

Best in Covid:
Populists in the Time of Pandemic

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Abstract

How do populists govern once in power? We address this question by analyzing the actions of technocratic populists in power during the first wave of the novel coronavirus crisis in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. We identify three features of the populist pandemic response. First, populists bypassed established, institutionalized channels. Second, they engaged in erratic yet responsive policy making. These two features are ubiquitous to populism. The third feature is the use of narratives of expert-driven governance to legitimize their direct link with voters. This is specific to technocratic populism, which instrumentalizes knowledge. Technocratic populists in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia weaponized and politicized medical expertise yet handled the first wave of Covid-19 relatively well.

Keywords

populism; technocratic populism; nationalism; health expertise; pandemic; Covid-19; ANO; OL'ANO; Czech Republic; Slovakia; first wave

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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“I will respect whatever the consilium of experts approve. The Chief Public Health Officer makes the final decision.”

Igor Matovič, The Prime Minister of Slovakia

“[T]he public demanded that we loosen up [Covid-19 restrictions over the summer of 2020], and so, we did. Unfortunately, we were wrong.”

Andrej Babiš, The Prime Minister of the Czech Republic

Introduction

On August 31, 2020, Andrej Babiš uttered the following words at the Strategic Forum in Slovenia: *“My profession is businessman, crisis manager, actually Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, ..., we have results, best in Covid”*. His statement reflected the general sentiment following the first wave of the pandemic in Europe. The Czech Republic quickly introduced strict mask mandates and seemed to have had the virus under control by early summer 2020. However, by mid-October, it recorded more new cases per million people than any other country in the world.

In May, Igor Matovič also touted Slovakia as *“best in Covid”* because of its lowest death rates in the European Union. By October, infections started to surge, which forced Slovakia to re-introduce freedom of movement restrictions. Technocratic populists responded quickly to the pandemic threat in the spring, but also to shifts in public mood during the summer. When the public was exhausted and demanded a return to everyday life, the government unraveled restrictions, and a massive second wave ensued.

We explore the inner mechanics of technocratic populism in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Both leaders (Andrej Babiš and Igor Matovič) lead governing coalitions that grappled with the challenge of Covid-19. This provides a rare opportunity to study populist

governance in crisis (Caiani & Graziano, 2019; Moffitt, 2015). Our analysis identifies three features of the populist response to the pandemic. First, populists bypassed established, institutionalized channels to combat the crisis. Second, they engaged in erratic yet responsive policy making. These features are ubiquitous to populism.

The third feature is specific to technocracy—and technocratic populism—in its instrumentalization of knowledge. Technocratic populists use narratives of expert-driven governance to legitimize their direct link with voters. Therefore, responsive crisis management, legitimized by science and expertise, is especially conducive to their appeal. The Czech and Slovak leaders weaponized medical expertise for political purposes, yet generally handled the first wave of the pandemic well.

Technocratic populism is an output-oriented populism that directly links voters to leaders via expertise. De la Torre (2013: 34) used the term to describe President Rafael Correa, formerly an economics professor, as someone who “combine[d] populist rhetoric with top-down technocratic policies,” and called for the end of ‘partocracy’ in Ecuador. Technocratic populism arises as a response to the crisis of governance by mainstream parties. When voters in inadequately governed states reject left-wing Tweedledums and right-wing Tweedledees, they turn to leaders that offer expertise outside of the dysfunctional deliberative political realm (Pop-Eleches, 2010).

Berlusconi in Italy, Babiš in Czechia, and Ivanishvili in Georgia turned their business expertise into political capital. Macron in France was trained as an elite-level technocrat but also worked in the banking sector. Matovič started in a publishing business but joined the political opposition in Slovakia during 2010. He tasered the political establishment with clownish stunts and a decade later, he won elections. All the above-mentioned leaders rejected the notion of a left-right continuum in politics. Some of them might appear centrist, but first and foremost, they adopt policies that are politically expedient and responsive (Mair, 2009) to the immediate needs of pockets of voters, which they strategically target. When in power, they weaponize expertise to undermine accountability and oversight while aggrandizing their own power.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we outline how technocratic populism differs from other forms of populism. Second, we justify the party classification of ANO and OLaNO as populist parties (Zulianello, 2020). ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens), led

by Andrej Babiš, presided over the pandemic response in the Czech Republic with the social democrats. OĽaNO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities), led by Igor Matovič, formed a governing coalition with three other parties after winning the February 2020 elections in Slovakia on an anti-corruption platform. However, the government's agenda was immediately over-shadowed by Covid-19. We discuss the Czech case first, and then contrast it with the Slovak case. The article concludes with a discussion of the broader implications for the study of technocratic populism.

