggü. politischen Gegnern, nicht gegen gesellschaftlichen Schichten	Direktwahl des PV - Teilhabe, Dazugehören, etwas bewirken können, stärkeres Mandat / haut auf den Tisch / Merkel-Lager vlit ausgegrenzt	er haut auf den Tisch / Entscheidung der Basis muss respektiert werden / nicht viel Widerspruch in der Partei / Frieden in der Partei / er hat zur Verrohung der Gesellschaft beigetragen	hat die Mehrheit der Partei hinter sich vereeint/ geschafft, auch seine Nichtwähler zu überzeugen / kein Antikandidat, sondern akzeptabel/ in der Gesellschaft bei Spaltungen klare Ansagen, Grenzen ziehen
codes English	Party: reconcile, give space, calm / society: confrontational x rivals	party: participation, potential exclusion	party: calm, peace, little opposition / society: negative	party: reconcile, connect, acceptable, convinced non-supporters/ society: uncompromising, negative

Source: Authors

Three stakeholder/respondent groups in party leader selection have been defined based on Hazan and Rahat (2010), who identify possible party leader selectorates, and Hughes and Dann (2009), who identify stakeholder groups in political marketing. The stakeholder groups in party leader selection consist of people who are directly invested in the party and its success, excluding broader public stakeholder groups such as media or lobby groups. The sampling method used is a mixture of stratified purposive sampling due to selecting individuals within subgroups of interest, i.e. the defined stakeholder groups (Bryman, 2012, p. 419) and of opportunistic sampling, capitalizing on unforeseen opportunities to collect data from certain individuals (Bryman, 2012, p. 419). Opportunistic sampling was used as a working solution for the main issue of interviewing politicians and political professionals as found by Goldstein (2002) – securing an interview date with the respondent.

The stakeholder-respondent groups are defined as following:

1. Party supporter – has voted for the CDU before and self-identifies with the party. They do not hold nor are they running for any political office and are not actively involved in any party activities. They might still be a 'sleeping' member or might have worked for the party in the past. They follow German politics and the CDU regularly.

2. Party member – an active member of the CDU who either holds an elected office and/or works for the party professionally, is involved in election campaigns, or personally runs for office. The distinction between 'party member' and 'party supporter' stems from involvement in internal party affairs rather than mere party membership. It is partly based on Neu (2017) who stresses the role of modern CDU members as individuals with the ambition to run for office, distinguishing themselves from traditional supporters and 'sleeping members'.

3. Party elite – a CDU member who is either a member of the federal party board, and/or a member of the federal parliamentary group board, and/or a member of a federal state party board.

The respondents did not agree to have particular personal data such as age, gender, region, position, and length of party membership directly assigned to them. Therefore, besides stakeholder group membership, no further distinction of the respondents will be provided to ensure confidentiality. However, it is possible to summarize the demographics of the respondents in an aggregated format:

Table 2:
Respondents' Summary

Respondents	Total 8
Stakeholder group	2 supporters (= inactive members) 4 members 2 elite members
Gender	2 women 6 men
Region	4 from Berlin 1 from Brandenburg 1 from Saxony-Anhalt 2 from North Rhine-Westphalia
Age	range 25-47
CDU membership	all respondents have been members for 4+ years

Source: Authors.

In total, eight interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted from June 2024 to July 2024 as video calls via Microsoft Teams. The interviews were conducted in German and took approximately 60 minutes each. Due to the sensitive nature of the responses, the interview transcripts will not be published to ensure the respondents' anonymity. However, the audio recordings and the transcripts are saved in the author's archive and may be made partially available upon special request. The transcripts and codes are stored according to the respondent's stakeholder group and number, following the chronological order of the interviews.

3.3 Limits of the Study

While discussing current party politics at the top level, the sensitivity of the matter and the issue of confidentiality can be major concerns for the respondents, potentially leading to reservations about answering the questions. This issue can be exacerbated by conducting the interviews online, which tends to be perceived as less personal and potentially less confidential than talking to the respondent in person. Bryman (2012, p. 218) – and especially Leech (2002, pp. 665–666) in the context of elite interviewing – stress the importance of rapport with the interviewee. According to Leech (2002, p. 656), the interviewer must appear trustworthy and knowledgeable about the discussed subject with the 'highly placed' respondent, so that they do not feel as if they are wasting their time speaking to them. At the same time, the interviewer should appear clearly less knowledgeable than the interviewee, as each respondent in an elite interview should be treated as an expert in their field. Indeed, all respondents in this study are real experts on CDU party politics from their own stakeholder perspective.

A practical limitation of Smith's (2009) and Žižlavský and Eibl's (2011) frameworks for brand personality dimensions is their operationalization for British and Czech politics. However, given the relative cultural proximity of these European countries (especially Czechia) to Germany, it is plausible to expect that the dimensions may apply. This assumption is supported by the fact that Žižlavský and Eibl (2011) only removed the sixth dimension of 'uniqueness' while adjusting the British framework to Czech politics, implying that the remaining five dimensions do not differ significantly between the two countries.

A key methodological limitation of this qualitative study is undoubtedly the small sample size of eight respondents. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population, not even within the selected political party. However, this limitation reflects the nature of qualitative research and, more importantly, the specific characteristics of the research subject rather than a flaw in the research design.

4. Context

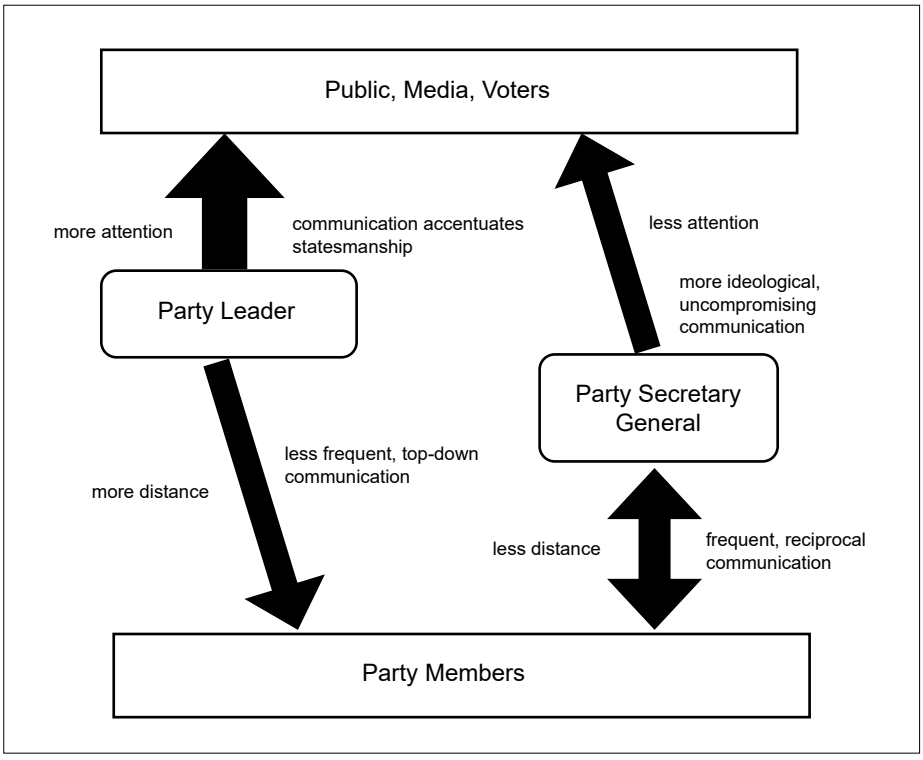
Chiru et al. (2015) show that true competition for party leadership has remained rare in Western democracies. 'Coronations' of the only candidate were common, as well as leaders capitalizing on their incumbency advantage, only rarely losing the race, and candidates often winning by an overwhelming margin. In fact, Germany has been ranked as the least competitive of the observed countries in the period of 1965-2012 (Chiru et al., 2015, pp. 30–31). This lack of competition however changed after the departure of Angela Merkel.

After Angela Merkel stepped down as CDU leader in 2018, the party experienced a period of intense competition and leadership instability. The first leadership race saw Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merkel's preferred successor, narrowly defeating Friedrich Merz in a delegate vote. However, Kramp-Karrenbauer struggled to assert control over the party, particularly after CDU representatives in Thuringia had controversially voted together with the far-right AfD in the state parliament. This crisis undermined her authority, leading to her resignation in 2020 (Zehender, 2024). The next leadership contest in 2021 featured Armin Laschet, then Prime Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, competing against Merz and Norbert Röttgen. Laschet won in a second-round delegate vote but faced immediate challenges, including internal party divisions and competition from CSU (Christian Social Union, CDU's sister party in Bavaria) leader Markus Söder for the chancellor candidacy (Marx, 2024). His campaign was further damaged by a public misstep when he was caught laughing during a visit to a flood-stricken region, contributing to CDU's defeat in the 2021 federal elections (Chambers, 2021).