Technocratic Populism

Populism is a thin-centered ideology (Hawkins & Littvay, 2019; Mudde, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018) and a strategy to gain power (Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Taggart, 2000; Vachudova, 2000; Weyland, 2020) that can lead to executive aggrandizement (Bermeo, 2016). Populist ideologies emphasize, as well as combine, economic grievances, identity politics and technocratic expertise. Populist types are defined by the core definitions of the “people”. They respond to three different grievances: economic inequality, identity-based exclusion and governance on behalf of the “ordinary people” (Canovan, 1981; Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013).

Technocratic populism instrumentalizes governance (Aprasidze & Siroky, 2020; Perottino and Guasti, 2020; Verzichelli & Castaldo, 2020). However, it is not the rule of experts (Dargent, 2014) but a variant of populism (Bickerton & Accetti, 2017). Technocratic populists rule in the name of the “people” on the grounds of expertise. They “strategically use the appeal of technocratic competence and weaponize numbers to deliver a populist message” (Buščíková & Guasti, 2019: 304). Furthermore, populists use technocracy in their quest to bypass institutions of representative democracy (Caramani, 2017; Guasti, 2020a; Urbinati, 2019).

- TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE -

Table 1: Technocratic populism as a sub-type

People	Grievance	Governments	
		Responsible	Responsive
		Policies	
		Universalistic	Targeted
Nation	Identity	mainstream right	exclusionary populism
Underdog	Economy	mainstream left (social democrats)	inclusionary populism
Ordinary	Governance	technocracy	technocratic populism

Table 1 locates technocratic populism as a sub-type of populism (which pitches the elite against the “people”). We use Canovan’s definitions of “the people” (Canovan, 1981). Technocratic populist parties respond to the grievances of “ordinary people” who are dissatisfied with governance by mainstream politicians and offer both expertise in governance **and** a direct link to voters. Exclusionary populism responds to grievances associated with ethnic diversity, inclusionary populism is an attempt to remedy economic exclusion (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). When populists opt for divisive identity politics (Bustikova, 2020; Meguid, 2008; Mudde, 2000), they fabricate the category of the “enemy of the people” and apply it to political opponents (Pappas, 2019). Populists maintain flexibility to define “the other” along many identity marks, such as ethnicity, culture, language or gender (Jenne, 2018; Vachudova, 2020). The instrumental use of ideology is a cornerstone of populist policy inconsistency.

Once populists are in power, we can observe their policy making. In Europe, the decline of social democracy allowed for a shift to the left (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019), yet at the same time it did not displace identity (Kates & Tucker, 2019). In Eastern Europe, populists effortlessly combine exclusive identity politics with welfare and family protection (Bill & Stanley, 2020; Bustikova & Kitschelt, 2009; Enyedi, 2020). However, populist left-leaning economic platforms do not possess the programmatic and universalistic consistency of social democratic parties. Populist economic platforms are targeted, even erratic, and disregard “responsibility”. Mair identified a growing tension between problem solving and satisfying public demands: responsibility and responsiveness. In his words: “*governments*

are now finding it increasingly difficult to be responsive to voters.... In seeking to act responsibly, that is trying to ... meet the everyday responsibilities of office, governments now find themselves ... constrained” (Mair, 2009: 13-14).

In order to account for the erratic nature of populism, we highlight a distinction between targeted policies and universalistic policies of responsible governments that provide long-term public goods (Kitschelt, 2000). Targeted policies that deliver club goods and cater to blocks of voters are limited in scope, and typically focus on short-term gains. Extreme responsiveness results in ad-hoc and even erratic targeted policies crafted to respond to immediate needs, such as those that arise from social media, which provides populists with instantaneous popularity boosts.