Following this loss, the CDU sought renewal, leading to a historic all-member vote in 2021 to elect a new leader. In this unprecedented internal poll, Friedrich

Merz, who had previously lost twice in delegate-based leadership contests, secured a decisive victory with 62.5% of the party membership's support. Based on this strong mandate from the party membership, he was subsequently confirmed as party leader by 95% of the delegates at the CDU convention, marking a clear shift from Merkel's centrist approach to a more conservative, economically liberal direction (Hennecke, 2024). Under Merz's leadership, the party worked to rebuild its ideological identity, particularly in cooperation with Secretary General Carsten Linnemann,[1] who supervised the creation of the 'Grundsatzprogramm', the party's new basic principle program (Mendgen, 2023). Merz's leadership stabilized the party internally, but questions remained regarding his ability to connect with the broader electorate as a potential chancellor candidate. His tenure signified a return to more traditional CDU values, but his polarizing image and communication style posed challenges for future electoral success (Heckmann, 2022).

Figure 2:
Communication scheme of Party Leader and Party Secretary General



Source: Authors, based on the interview results.

5. Findings: Plebiscitary Party Leader is Elected Chancellor

This article offers a nuanced portrait of Friedrich Merz based on interviews conducted with specific groups of respondents, focusing on his strengths as a communicator and his appeal to conservative voters. It also highlights his weaknesses, particularly his limited executive experience and polarizing effect within the CDU. The piece underscores the internal tensions Merz faces in balancing ideological clarity with party unity (c.f. Heckmann, 2022). It is important to mention again that the text refers to the research respondents and its results cannot be generalized. However, the conclusions still provide valuable insights into otherwise opaque intra-party processes.

Respondents widely acknowledged that Merz embodies the peaceful conflict-resolution value of plebiscitary leader democracy within the CDU. Party elite members, particularly those involved in strategic decision-making, praised his ability to restore stability after years of internal divisions following Merkel's departure. CDU members also viewed him as a unifying figure who successfully integrated various party factions. However, voter respondents—especially centrist and younger voters—were more critical, noting that his leadership style could be divisive in broader political discourse. Many expressed concern that his assertive rhetoric could alienate potential coalition partners and undecided voters, limiting CDU's national electoral appeal.

The perception of meritocratic selection was more contested among respondents. Party elite and older CDU members emphasized Merz's strong economic credentials and long political career, citing his expertise as a key asset. However, younger and more moderate CDU supporters questioned whether his elite background and corporate ties made him too disconnected from the everyday concerns of voters. This divide was especially noticeable in discussions about his communication style—while some saw his directness as a sign of competence, others perceived it as reinforcing an out-of-touch, technocratic image.

Regarding integration, respondents from the CDU's leadership structure saw Merz as having successfully navigated internal party dynamics, particularly by incorporating the economically liberal and conservative factions. However, voter respondents expressed skepticism about his ability to integrate perspectives beyond the CDU's traditional support base. Many interviewees highlighted his difficulty in appealing to women, younger voters, and urban electorates, groups that were key to Merkel's broader centrist appeal. Some suggested that the CDU's strategic co-branding effort—pairing Merz with Secretary General Carsten Linnemann—was an attempt to compensate for this weakness by associating Merz with a more approachable and inclusive figure.

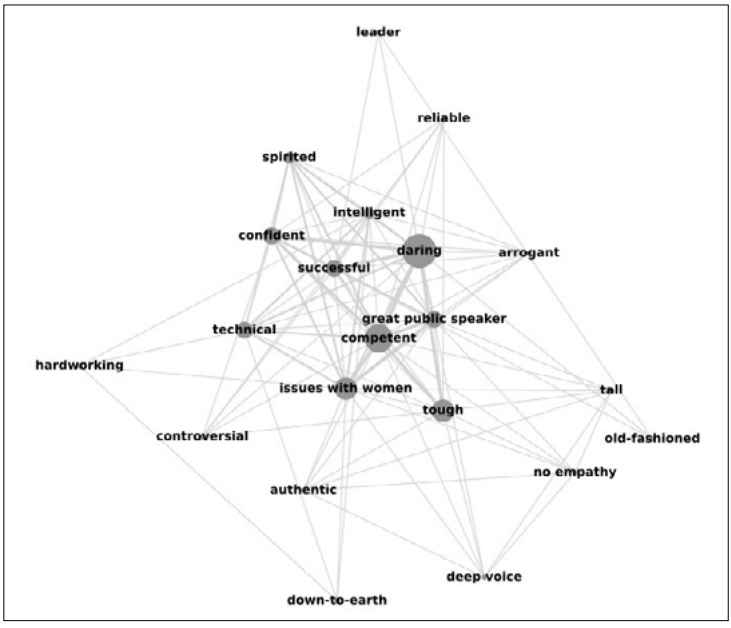
On repoliticization, many respondents agreed that Merz had reinvigorated ideological debate within the CDU. Elite respondents saw this as a necessary correction after the perceived centrist dilution of CDU's brand under Merkel. Party members appreciated his clear positions on economic and security issues,

which they felt provided stronger ideological clarity. However, among general voters, the response was more mixed. While some appreciated his firm stance on issues like fiscal conservatism and migration, others worried that his ideological assertiveness might alienate swing voters who preferred Merkel's pragmatic approach. The study found that while Merz's repoliticization efforts strengthened CDU's internal coherence, they risked narrowing its electoral coalition.

The study also examined how different respondent groups perceived Friedrich Merz's brand personality, identifying both strengths and weaknesses. Across all stakeholder groups, he was recognized for his leadership and authority within the CDU. Party elite respondents credited his strong organizational skills and strategic acumen, while members saw him as decisive and capable of managing the party's direction effectively. However, among voters, perceptions were less uniform—while some valued his strong leadership persona, others found it overly rigid and lacking the warmth associated with more electorally successful leaders.

On honesty, responses were polarized. Some members and elite respondents appreciated his straightforwardness and willingness to challenge political norms. However, among voter respondents´ group, his corporate background and past controversies (such as comments about his wealth) raised concerns about his sincerity. Several interviewees noted that he sometimes appeared calculated rather than genuinely connecting to voters and their concerns. This discrepancy suggested that his perceived authenticity was stronger within CDU structures than among the general electorate group of respondents.

Figure 3:
Brand personality traits of Friedrich Merz



Source: Authors, codes according to frequency.

Figure 3 shows that leadership and toughness are often perceived together, forming the backbone of Merz's brand personality, as identified in a qualitative study conducted on a limited sample of specifically selected respondents. Leadership is strongly supported by frequent mention of traits such as competent, successful, and intelligent, which form a dense cluster, reinforcing Merz's reputation as a capable and knowledgeable leader. Toughness was widely acknowledged as a defining characteristic of Merz's leadership and is a dominant dimension in figure 3, with traits such as tough, daring, and controversial appearing frequently and co-occurring, indicating that Merz is widely seen as assertive and resilient. Party elite respondents valued his resilience and ability to assert control over CDU's direction, seeing it as essential for reestablishing the party's credibility after its 2021 electoral defeat. CDU members also appreciated his firm stance on internal discipline and policy direction. However, some voter respondents viewed his toughness as bordering on inflexibility, making him seem unapproachable and resistant to compromise. This perception was particularly strong among voters' group of respondents outside CDU's traditional base, who saw his leadership style as less adaptable to coalition-building.

Honesty is reflected through traits such as authentic, down-to-earth, and reliable, which are frequently mentioned and often co-occur, suggesting that Merz is perceived as sincere and grounded by several of our respondents.

On spiritedness, both respondents of CDU members and party elite´s group saw Merz as an energetic and passionate figure, particularly in his commitment to ideological renewal. However, voter respondents noted that his enthusiasm sometimes translated into an overly aggressive communication style. Several interviewees remarked that while he was effective in mobilizing CDU supporters, he struggled to inspire undecided or younger voters who preferred a more inclusive and forward-looking message. Therefore, spirited is represented (in figure 3) by traits such as spirited, confident, and great public speaker, which are central and well-connected, indicating that Merz is seen as energetic and rhetorically strong.

In contrast, image is far more ambivalent, suggesting that while Merz is respected, his emotional appeal and inclusivity may be areas of vulnerability among our respondents. Within the CDU, he was seen as a competent, results-driven leader who effectively rebranded the party's ideological positioning. However, voter respondents often described his image as cold or distant, lacking the relatability necessary for broad electoral appeal. While party elites admired his executive-style leadership, ordinary voters expressed a desire for a leader with a stronger emotional connection and personal charisma.

Traits such as issues with women, no empathy, arrogant, and old-fashioned appear on the periphery, suggesting that while Merz has a strong professional image, his broader public appeal may be limited or contested. Uniqueness doesn't seem to be an obviously strong dimension in the graph; however, traits such as tall, deep voice, and technical could be seen as contributing to a distinctive and memorable personal brand based on research respondents.

Finally, on uniqueness, respondents agreed that Merz distinguished himself from his predecessors, particularly Merkel. Interviewed CDU members who had felt alienated by Merkel's centrist pragmatism appreciated his more defined ideological stance. However, voter respondents were divided—while some welcomed a clearer conservative identity, others questioned whether Merz's approach was too backward-looking to attract new demographics. Several interviewees noted that while he successfully differentiated himself within the CDU, his ability to stand out positively on a national stage remained uncertain.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

At a time when academic and media texts are filled with headlines such as 'crisis of democracy', 'rise of authoritarianism', 'backsliding democracy', and 'weak leadership' (Mechkova, Luhrmann & Lindberg, 2017; Cianetti & Hanley 2021; Gjipali, 2021; Eatwell & Goodwin 2018; Galsto, 2020; Mounk, 2018; Norris & Inglehart 2019; Zielonka, 2018), etc., it is increasingly important that world leaders not only live up to the demands of their constituents but also to the principles of democracy, which increasingly seems to be personalized, i.e. based on elites, leaders. This is not only an original theoretical conceptualization of modern concepts (selection of leaders in the context of personal branding and leader democracy in a revitalized) with which political science is increasingly concerned but a unique probe into one of Europe's most important countries and its internal democratic-managerial functioning.