Populists’ offerings of state-sponsored benefits to voter blocks is a “responsive”, flexible strategy that can be used to secure votes both from the poor as well as from the wealthy. Policy cherry-picking blurs traditional left and right divisions in politics (Szikra, 2018; Edwards, 2010; Pirro 2007; Rovny & Polk, 2020). Free of responsibility, populists can at the same time lower taxes, inflate deficits, increase benefits and offer “free” public goods to a selected segment of voters.

Most governments must strike a balance between what voters want and what is feasible. We associate programmatic mainstream parties, such as social democratic parties, with “responsibility”. Populists, on the other hand, are associated with inconsistency (Grzymala-Busse and Nalepa, 2019) due to their “responsiveness” (Mair, 2009). Technocratic populism is a sub-type of populism. It responds to crisis by initially offering expertise outside the political realm but also a direct, personalized and instantaneous accountability linkage between the leader and “ordinary” supporters.

ANO and OLaNO

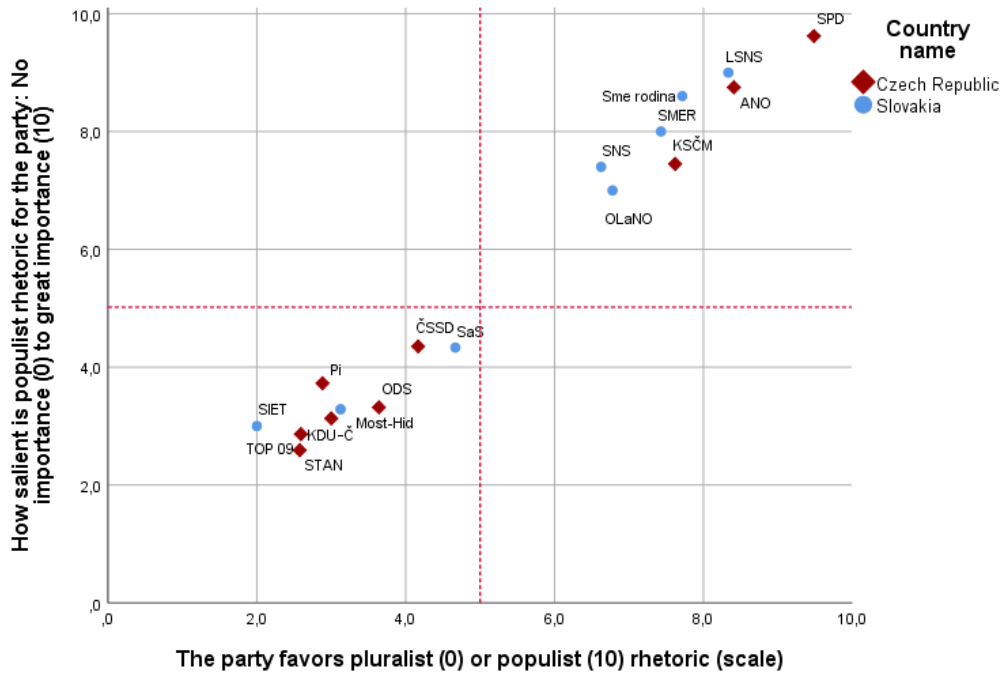
How do populists wield power? We are frequently limited to seeing populists in the opposition benches. But, when populists come to power and experience crisis, we can observe how they govern. Eastern European populists are versatile and defy typological precisions (Bernhard et al. 2020). Nevertheless, quality of governance is a perennial

weakness of both countries, since the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993 (Basta & Bustikova, 2016). Two decades later, dissatisfied voters turned to anti-establishment parties founded on the promise to combat political corruption. ANO and OĽaNO are two prime examples.

ANO, a technocratic populist party led by Andrej Babiš, won elections in 2017 and has been leading a minority coalition government since 2018 (Havlík, 2019). Igor Matovič, who leads OĽaNO, won elections on an anti-corruption platform and formed a governing coalition in March 2020 (Gyárfášová & Učeň, 2020). Figure 1 places Czech and Slovak political parties' score on indicators of populism as measured by the Global Party Survey (2019). The mainstream parties are in the bottom-left quadrant, populists are in the top-right quadrant. Both ANO and OĽaNO favor populist over pluralist rhetoric (the x-axis) and populist rhetoric is salient in their platforms (the y-axis).

- FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE -

Figure 1: Populist vs. pluralist rhetoric and its salience among Czech and Slovak parties



Source: Global Party Survey 2019.

ANO and OĽaNO reject programmatic divisions and oppose traditional, “establishment” parties on the left and right. Both have flexible and opportunistic policy platforms that respond to shifts in public moods, social media impulses and extensive internal polling, which provides them with flexibility to adjust their policy positions. ANO started as a fiscally conservative party promising effective, lean governance in 2011. However, ANO’s core voters in 2020 are primarily retirees who depend on the state.

OĽaNO’s is equally versatile. During the 2019-2020 electoral campaign, Igor Matovič declared that he considered most of the far-right ĽSNS voters, as well as most of the leftist Smer-SD voters, to be “normal” people and he welcomed their votes. Matovič’s lack of traditional ideology is also reflected in the party’s manifesto, which does not include a single word that would programmatically relate to the left or right. OĽaNO’s manifesto divides people into “us” vs. “them” categories. “Us” are “brave and honest people” who deserve “to live better.” “Them” are thieves and mafia-linked politicians who “stole the state” and “friends of these politicians” who benefited from the corrupt system (OĽaNO Party Manifesto, 2020: 10). Matovič’s electoral campaign promised justice for all.

In terms of economic policies, both ANO and OĽaNO appeal to the segments of left leaning, working-class constituents. Both “responsively” design targeted economic policies to buy off voters (Malová & Dolný, 2016; Baboš, Világi & Oravcová, 2016) without the “responsibility” of budget constraints. Matovič advocates for sound public finances. Yet, he refuses to eliminate redistributive policies introduced by the previous party in power, Smer-SD, such as free trains for students or increased pensions. Similarly, since in power, ANO accelerated spending on targeted welfare programs, yet at the same time, decreased taxes.

Reactive, impulsive measures driven by social media popularity or selective access to leaders are symptoms of populism. This is exemplified by Andrej Babiš’s appeal on social media to “*call me and I will fix it right away*” in his effort to micromanage every aspect of the Czech economy. Instantaneous popularity on social media is the ultimate measure of success. Igor Matovič’s style is similar. He refused to hire a professional spokesperson that would represent the office of the Prime Minister. He prefers direct communication with

citizens and extensively uses Facebook for policy updates. He even occasionally uploads posts from Slovak cabinet meetings live via Facebook.

Populist reactiveness can be exemplified by Andrej Babiš's personalized efforts to "Save Max". Maxík (little Max) was born in June 2018 with spinal muscular dystrophy. Drugs that can cure this condition are expensive, unavailable and not covered by public insurance. The cure is available abroad and must be performed before the second birthday of a sick child. Max's family organized social media campaign and raised over 2 million euro, predominantly from small donors. Their efforts generated a large wave of solidarity and publicity. Once the collection was concluded, the Ministry of Finance announced that the family will have to pay value added tax (VAT) on the money raised. Public backlash ensued. Max's advocates criticized the state for failing to rescue a sick child as well as for predated on civic solidarity.

Under mounting criticism, Prime Minister Babiš got involved. In his weekly Sunday recordings "Čau lidi" ("Hi guys") on Facebook, he proclaimed that he will make every effort to 'Save Max'. First, Babiš promised to suspend the VAT and "to find a legal tax loophole." When no loophole was found, Babiš opted to "have a call" with public health insurance providers. In a miraculous turn of events, in April 2020, the two largest public insurance companies decided to alter their policies for Max and two other boys in a need of identical treatment for spinal muscular dystrophy.¹ The insurers decided to fully cover the treatment for three boys. The public was enthusiastic and praised the Prime Minister for saving the boys. Babiš hijacked a civic initiative to increase his visibility and popularity. There was no policy adaptation. Parents and patients in similar situations and in need of unavailable treatments have to organize an online campaign and hope to catch the his eye.