Intra-party plebiscitary leadership alone does not guarantee electoral success—it must be complemented by adaptive political management and a responsive policy agenda. The article covers the CDU party congress where Merz navigated debates around the introduction of a women's quota. It reflects the party's struggle to modernize while maintaining traditional values. Merz is portrayed as a pragmatic leader trying to reconcile differing factions within the CDU (see Herrmann & Koopmann, 2022). The CDU's return to power was driven by a public preference for experienced and reliable governance. Despite Friedrich Merz's limited background in executive political roles, voters strongly associated the CDU with competence in addressing the country's most urgent challenges—particularly in economic policy and both internal and external security (Bundestagswahl, 2025). This perception helped bridge the gap between leadership experience and electoral appeal. The coalition-building effort underscored that, as well as the importance of the integrative function of plebiscitary leader democracy, as Merz had to bridge inter-party ideological divides while maintaining internal party cohesion. His leadership style, initially viewed as rigid, evolved during negotiations with coalition partner – the Social Democrats – a necessary partner for a swift constitutional budgetary reform (Deutsche Welle, 2025). The three

parties successfully reached a compromise despite the tough election campaign, reflecting a strategic shift toward a broader political appeal (Greive & Olk, 2025).

In this context, Henkel (2024) analyzes the strategic communication of Merz, Söder, and Wüst regarding the Union's chancellor candidacy. Merz emerges as the frontrunner, with his rivals showing calculated restraint. The article emphasizes the importance of timing and unity in shaping the CDU/CSU's electoral prospects. Kain (2024) explores the rise in Merz's popularity, attributing it to his clear stance on security, migration, and economic issues. The article presents Merz as a stabilizing figure in uncertain times. His transformation from a divisive figure to a credible chancellor candidate is a central theme. Last but not least, Mendgen (2024) portrays Merz as increasingly assertive and decisive, likening him to a 'Basta-Kanzler' in the tradition of Gerhard Schröder. The article highlights Merz's firm positions on EU bureaucracy, migration, and defense. It suggests that his leadership style is resonating with voters seeking clarity and strength.

On social media, Merz presents himself as someone who has united a large party and a large parliamentary group, testifying to 'good atmosphere' and 'positive feedback' from members of the broader party elite. In the interview excerpt shared on Instagram, Merz claims his personal strength is 'motivating and leading a team' in a successful manner that 'cannot be achieved by authority alone'. (Merz [@merzcdu], 2024).

Taking all of this into consideration, we see that Merz excels in the four competition values of leader democracy very favorably given the rampant anti-democratic tendencies (not only) in Europe. While he adjusted his communication style to position himself as a chancellor candidate, it remained uncertain if he would convince the public as effectively as party members. In the post-election period, we know that the CDU/CSU under Merz's leadership won a total of 208 seats out of 630 in the February (2025) Bundestag elections (The Federal Returning Officer, 2025), making Merz the winner of the electoral contest and the future German chancellor. Merz is seen as successful and competent but also polarizing and controversial, with deficiencies in the brand personality dimensions image and honesty, and in political charisma, which will also be an important factor in post-election negotiations. Therefore, a co-branding strategy with other party personalities is essential for Merz's inter-party and intra-party action.

In conclusion, Merz's ascent and the CDU's electoral performance exemplify the evolving dynamics of political leadership in Germany. His case highlights the tension between internal party consolidation and broader political engagement. Moving forward, the CDU's ability to govern effectively will depend on its capacity to balance leader-centric communication and policymaking with coalition adaptability, ensuring that the personalization of politics does not come at the expense of democratic legitimacy and public trust.

To conclude, this study provides insight into the specific case of Friedrich Merz's election as CDU chairman, revealing some of the key mechanisms of internal party decision-making and dynamics within one of Germany's most important political parties. However, it should be noted that the results cannot be

generalized to a large extent, as the research is based on a relatively small number of respondents and focuses on one specific case. For this reason, further research should strive for a broader empirical basis, both by expanding the number of cases analyzed and by conducting a more in-depth comparison across parties, time periods, and political contexts.

At the same time, this work touches on a more general problem in political science – a long-standing lack of interest in intra-party processes, mainly due to their difficult accessibility. Internal negotiations, factional bargaining, and leadership selection mechanisms often remain hidden from the public and researchers, making this type of research methodologically challenging but all the more valuable. This is where the contribution of this study lies: it raises questions that are still often marginalized in academic debate and shows that a deeper understanding of internal party processes is key to a comprehensive understanding of the functioning of party structures and democratic politics as such.

Furthermore, this study may serve as a preliminary signal for traditional, less personalized parties and party systems, highlighting areas that could benefit from further investigation. Rather than presenting definitive conclusions, we suggest several general directions that might warrant attention in future research. For instance, traditional political parties might consider how to leverage the popular mandate of a newly elected leader as an opportunity for programmatic and brand renewal (Cross & Pilet, 2015; Hughes, 2007). Internally, strengthening communication to secure member support and ensure coherent messaging may also be of strategic importance. In terms of external presentation, parties could explore co-branding strategies, aligning the leader's personal image with other party figures to mitigate potential weaknesses (Hughes, 2007; Balmas & Shaefer, 2013). Finally, increased emphasis on leader competition values in both internal and external communication may offer another avenue worth considering (Illés & Körösényi, 2022).

Future research could therefore proceed in several directions. On the one hand, it would be appropriate to focus on comparing selection procedures across parties within a single country, or even in an international context, where it would be possible, for example, to compare the CDU with other conservative parties in Europe. Furthermore, it would be possible to deepen the analysis of factors that influence support for candidates within the party—for example, the role of regional structures, party networks, media representation, or the relationship between the membership base and the leadership. Finally, it would be useful to analyze how the concept of party leadership is changing in response to broader social and political changes, such as the fragmentation of the political spectrum, the personalization of politics, or the digitization of party life.

Overall, research into intra-party democracy (in context of personalization) is an important but still underexposed field, the further development of which can significantly contribute to understanding the current changes in political parties and party systems in democratic regimes.

Data availability: Sharing raw data-interview audio-recordings, transcripts or field notes may reveal the identity of participants, violating the promises of confidentiality. Requests to access the qualitative data can be directed to the authors.

Supplementary Information: Supplemental material for this article is available in the authors' archive.

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'Party Elite 1'. Interview by Martina Beránková [MS Teams], 24 June, 2024.
'Party Elite 2'. Interview by Martina Beránková [MS Teams], 10 July, 2024.

Endnotes:

1 The most unexpected outcome of the interviews was the central role attributed to CDU Secretary General Carsten Linnemann, who was consistently brought up by respondents despite not being prompted. His appointment by Friedrich Merz in 2023 was widely praised as a strategic move that improved both internal and external party communication. Respondents noted that Linnemann's provocative public style allows Merz to adopt a more statesmanlike tone, positioning himself as a future chancellor candidate. Internally, Linnemann actively engages with party members through modern tools like podcasts, polls, and online meetings, enhancing transparency and participation. This division of labor enables Merz to focus on elite-level and public-facing communication, while Linnemann manages grassroots engagement and ideological messaging.

Who's to Blame? Elites and Enemies in Political Party Manifestos – The Case of Poland (2001–2023)[1]

Jakub Krupa[2]

Abstract

This article examines the actors subjected to criticism by Polish political parties between 2001 and 2023. It also assesses whether a relationship existed between the degree of anti-elitism or enemy discreditation in party manifestos and a party's position within the political system or its ideological orientation. Elites were conceptualized as actors occupying a vertical relationship with 'the people', whereas enemies were characterized by a horizontal opposition. Five types of elites were identified: political, international, state, symbolic, and economic. Similarly, enemies were classified into five categories: geographical, legal, political, economic, and cultural. The article drew inspiration from the populism studies, particularly in its conceptualization of anti-elitism and the construction of enemies per se. Moreover, proposed was an approach that treated anti-elitism and enemy construction not as binary attributes, but as variable and gradable dimensions that could evolve over time—even within the same political parties—and were not exclusive to parties typically labelled as populist. The findings show that, in their manifestos, Polish parties devote significantly more attention to criticizing elites than to identifying enemies. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that the specific types of targeted elites and enemies are shaped by distinct dynamics: some are primarily conditioned by a party's position within the political system, whereas others stem chiefly from its ideological or economic profile.

Keywords: elites; enemies; political parties; manifestos; Poland

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1. Introduction

Political parties do not only appeal to voters through promises of social benefits or visions of a better state, but also by assigning blame for any existing unfavourable conditions. This blame is typically directed either at the elites—portrayed as those who have shaped or now control the system from their influential and well-paid positions—or enemies, often described as 'others' or 'outsiders'. These groups are held responsible for the absence of decent jobs, long queues for medical care, public insecurity, and the poor quality of public services. The primary objective of this article is to examine whom political parties identify as responsible for these and other negative circumstances.

The first key question is whether the blame is more frequently directed at elites—positioned above 'the people'—or at enemies located alongside them (**Q1**). As Bobba and McDonnell (2016) have demonstrated in their analysis of Italian populist parties, Forza Italia's messaging contained significantly more anti-elitist rhetoric than did that of the Northern League, which, conversely, focused more heavily on excluding 'others' or 'enemies' from the notion of 'the people'.

This leads us to three foundational concepts in the study of populism: the people, the elite, and the enemy. Their appearance here is not accidental. This article draws substantially on the literature about populism, particularly approaches that conceptualize it as a gradable and measurable phenomenon—most notably Aslanidis (2018), Breyer (2023), Woods (2014), Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011), Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug (2014). The perspective adopted here also aligns closely with views that frame populism as a political communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) or a political strategy (Weyland, 2017), rather than as a thin-centred ideology (Mudde, 2004).

That said, the concept of 'the people' is not the main analytical focus of this article. Instead, the primary focus lies on the subsequent question: which elites and which enemies were subject to discreditation (**Q2**)? And ultimately, what types of political parties engage in such rhetoric? Is there a relationship between the critique of elites or the identification of enemies and factors such as a party's position within the political system, its orientation along the economic or GAL–TAN axes, or the degree of its political extremism (**Q3**)?

In the American context, for example, Democrats tend to criticize business elites, while Republicans more frequently target federal political elites (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Oliver & Rahn, 2016). Similarly, Maurer and Diehl (2020), in their analysis of presidential candidates' Twitter communication in France and the United States, found that right-wing candidates more often criticized political elites, whereas left-wing candidates focused their criticism on economic ones. Ernst et al. (2017) showed that the level of populism—including both anti-elitism and the identification of 'enemies'—is higher in extreme parties than in centrist ones. Ostiguy and Casullo (2017) indicated that left-wing populism

primarily focuses on the wealthy. In the context of the present article, this corresponds to exclusion along the economic axis. Conversely, right-wing populism tends to target immigrants or members of national minorities and might reflect exclusion along the cultural axis (Green/Alternative/Libertarian vs. Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist).

Once we have established the types of parties that adopt this rhetoric, it becomes equally important to identify which specific Polish parties criticize elites and designate enemies more frequently than others (**Q4**). This raises an interesting issue: does the emphasis on pointing out enemies and condemning elites primarily characterize political actors commonly labeled as populist (Breeze, 2019; Wojczewski, 2020) or radical (Cervi, Tejedor, & Villar, 2023), or might it be associated with additional characteristics of these parties?

Poland represents an interesting case study, given its complex political trajectory. After four decades under Soviet influence, Poland has been a member of the European Union since 2004. Throughout this period, strong anti-elite rhetoric and the construction of enemies, combined with the self-presentation as representatives of 'the people', have been employed by both large and small parties, those in power as well as those in opposition, and across various party families. In the Polish context, several parties have been classified as populist by scholars, most notably Self-Defence (Marczewska-Rytko, 1998; Drelich, 2012), the League of Polish Families (Nalewajko, 2004; Moroska, 2010), the Kukiz'15 movement (Kasprowicz & Hess, 2017; Wrześniewska-Pietrzak & Kołodziejczak, 2018), and Law and Justice (Przyłęcki, 2012; Dzwończyk, 2015). While the first three cases tend to generate little disagreement, it is worth noting that some scholars challenge the classification of Law and Justice as a distinctly populist party (Lewandowski, 2021; Gdula, 2018). After the 1989 transition, new elites gradually emerged, providing critics with new targets—those associated with both the new democratic order and the ancien régime. The shift from a centrally planned economy to a capitalist one caused severe disruptions for millions of workers, leaving many of them unemployed and driving some into poverty as state-owned enterprises were shut down. This historical specificity is essential, as the meanings assigned to the categories of 'elite' and 'enemy' are deeply rooted in the historical, social, political, and ideological contexts in which political parties operate (Nalewajko, 2013; Vaughan & Heft, 2023; Canovan, 1999).

2. 'Elites' and 'Enemies'

Political competition in Poland initially centred on the rivalry between post-communist and post-Solidarity elites. Over time, however, entirely new political parties—unconnected to this historical divide—entered the arena and began competing for electoral support. This development suggests that the types of elites subjected to criticism vary across political actors and time.

The term *elite* is often used imprecisely. It typically refers to individuals perceived as exceptional or influential—those whose decisions shape broader society. This includes groups such as the aristocracy, bourgeoisie, senior bureaucrats, military leaders, intellectuals, artists, athletes, and political figures (Żyromski, 2007). Mills (1956) has defined the 'power elite' as those occupying top positions in the social hierarchy: politicians, high-ranking state officials, military commanders, major shareholders, and corporate executives. Similarly, Moore (1979) has understood elites as individuals who exert influence over the political process.

In this article a broad definition of elites is adopted, recognizing their presence across multiple spheres of social life—including business, law, media, culture, education, and the military (Dye, 1983), as well as politics, religion, the civil service, and labour unions (Giddens, 1972). This approach also brings into focus the notion of *symbolic elites*—those involved in legitimizing decisions and shaping public narratives. These include opinion leaders such as editors, filmmakers, authors, textbook writers, intellectuals, the clergy, and business leaders. While symbolic elites may not hold direct political power, they exert considerable indirect influence by structuring public discourse: determining which topics receive attention, which are marginalized, and which are excluded entirely. They possess symbolic power, enabling them to highlight issues that often remain invisible to the general public (van Dijk, 1993; Bourdieu, 1992; Lasch, 1995). Symbolic elites construct entire symbolic universes—interpretive frameworks that shape the public understanding of reality. These frameworks may simplify or distort complex phenomena in order to make them more accessible to broad audiences. Different symbolic universes interpret the actions and motivations of social actors in diverse, often incompatible ways (Churska, 2005; Krupa & Jezierski, 2024).

Any discussion of elites in recent times must necessarily engage with the literature on populism, as elites are invariably defined in relation to *the people*, to whom political appeals are directed. Populism draws a sharp moral dichotomy between a virtuous, morally pure 'people' and a corrupt elite. This division is vertical in nature: the elite is positioned above and in opposition to the 'people' (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Yet the nature of the elite being denounced depends largely on how the 'people' are imagined.

Conceptions of elites—and the labels used to describe them—vary significantly depending on the historical, geographical, and socio-economic contexts. What constitutes 'the elite' in the United States differs markedly from Venezuela or Poland. Like populism itself, elite critique is highly adaptive and context-dependent–chameleon-like in nature (Taggart, 2000). As Mangset, Engelstad, Teigen, and Gulbrandsen (2019) have demonstrated, there are many types of elites, and different populist movements target different ones. They distinguish between political, intermediate, economic, and cultural elites. Jagers and Walgrave (2007) have identified political, media, state, and economic elites.

The construction of the 'people' necessarily involves drawing boundaries–delineating who belongs and who does not. This process produces antagonistic social divisions and a discursive construction of the enemy (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2005). The enemy may take the form of global forces (e.g., antisemitic conspiracy theories) or specific minority groups, such as immigrants (Ostiguy, 2017). However, the enemy should not always be understood as a marginal or small group. It may consist of large populations marked by different racial backgrounds, sexual orientations, religious affiliations, or political views considered unacceptable (Hameleers & de Vreese, 2020). In this sense, the enemy is defined through exclusion—as a perceived threat to the prosperity and identity of 'our' people. Crucially, the relationship between the people and the enemy is *horizontal* (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), as opposed to the vertical relationship between the people and elites. As with elites, the specific nature of the enemy is shaped by the political, social, and cultural context in which it is constructed.

3. Methods

Political party manifestos were selected as the subject of analysis because they constitute one of the primary instruments through which parties articulate their official positions on central political issues. While these documents are not necessarily widely read by the general electorate, they serve as a crucial source for comparative research and discourse analysis (di Cocco & Monechi, 2022). Manifestos lay out the policy goals, party pledges to pursue if elected, thereby offering insight into its intended governance agenda. Although such texts are often dense and not easily accessible to the average voter, their content is frequently disseminated, interpreted, and popularized by the media, which plays a significant role in shaping public understanding (Harmel, 2018).

The 2001–2023 timeframe chosen for this analysis includes the political rise of Law and Justice (PiS) and Civic Platform (PO), whose first participation in parliamentary elections occurred in 2001. These elections marked the final moment in which the cleavage between post-Solidarity and post-Communist parties—an axis that had shaped Polish politics throughout the first sixteen years of the post-transition period—retained decisive relevance (Grabowska, 2004). Beginning in 2005, Law and Justice (PiS) and Civic Platform (PO) alternated in governing or co-governing the country, entrenching their dominance and reconfiguring political competition around the divide between 'Solidary Poland' and 'Liberal Poland' (Obacz, 2018). From the point at which this new axis gained political salience, every subsequent electoral cycle produced presidents and prime ministers who were either members of these parties or individuals appointed by them, further consolidating their institutional authority. The most recent parliamentary elections were held in 2023 offer the latest available set

of party manifestos, making them an essential reference point for examining current political narratives and priorities.