Pandemic Response in Czechia

The official platform of ANO revolves around four issues: security, state effectiveness, state investment and human capital investment. Babiš's motto is to "*run the state as a firm*" as a testament to his business background (Bustikova & Guasti, 2019). In 2017, ANO won elections with almost 30% of the vote; and in 2018, it formed a minority government with

social democrats. Once in charge, Babiš went on a spending spree with a range of policies targeting older and poor voters. ANO aggressively increased both salaries and the numbers of employees who depend on the state for living.

In 2019, the government's target for 2020 was a budget deficit of 40 billion Czech crowns (1.5 billion euro). However, the coronavirus crisis forced more spending. In April 2020, the government widened the target to a projected record deficit of 500 billion crowns (18.8 billion euro). Although ANO runs on a platform of a lean, business-like efficient state, the state became over-bloated even before the pandemic.

The Covid-19 crisis in the spring of 2020 tested state effectiveness. The government reacted swiftly and introduced strict emergency measures on March 11. Schools, non-essential business and offices were shut down. Non-essential travel was restricted and borders with neighboring countries were closed. According to the Ministry of Health, as of September 4, 2020, Czechia, a country of 10.6 million people, registered 26,452 cases and 426 deaths. From the standpoint of public health, the first wave of the pandemic was handled successfully (Guasti, 2020b).

ANO imposed unconstitutional measures to protect public health (Guasti, 2020a), such as a complete border shut-down. The chief of the emergency task force during the first wave, Roman Prymula, floated the idea that borders should remain closed for two years. The government forbade the Czech citizens to leave the country (with some exceptions), as part of the emergency measures. For many people, it was reminiscent of the iron curtain. Opposition politicians called the measure unconstitutional and the Senate started to prepare a complaint to the Constitutional court. As a consequence, in late April, the government backed off and opened the borders for its own citizens. For foreigners, the borders remained sealed.

A large component of the success in taming Covid-19 has to be attributed to the surge of civil society activism, volunteering, solidarity, human capital mobilization and exemplary compliance with the public safety measures, at least during the first wave (Respekt, 2020). The state required all citizens to wear masks in public, initially including streets, parks, shops and public transportation and introduced fines for non-compliance. However, since masks were sold out and practically unavailable both for citizens and health care workers, citizens responded by producing home-made masks and home-made hand

sanitizers. These were distributed via friendship circles, civic organizations and volunteer groups. Health and hospital workers lacked masks, respirators and protective gear as well. This led to the outpouring of private donations and to innovation (such as masks printed on 3-d printers). Civil society plugged the holes where the state had failed.

Andrej Babiš first mocked the use of masks and then forced the whole country to dig up their sewing machines, while threatening non-compliance with fines. Then, he jumped on the civil society bandwagon. On March 29, 2020 he sent a tweet to President Trump with a link to the viral #Masks4All video: *Mr. President @realDonaldTrump, try tackling virus the Czech way. Wearing a simple cloth mask decreases the spread of the virus by 80%! Czech Republic has made it OBLIGATORY for its citizens to wear a mask in the public.* As with the ‘Save Max’, the Prime Minister used a viral social-media activity to present himself as a “man of the people” and he took credit for the actions of civil society.

The crisis showcased Andrej Babiš’s instantaneous responsiveness. In a press conference on March 14, Babiš was asked to address the severe shortages of respirators in hospitals and among health workers. He denied it: *“It is not true that health workers do not have respirators. Tell me where, I will personally deliver (respirators) to them”*.² Babiš later apologized and acknowledged shortages. To secure the necessary supplies, social democratic Vice Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior Jan Hamáček used personal networks in China to purchase PPE. When a Chinese plane landed in Prague on March 20 with more than one million respirators in the amount of 75 million Czech crowns (2,760 thousand euro), both the Prime Minister Babiš and the vice Prime Minister Hamáček greeted the cargo personally at the tarmac. In a midst of pandemic, the highest officials from both governing parties competed for media attention over the PPE for which Czechia had overpaid.

Tensions between Babiš’s ANO and the social democrats, a junior coalition partner, extended beyond the sight of the cameras. Each party controlled different portfolios and the government branches were competing rather than coordinating with each other. The Ministry of Health (controlled by ANO) was also purchasing respirators and medical supplies from China, independently of the Ministry of Interior (controlled by social democrats), and for a higher price. The Ministry of Interior paid 1.5 to 2.5 euro for one

FFP2 respirator, but the Ministry of Health paid up to five euro per piece.³ Despite the rhetoric, effective governance was clearly lacking.