To address the research questions, a triangulation of methods was applied. The primary method was qualitative content analysis, used to identify negative references to 'elites' and 'enemies' in party manifestos. This was supplemented by quantitative techniques, including quantitative content analysis and statistical testing. Specifically, the Mann–Whitney U test was employed to compare whether two independent groups differed significantly in terms of the frequency or intensity of such references. In addition, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between selected variables.

The sample selection was purposive and based on three criteria: (1) the party or coalition surpassed the threshold of at least 3% of valid votes cast in parliamentary elections, (2) achieved this between 2001 and 2023, and (3) published a sufficiently extensive electoral manifesto to enable reliable content analysis. The analysis included 42 political party manifestos.

Of the analysed documents, 28 were published by parties that consistently met the funding threshold across all elections since 2001, despite occasional changes in their names. These included the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), the Polish People's Party (PSL), Civic Platform (PO), and Law and Justice (PiS). The remaining manifestos belonged to formations such as Solidarity of the Right Electoral Action (*AWS Prawicy*), the Freedom Union (UW), the League of Polish Families (LPR), Self-Defense (*Samoobrona*), Polish Socialdemocracy (SDPL), the Palikot Movement (*Ruch Palikota*), Modern (*Nowoczesna*), Kukiz'15, Together (*Razem*), KORWiN, Confederation (*Konfederacja*), and Poland 2050 (*Polska 2050*). In total, the corpus amounted to approximately 4.9 million characters. The complete set of electoral manifestos analyzed in this study is presented in the Appendix.

The dataset included 10 manifestos from governing parties and 32 from opposition parties, and accordingly covered 32 manifestos from parties represented in parliament and 10 from extra-parliamentary parties.

This study uses expert evaluations of political party positions on both the economic left–right axis and the GAL–TAN axis (Hooghe, Marks, & Wilson, 2002). Party placements on these axes were drawn from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey data spanning 1999–2019 (Jolly et al., 2022), as well as a special 2023 edition (Hooghe et al., 2024). In cases where parties ran as part of coalitions, scores were calculated as the average of the constituent parties' values. Both indices are scaled from 0 (representing the economic left or GAL pole) to 10 (economic right or TAN pole), with results rounded to two decimal places. Extremity on the scales was defined as the distance from the centre point—thus, for instance, a score of 4 (left) and 6 (right) are considered equally distant from the midpoint of 5, and therefore equally 'extreme'.

References to the 'elites' were necessarily negative, encompassing elements of blame, criticism, or discreditation. The 'elites' can be impersonal in nature

(e.g., the political system). Five types of elites were distinguished: political (politicians, political parties), economic (either in general or referring to specific economic entities or industries), international (international institutions, the elites of other countries), state (specific state bodies, bureaucratic elites, judicial elites, military elites), and symbolic (intellectuals, the media, clerical elites).

The 'enemy' or 'others' also can take an impersonal form (e.g. LGBT ideology). Only statements that included criticism, blame, discreditation, or the exclusion of these 'enemies' or 'others' from the people were considered. The enemy was classified into five categories: geographical (e.g., foreigners, immigrants, refugees, the international community, the West, Germany, Russia), legal (those who do not obey the law, such as hooligans, criminals, perpetrators of violence), political (e.g., voters of other parties, broadly defined late-communist nomenklatura), economic (e.g., wealthy individuals, entrepreneurs, professional corporations, interest groups, lobbyists, business cartels, tax fraud schemes, union activists), and cultural (e.g., Islam, Muslims, Catholicism, Catholics, LGBT ideology, gays, Islamophobia, oikophobia, discriminators, sexual minorities).

It should be noted that when discussing the identification of the enemy or anti-elitism, we are referring to concepts that are gradable, as argued by Vaughan and Heft (2023). The codebook itself was adapted from the work edited by Agnieszka Stępińska and Artur Lipiński (2020). For the purposes of this study, several modifications were introduced to better reflect the specific context of Polish political party manifestos.

The unit of analysis was the 'quasi-sentence', defined as a segment of text ending in a full stop, question mark, or exclamation point, irrespective of grammatical completeness. When a relevant term appeared within a quasi-sentence, the corresponding code was applied. Each quasi-sentence could receive multiple codes or none at all, meaning that between 0 and N codes could be assigned. The coding scheme was binary (0 or 1), rather than scalar. Each quasi-sentence was interpreted in its broader textual context. When a coded quasi-sentence was immediately followed by another that expanded upon or clarified the same theme, the latter was also coded. The final result for each category–'elites' and 'enemies'–was calculated by dividing the number of characters in coded quasi-sentences by the total number of characters in the manifesto. Manual coding was carried out using MAXQDA 2024. The data were exported to Excel and processed using SPSS.

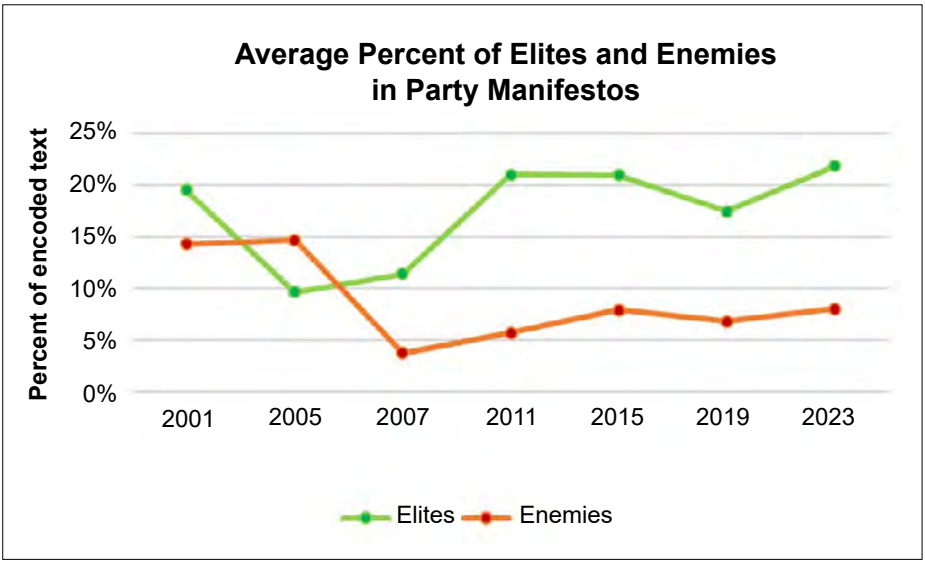
Examples of coded fragments:

- A 'quasi-sentence' assigned a single code (discrediting the 'cultural enemies'), results in the sum of its characters being multiplied by 1: 'Obronimy szkoły przed inwazją samozwańczych "seksedukatorów" i propagandystów ruchu LGBT.' = 89 characters x 1 = 89. [*We will defend schools against the invasion of self-proclaimed 'sex educators' and LGBT movement propagandists.*]

- A 'quasi-sentence' assigned two codes (discrediting 'political elites' and 'geographical enemies') results in the sum of its characters being multiplied by 2: 'Władza w Polsce nie może należeć do partyjnych oligarchii, nie może też należeć do obcych rządów, do międzynarodowych korporacji, ani zagranicznych mediów.' = 155 characters x 2 = 310. [*Political power in Poland should not be controlled by party elites, foreign governments, global corporations, or international media outlets.*]

4. Results

Figure 1:
Average Percentage of Elites and Enemies in Polish Political Party Manifestos by Election Year

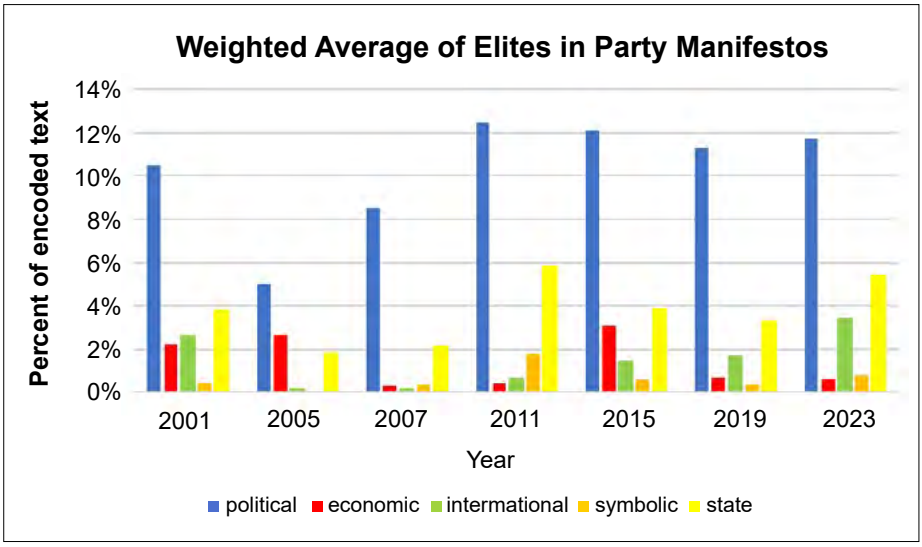


Source: The author.