Because the government was purchasing medical supplies under emergency measures, oversight and transparency in public procurement were suspended. Small Czech firms and firms with limited political connections were excluded from pandemic-related acquisitions by all ministries. The quick, non-transparent process of spending public funds invited corruption. The Supreme Audit Office (Nejvyšší kontrolní úřad) initiated an investigation into suspicious public procurement of medical supplies immediately after the emergency measures were terminated on May 17.

When recapitulating the crisis, Babiš praised the emergency measures in a radio interview on May 7: “*Finally, I was able to run the state as a ... firm, it was effective and to the point. We were able to see our decisions implemented right away.*”⁴ The desire to manage the crisis as directly as possible led to the bypassing of institutional guidelines that were put in place in cases of emergency. In the initial stages, this led to chaos, but it gave Babiš maximum control over the pandemic response and focused media attention on him. Furthermore, these unorthodox steps were justified by relying on a loyal, handpicked, expert. Epidemiologist Roman Prymula, a non-elected deputy minister, became the public face of the pandemic response.

Technocratic populism in a pandemic is a double-edged sword. Expertise was prioritized over deliberation. Panicked citizens followed cues on the importance of masks and distancing, which allowed the government to tame the virus in the first wave. Responsiveness is compatible with “blunt” measures that do not require fine tuning, like shutting the borders or lockdowns. These measures immediately satisfied the public urge for safety and were effective from the public health standpoint. However, in order to combat the virus over the long run, governments need to implement responsible policies that require higher levels of state capacity, coordination and meticulous planning.

Although there is a Central Emergency Task Force (ústřední krizový štáb) to respond to emergencies such as natural disasters and epidemics, which has always been headed by an elected minister, Prime Minister Babiš bypassed a social democratic minister of interior Jan Hamáček and selected Roman Prymula, an expert, to lead the fight against the virus. Babiš bent the rules to control the task force directly. Professor Prymula is a prominent

epidemiologist with the rank of colonel, and an expert on vaccines and immunization who served as an apolitical deputy minister of health loyal to Babiš's ANO. Even though he lacked the security clearance required for all deputy ministers, he activated the Central Emergency Task force on March 16 and began coordinating purchases of respirators, medical supplies and PPEs.

Without a minister in charge, the task force's ability to coordinate procurement and response was undermined. On March 30, Prymula was forced out, although he later became the Minister of Health during the second wave in the fall. Adam Vojtěch, the first sacrificial lamb, was forced to resign on September 21 to deflect blame away from the Prime Minister. His technocratic replacement, Prymula, lasted a month. As the crisis was spiraling out of control in autumn and appeasing public anger, Babiš proposed to sack the professor on October 23.

Initially, Roman Prymula was the star of press conferences along with the Prime Minister. When asked who is in charge to combat the pandemic, Babiš noted: "*For me, the biggest expert is the Deputy Minister Prymula. We are in touch online. All the time.*"⁵ Prymula's popularity rose. Eventually, he outshone both the Prime Minister and his Minister of Health Adam Vojtěch. A representative survey from early April found that Prymula was perceived by more than a third of the adult population (34%) as the person who contributes most to the efforts to combat the spread of the coronavirus. Minister of Interior Hamáček received the second-best marks, closely followed by Babiš. The public perceived the ANO Minister of Health, Vojtěch, as marginal compared to Prymula, Hamáček and Babiš.⁶

Babiš shielded himself with Prymula's medical expertise, which helped him to usurp power and the media spotlight. He undercut his junior coalition partner and the political opposition. Babiš viewed the social democratic Vice Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior Hamáček as a competent political rival who could outshine him, which led to tension in the governing coalition. Most importantly, Babiš's decision to elevate Prymula interfered with a delicately designed system of institutional response in which the Ministry of Interior played a vital coordinating role. It undermined the efforts of the Central Emergency Task Force because the Ministry of Interior, controlled by social democrat

minister Hamáček, could not effectively co-ordinate with a Ministry of Health, controlled by ANO minister Vojtěch.