As shown in Figure 1, in six out of seven electoral cycles, the average share of content dedicated to 'elites' in party manifestos exceeds that devoted to 'enemies.' Across most election years, elite-focused criticism accounts for approximately 18–22% of the total programme content, while references to enemies consistently remain lower, typically ranging from 5% to 7%. Particularly striking is the sharp decline in enemy-related rhetoric following the 2005 elections. In the subsequent cycles—2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023—mentions of 'enemies' never returned to the levels observed in 2001 or 2005. These findings suggest that political blame is more often attributed to elites (**Q1**). Equally noteworthy is the abrupt rise in

anti-elitism between 2007 and 2011, which remained elevated in 2015. This trajectory is puzzling: in 2007, despite low level of anti-elitism, a major alternation of power occurred (PiS lost office to PO, which formed a coalition with PSL). By contrast, in 2011, elite criticism intensified sharply, yet no power change followed. Only in 2015—when this heightened level of criticism persisted—alternation occurred, with the PO-PSL coalition being replaced by a PiS government.

Figure 2:
Weighted Average Percentage of Elites in Polish Political Party Manifestos by Election Year



Source: The author.

As shown in Figure 2, *political elites* consistently constitute the most frequently criticized category across all the elections from 2001 to 2023. Criticism of *state elites* also features prominently throughout the period. While *economic* and *international elites* are targeted more sporadically, their presence is nevertheless clearly visible in certain years. By contrast, *symbolic elites* remain largely marginal in the discourse—at no point exceeding 2% of programmatic content, with their highest share recorded in 2011 (**Q2**). The next section examines which parties are more likely to direct criticism at elites, taking into account their position within the political system.

Table 1:
Mann–Whitney U Test Results for 'Elites' and Their Subtypes

Grouping variable: Government vs. Opposition Party						
Category	**Elites**	**Political elites**	**Economic Elites**	**International Elites**	**Symbolic elites**	**State Elites**
Mann–Whitney U test	30.000	30.000	73.000	143.000	117.000	88.000
Test statistic	-3.840	-3.839	-2.573	-0.519	-1.333	-2.127
p-value	**<0.001**	**<0.001**	**0.010**	0.603	0.183	**0.033**
Grouping variable: Parliamentary vs. Non-parliamentary Party						
Category	**Elites**	**Political elites**	**Economic Elites**	**International Elites**	**Symbolic Elites**	**State Elites**
Mann–Whitney U test	65.000	84.000	92.000	143.000	152.000	106.000
Test statistic	-2.806	-2.244	-2.011	-0.519	-0.248	-1.595
p-value	**0.005**	**0.025**	**0.044**	0.603	0.804	0.111

Source: The author.

As shown in Table 1, several statistically significant patterns can be identified. First, *elite criticism* varies depending on a party's position within the political system: opposition and non-parliamentary parties tend to criticize elites more frequently than governing and parliamentary parties. Second, when comparing governing and opposition parties, statistically significant differences are evident in the criticism of *political*, *economic*, and *state elites*, with opposition parties engaging in such criticism more often. Third, in the comparison between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties, significant variation is observed in the frequency of criticism directed at *political* and *economic elites* (**Q3**).

Table 2:
Pearson's Correlation Results for Economic and GAL-TAN Axis

Category		**Economic axis**	**Economic extreme**	**GAL-TAN axis**	**GAL-TAN extreme**
Elites	r	0.179	**.331***	0.166	**.340***
	p-value	0.257	**0.032**	0.294	**0.028**
Political Elites	r	0.097	0.206	0.062	0.261
	p-value	0.540	0.190	0.694	0.096
Economic Elites	r	-0.046	**.545****	0.045	0.171
	p-value	0.771	**<0.001**	0.776	0.279
International Elites	r	0.172	**.394****	**.437****	**.391***
	p-value	0.276	**0.010**	**0.004**	**0.010**
Symbolic Elites	r	-0.020	-0.210	-0.142	0.133
	p-value	0.901	0.182	0.371	0.402
State Elites	r	**.352***	0.133	0.088	0.170
	p-value	**0.022**	0.401	0.580	0.281

Source: The author.

As illustrated in Table 2, several interesting and statistically significant correlations can be observed. First, there is a clear relationship between elite criticism and a party's ideological extremity on both the economic and GAL–TAN axes, with the strength and significance of the correlations being notably similar across both dimensions. Second, a strong and non-random correlation is evident between criticism of *economic elites* and economic extremity—parties at the far ends of the economic spectrum are more likely to express such criticism. Third, criticism of *international elites* is correlated both with economic extremity and with party positioning on the GAL–TAN axis: TAN-oriented parties are more prone to criticizing *international elites* than GAL-oriented ones, and this tendency increases with ideological extremity on the GAL–TAN scale. Fourth, criticism of *state elites* is associated with a party's position on the economic axis, with right-leaning parties showing a greater propensity to target this type of elite (**Q3**). To explore this further, Table 3 highlights party manifestos in which elite criticism exceeded by more than two standard deviations (SD).

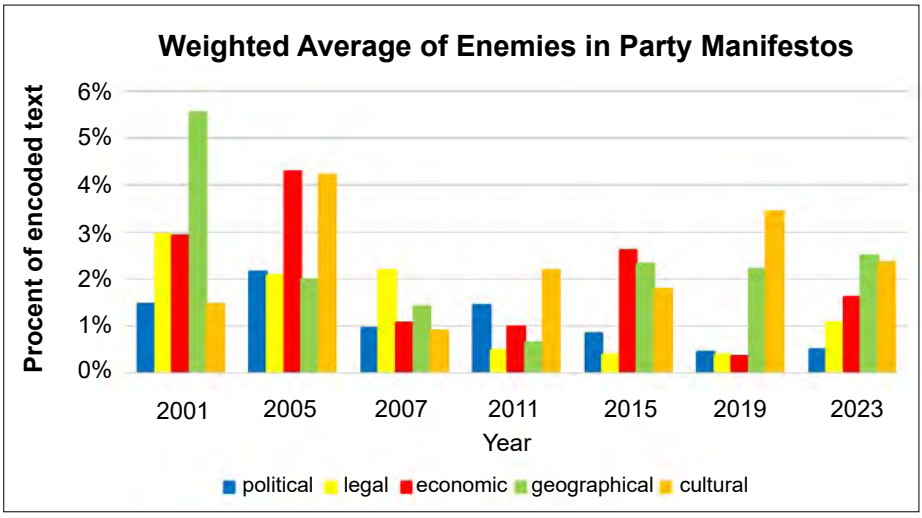
Table 3:
Party Manifestos in Which Elite Criticism Exceeded by more than 2 SD

Category	Year	Party Name	Content in Manifesto	Average Content in Manifestos
Elites	2015	Kukiz'15	0.5078	0.1767
	2023	Confederation	0.4952	
Political Elites	2015	Law and Justice	0.2855	0.1021
	2015	Kukiz'15	0.2845	
Economic Elites	2015	Together	0.1217	0.0166
International Elites	2001	League of Polish Families	0.1626	0.0150
	2023	Confederation	0.1768	
Symbolic Elites	2011	Palikot Movement	0.0741	0.0059
State Elites	2011	Palikot Movement	0.1455	0.0372
	2023	Confederation	0.1144	

Source: The author.

As illustrated in Table 3, the threshold of two standard deviations was exceeded once by the League of Polish Families in 2001, twice by the Palikot Movement in 2011, once by Law and Justice in 2015, once by Together in 2015, twice by Kukiz'15 in 2015, and three times by Confederation in 2023 (**Q4**). Importantly, all of these manifestos were published by parties that were in opposition at the time of publication. Furthermore, six out of the ten cases involved non-parliamentary parties that were either newly established or relatively new to the political landscape. Only one instance—Law and Justice in 2015—concerned a party from the political mainstream. Notably, this party went on to form the government following the 2015 parliamentary elections.

Figure 3:
Weighted Average Percentage of Enemies in Polish Political Party Manifestos by Election Year



Source: The author.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the distribution of 'enemy' types is notably more varied, with no single dominant category, unlike the case of the 'elites'. In 2001, the dominant *enemy* is *geographical*; in 2005 – *economic*; in 2007 – *legal*; in 2011 – *cultural*; in 2015 – again *economic*; in 2019 – *cultural*; and in 2023 – once more *geographical*. Notably, the only type of 'enemy' that never becomes dominant across the observed periods is a *political* one (**Q2**). The results are especially thought-provoking, as they demonstrate the diverse and complex contexts that shaped the formulation of party electoral programs.

Table 4:
Mann–Whitney U Test Results for 'Enemies' and Their Subtypes

Grouping Variable: Government vs. Opposition Party						
Category	**Enemies**	**Political Enemies**	**Legal Enemies**	**Economic Enemies**	**Geographical Enemies**	**Cultural Enemies**
Mann–Whitney U test	76.000	108.500	152.000	113.000	149.000	102.500
Test statistic	-2.481	-1.550	-0.237	-1.389	-0.326	-1.699
p-value	**0.013**	0.121	0.812	0.165	0.745	0.089
Grouping Variable: Parliamentary vs. Non-parliamentary Party						
Category	**Enemies**	**Political Enemies**	**Legal Enemies**	**Economic Enemies**	**Geographical Enemies**	**Cultural Enemies**
Mann–Whitney U test	84.000	142.000	103.000	120.000	157.000	127.000
Test statistic	-2.244	-0.542	-1.692	-1.182	-0.089	-0.975
p-value	**0.025**	0.588	0.091	0.237	0.929	0.330

Source: The author.

Table 4 reveals only two statistically significant findings. Differences between governing and opposition parties, as well as between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties, appear only when all *enemy* types are considered collectively. This suggests that a party's position within the political system affects how frequently *enemies* are referenced, but not which specific types are emphasized (**Q3**).

Table 5:
Pearson's Correlation Results for Economic and GAL-TAN Axis

Category		Economic axis	Economic extreme	GAL-TAN axis	GAL-TAN extreme
Enemies	r	0.037	**.523****	0.130	0.265
	p-value	0.817	**<0.001**	0.413	0.090
Political Enemies	r	-0.099	-0.282	-0.001	0.195
	p-value	0.534	0.071	0.996	0.216
Legal Enemies	r	-0.042	0.023	0.139	0.052
	p-value	0.792	0.884	0.381	0.746
Economic Enemies	r	**-.377***	0.287	-0.077	0.109
	p-value	**0.014**	0.066	0.627	0.490
Geographical Enemies	r	-0.200	0.287	**.494****	**.377***
	p-value	0.203	0.065	**0.001**	**0.014**
Cultural Enemies	r	-0.160	-0.001	-0.248	0.162
	p-value	0.312	0.995	0.113	0.306

Source: The author.

As shown in Table 5, several statistically significant and noteworthy correlations emerge. First, there is a strong and non-random correlation between the frequency of *enemy* references and a party's extremity on the economic axis. Second, when it comes to *economic enemies*, the position on the economic axis matters—parties on the left are more likely to identify *economic enemies*. Third, in the case of *geographical enemies*, there is a strong and significant correlation between such references and a party's side on the GAL–TAN axis—parties on the TAN side are more inclined to point to *geographical enemies*. Additionally, for *geographical enemies*, party extremity on the GAL–TAN axis is also a significant factor (**Q3**). To explore this further, Table 6 highlights party manifestos in which enemies criticism exceeded by more than two standard deviations (SD).

Table 6:
Party Manifestos in Which Enemy Discreditation Exceeded by more than 2 SD

Category	Year	Party Name	Content in Manifesto	Average Content in Manifestos
Enemies	2001	Law and Justice	0.2514	0.0963
	2001	League of Polish Families	0.2874	
	2005	Democratic Left Alliance	0.2534	
	2005	Self-Defense	0.3380	
Political Enemies	2001	Law and Justice	0.0596	0.0114
	2005	Democratic Left Alliance	0.0994	
Legal Enemies	2001	Law and Justice	0.0703	0.0138
	2005	Law and Justice	0.0677	
	2007	Law and Justice	0.0528	
Economic Enemies	2005	Self-Defense	0.1839	0.0914
	2015	Together	0.1328	
Geographical Enemies	2001	League of Polish Families	0.2707	0.0253
Cultural Enemies	2005	Democratic Left Alliance	0.1402	0.0238
	2005	Self-Defense	0.0965	
	2019	Democratic Left Alliance / Left	0.0836	

Source: The author.

As shown in Table 6, the threshold of two standard deviations was exceeded on five occasions by Law and Justice (three times in 2001, once in 2005, and once in 2007), four times by the Democratic Left Alliance (three times in 2005 and once in 2019), three times by Self-Defense in 2005, twice by the League of Polish Families in 2001, and once by Together in 2015 (**Q4**). As can be observed, for many of these parties, these were the first elections in which they ran under their own label. What is particularly striking is that two of the programmes that surpassed the two-standard-deviation threshold belonged to governing parties at the time—specifically, the Democratic Left Alliance in 2005 and Law and Justice in 2007. This finding is especially noteworthy, as no comparable case was observed in relation to anti-elitism, as previously demonstrated in Table 3.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings suggest that political manifestos tend to target elites more frequently than enemies, which is, to some extent, understandable. Given that party manifestos are designed to appeal to voters, particularly in the case of catch-all parties, it is often more strategic to avoid explicitly designating parts of the electorate as 'enemies'—whether these are supporters of competing parties, individuals identifying with movements such as LGBT, or people who do not practice the

dominant religion. Such labelling excludes these groups from the category of 'us', thereby increasing the risk of losing their electoral support. Although 'enemies' may be defined in impersonal terms, as discussed earlier, they are often framed in a personal way, referring to individuals who may be voters of these parties. Such framing risks alienating potential supporters by excluding them from the 'people'. The predominant target of elite-related criticism is the *political elite*.

The intensity of anti-elitism is significantly influenced by a party's position within the political system: opposition parties are more inclined to criticize elites than those in government, and non-parliamentary parties do so more frequently than their parliamentary counterparts. This would partially support the findings of Bobba and McDonnell (2016). Additionally, extremity on both the economic and GAL–TAN axes is positively correlated with elite criticism. This finding is also supported by the study conducted by Ernst et al. (2017), although their research focused on populism, within which anti-elitism was defined as one of the three core components of populism. This does not necessarily mean that every opposition party exhibits a higher level of anti-elitism in its manifesto than every party in government.

Specifically, criticism of *international elites* is associated with economic extremity, GAL–TAN positioning (with greater intensity on the TAN side), and GAL–TAN extremity. Interestingly, criticism of *political elites* is statistically significant only with respect to a party's systemic position (oppositional) and parliamentary status (non-parliamentary). In the case of *state elites*, the key variables are systemic position (opposition) and placement on the economic axis (right side). For *economic elites*, the relevant factors are systemic position (opposition), parliamentary absence, and economic extremity. These results only partially confirm previous findings by Bonikowski and Gidron (2016), Oliver and Rahn (2016), and Maurer and Diehl (2020).

A noteworthy observation concerns which parties display significantly higher levels of elite criticism. Many of these instances involve parties participating in their first election cycle: in 2001, the League of Polish Families (*international elites*); in 2011, the Palikot Movement (*symbolic* and *state elites*); in 2015, Together (*economic elites*); and in 2015, Kukiz'15 (elites in general and *political elites*). This pattern suggests a possible relationship between party novelty and heightened elite criticism. Indeed, in 6 of the 10 cases that surpassed the two-standard-deviation threshold, the parties were electoral newcomers.

It is also important to note—though this may not be immediately evident from quantitative analysis—that governing parties can engage in elite criticism in their manifestos, which may initially seem paradoxical, given that these parties themselves constitute part of the elite. Such criticism can be directed at *political elites* from previous administrations, as well as at other types of elites outside the current political sphere, including certain *state elites*, such as judicial authorities, or *symbolic elites*, including intellectuals and journalists.

The key explanatory variables 'enemy' references are systemic position (opposition), lack of parliamentary representation, and economic extremity. For *economic enemies*, the only statistically significant factor is a party's position on the left of the economic spectrum. In the case of *geographical enemies*, both TAN side placement and extremity on the GAL–TAN axis are significant. These findings support the observations made by Ostiguy and Casullo (2017).

Unlike anti-elitism, enemies criticism does not show a consistent association with party novelty. Although some new parties—such as Law and Justice in 2001 (enemies in general, *political*, and *legal enemies*), the League of Polish Families in 2001 (enemies in general and *geographical enemies*), and Together in 2015 (*economic enemies*)—fit this profile, only 6 of the 15 cases exceeding the two-standard-deviation threshold involved first-time electoral participants. This suggests that while party novelty may be a key driver of anti-elitism, its link to pointing out enemies is less robust.

Although existing studies have addressed the portrayal of threats and adversaries—whether in the form of elites or other groups—they have typically focused on specific populist (Breeze, 2019; Wojczewski, 2020) or radical parties (Cervi, Tejedor, & Villar, 2023). In contrast, this study conceptualizes both anti-elitism and enemy designation as gradable phenomena, and, most importantly, as potentially present in the programmes of any political party, regardless of whether it is classified as populist.

This study has certain limitations. The analysis is confined to Poland, which is a large democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, between 2001 and 2023. And though the textual corpus analysed was substantial, future comparative research involving neighbouring countries with similar political systems, socio-economic challenges, and post-communist trajectories could offer valuable additional insights. It should also be emphasized that only the content of party manifestos was analyzed. The study did not take into account whether the parties intended to implement the programmes, nor did it consider their statements in parliament or during election campaigns.

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Appendix: Manifestos examined in the article

Year of manifesto	Party Name and/or Coalition Name	Number of signs
2001	Democratic Left Alliance - Labour Union (SLD-UP)	66 656
2001	Civic Platform (PO)	91 953
2001	Law and Justice (PiS)	98 219
2001	Polish People's Party (PSL)	118 509
2001	League of Polish Families	8 719
2001	Solidarity of the Right Electoral Action (AWSP)	17 350
2001	Freedom Union (UW)	87 664
2005	Law and Justice (PiS)	31 406
2005	Civic Platform (PO)	91 547
2005	Self-Defence (Samoobrona)	20 770
2005	Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)	18 673
2005	League of Polish Families (LPR)	23 148
2005	Polish People's Party (PSL)	22 401
2005	Social Democracy of Poland (SLD)	14 805
2007	Civic Platform (PO)	161 476
2007	Law and Justice (PiS)	107 246
2007	Left and Democrats (LiD)	135 625
2007	Polish People's Party (PSL)	57 920
2011	Civic Platform (PO)	157 723
2011	Law and Justice (PiS)	680 832
2011	Palikot's Movement (Ruch Palikota)	25 008
2011	Polish People's Party (PSL)	26 567
2011	Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)	346 670
2014/15	Law and Justice (PiS)	459 092
2015	Civic Platform (PO)	149 114
2015	Kukiz'15	50 115
2015/16	Modern (Nowoczesna)	112 041
2015	Polish People's Party (PSL)	40 316
2015	Democratic Left Alliance / United Left (SLD/ZLeW)	68 716
2015	KORWiN	74 944
2015	Together (Razem)	73 131
2019	Law and Justice / United Right (PiS/ZP)	454 871
2019	Civic Platform / Civic Coalition (PO/KO)	116 686
2019	Left (Lewica)	17 372
2019	Polish People's Party / Polish Coalition (PSL)	53 619

Year of manifesto	**Party Name and/or Coalition Name**	**Number of signs**
2019	Confederation (Konfederacja)	14 475
2023	Law and Justice / United Right (PiS)	464 060
2023	Civic Platform / Civic Coalition (PO/KO)	19 676
2023	Poland 2050 (Polska 2050)	42 905
2023	Polish People's Party (PSL)	81 913
2023	Confederation (Konfederacja)	129 239
2023	New Left (Nowa Lewica)	74 600

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.

Keywords: local politics, manifesto, populism, radical right party, Czech Republic

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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.

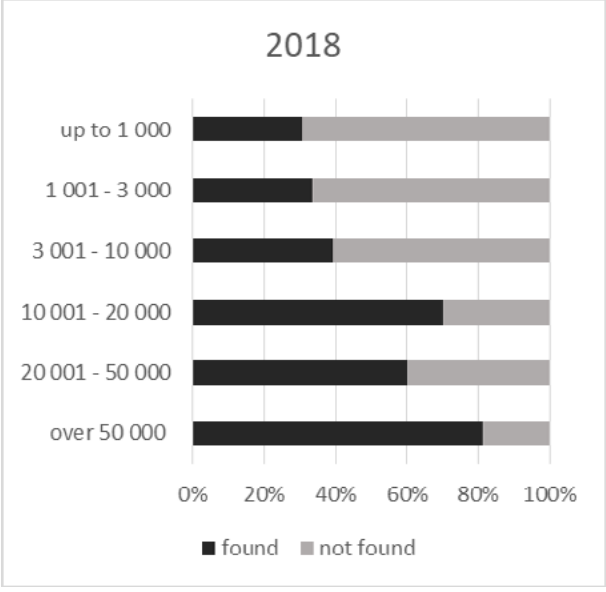
5. Data and methods

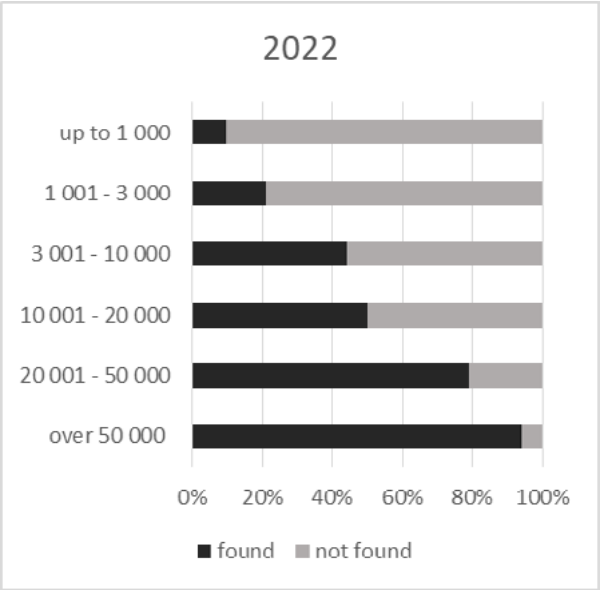
The primary source of information for this study is a corpus of local electoral manifestos from the SPD. Since there is no centralized project archiving local manifestos in the Czech Republic, I conducted my own data collection using several methods. Majority of manifestos come from search the municipality 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

Houman A. Sadri:

Conflict and Cooperation in the South Caucasus Region: From Theory to Policy

Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2024.

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Houman Sadri, associate professor of political science at the University of Central Florida, is the author of the "Conflict and Cooperation in the South Caucasus Region: From Theory to Policy." In the text, he explores the various safety concerns and foreign policy goals that are specifically unique to the South Caucasus states. Sadri also discusses how the three international relations (IR) perspectives: Realism, Clash of Civilization, and Geopolitics can help readers understand the political affairs of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia following their freedom from the Soviet Union. Because the book analyzes the territory through a geopolitical lens, it evaluates the discourse/unity that takes place inside the South Caucasus states and even displays the area's profound significance in global politics.

The introduction chapter offers a thorough examination of the South Caucasus region's vital position, ethnic/religious makeup, historic information, and self-governance since the end of the USSR. The book also dedicates a chapter going over the landscape and historical background from the pre-Soviet era up until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 for each South Caucasus state. Chapter 2 focuses on Azerbaijan, Chapter 3 concentrates on Armenia, and Chapter 4 centers on Georgia.

After successfully acquiring independence from the Soviet Union, multiple global and regional actors have targeted the South Caucasus territory for its critical geographic placement. This alone has sparked a major geopolitical competition between the United States and Russia within the region. In Chapter 2-4,

Sadri explains the three countries foreign policy relationships with the United States, Russia, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), other Western European organizations (i.e., North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European Union), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Iran, and Turkey. He also delves into the relations that Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia have with each other.

The author shows how Armenia has closer ties to Russia, CIS, the EU, Iran, and Georgia while it has weaker ties with NATO, the United States, OSCE, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Azerbaijan has a strong connection to Georgia and Turkey than it does with Armenia and Iran. Sadri acknowledges how the first Nagorno-Karabakh War poisoned the relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia. While both countries were negatively impacted by the conflict, Azerbaijan was able to utilize its raw materials to recover from the regional war economically and militarily. However, Armenia has not been very fortunate. The country is having a challenging time trying to build up its economy and military equipment. As of right now, Armenia mostly engages in foreign trade just to keep itself afloat.

When it comes to Georgia, the country tends to lean more in favor of developing closer connections with Western countries and organizations. The book addresses how Georgia regularly engages in separatist conflicts with Abkhazia, Adjara, and South Ossetia and heavily relies on powerful Western nations to supply its military needs. However, actively participating in these clashes took a major toll on Georgia's economy. To alleviate their financial burdens, the country imports majority of its resources from Azerbaijan and sends most of its goods to Russia. Unfortunately, the Russian government is extremely unhappy with Georgia's growing relationship with Western powers and has threatened to intervene militarily if the country continues to do so. To prevent a second Russia-Georgia War, the Georgian government decided to steer clear of forming closer ties with the Western nations.

Sadri also examines the diverse governmental frameworks of the three South Caucasus states and how these structures operate within their society. In Chapter 2, the book explores President Ilham Aliyev's very authoritative government. With the help of the New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), this allows Aliyev to secure enough seats to stay in office and enables him to exert brutal power over many Azerbaijani citizens. Sadly, those who are underrepresented in society such as ethnic/religious minorities and women are negatively affected under his administration.

In Chapter 3, it covers the main events that led to the Velvet Revolution. Sadri compares Armenia's system of government, various political affiliations, political liberties, constitutional rights, and fundamental rights during Serzh Sargsyan and Vahagn Khachaturyan's time in office. In Chapter 4, the author even goes over how the Georgia Rose Revolution has slightly improved the country's structure of government, main political players, individual rights, constitutional freedoms, and human rights.

In Chapter 5, the book neatly recaps Sadri's key takeaways assessing the political decision-making, safety precautions, and security-related problems of the South Caucasus states. He asserts that the territory is heavily influenced by separatist movements, domestic unrest, and geopolitical struggles. Not only that, but the author also explains how the three international relations (IR) perspectives can help professionals portray, exemplify, and foresee the foreign/security affairs of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia between themselves, their regional neighbors, and other world powers. Although these IR theories are useful tools in grasping the foreign policies of the South Caucasus states, they cannot fully expound on the underlying cause of disputes within the region.

As can be seen, Sadri presents a substantial amount of preliminary knowledge about Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, this geographical location was a complete mystery to many individuals during that time, and it is still an enigma today. Thankfully, the author identified this problem and dedicated hours of expert analysis to help fill-in the massive gap in knowledge for those who are unfamiliar with the South Caucasus states. He articulates the topic so well that even undergraduates can easily comprehend the dynamics of this region. Therefore, the book serves as the perfect introduction for those who may not know much about the South Caucasus territory and will be extremely helpful for academics, political analysts, and international relations/affairs specialists alike. As a result, professionals can gain more clarification about the intense rivalry between the West, Russia, Iran, and Turkey when it comes to this area of the globe.

Overall, *Conflict and Cooperation in the South Caucasus Region: From Theory to Policy* is a valuable and timely contribution to the study of Eurasian politics. Professor Sadri offers a well-researched and highly accessible examination of the South Caucasus, one that not only clarifies the region's strategic significance but also deepens understanding of its foreign and security policies. As a result, this book provides an important reference point for experts and policymakers seeking to anticipate how regional and global actors may engage with the South Caucasus in the years ahead. Among the many works written by scholars outside the region, Sadri's stands out for its depth of insight—shaped by his extensive fieldwork, sustained engagement with local institutions, and long-term familiarity with the societies he studies.

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