After mishaps, chaos and criticism, Babiš eventually ceded. Hamáček took over the emergency task force on March 30. When the crisis eased, the task force was dissolved on June 11. When asked about the tensions over the task force leadership, Hamáček suggested that the Prime Minister “*initially did not know what the Central Emergency Task Force is supposed to do. [Babiš] was afraid that this will result in dual governance. I have been telling him since the beginning that nobody questioned the role of government that needs expert recommendations to make decisions. That is the job of the Emergency Central Task Force*”.⁷

ANO politicized expertise. State and regional chief hygienists and epidemiology advisors found themselves in the hot seat. Rastislav Maďar, an epidemiology adviser to the Minister of Health Vojtěch (from ANO) resigned in August, after the government issued a set of contradictory guidelines about whether students should wear masks when they go back to school in September. He refused to be blamed for the chaos.

The Chief Hygienist Eva Gottvaldová who underplayed the threat of Covid-19 was sacked in March 2020. She was replaced by Jarmila Rážová, who was tasked with developing a system of tracing and prevention. The system of tracing (e-Rouška) has been ineffective, despite the state’s efforts to implement it since the summer. Citizens were therefore encouraged to make their own calls to people they were in contact with if they test positive. Do it yourself mask making has turned into do it yourself tracing. In the words of the Head Hygienist of Prague, Zdeňka Jágrová, “*I am very sorry, but we cannot handle tracing.*”⁸

To undermine the system of prevention more, Prime Minister Babiš did not comply with official Covid-19 policies. He refused to go into quarantine, as required, when the Chief Hygienist Rážová was tested positive on September 2, 2020. Babiš and Rážová were in close physical contact at meetings. Complying with a two-week quarantine requirement would diminish Babiš’s ability to participate in campaign events for regional and Senate elections in October 2020. In sum, although the number of deaths in the Czech Republic from Covid-19 was comparatively low after the first wave that ended in the summer, the system of prevention was not robust (Guasti, 2020b).

The government used expertise to justify political decisions and was not interested in promoting independent expert deliberations. The opposition, already restrained by emergency measures and tamed by fears of the virus, wanted to scrutinize expertise behind government decisions. It called for numbers, predictions and analysis that validated government steps.

Expert-driven response was guided by epidemiological concerns. Data on patients and testing were collected by the Institute of health information and statistics (ÚZIS) at the Ministry of Health controlled by ANO. The government was criticized for not sharing medical data and the underlying analysis that guided policy decisions. Academics, medical experts and data analysts could not access data to simulate independent epidemiological models.⁹ ÚZIS was not even sharing data with other ministries and economic consultants working for the government.¹⁰

Daniel Münich, a member of the economic advisory team of the Central Emergency Task Force, complained that Prymula kicked him out of the meeting at the Ministry of Health when he asked for more data. In his view, limiting access to epidemiological data hampered his team's efforts to forecast the economic impacts of the pandemic. The Ministry of Health countered, citing privacy concerns over data sharing.¹¹

Similarly, political opposition also requested more data, transparency and alternative expert views. In May 2020, the Senate issued a public statement asking the government to share expertise: *“When making long term strategic plans, the government does not work in a systematic manner with relevant data. Until to this day, the government did not issue a detailed analysis of the evolution of Covid-19 epidemic and the impact of the epidemic on citizens' health and the Czech economy.”*¹²

Babiš controlled the narrative in the first wave: he saved the country by following the recommendations of a prominent expert. He touted the low infection rate and a low death count as a national victory. Babiš also used the adherence of expertise to stir populist sentiments. When Angela Merkel warned German citizens in March that up to sixty percent of Germans might get infected, Andrej Babiš accused her of spreading panic and suggested that Europe is not doing enough: *“The Czech Republic took preventive measures sooner than all countries in Europe, including Germany, precisely so that we prevent massive*

*spread of the virus. We were the first ones to ban direct flights from Italy,, we closed schools”.*¹³

Initially, the Covid-19 crisis strengthened ANO. In July, polling agencies estimated that up to 32% of respondents would vote for ANO, a two percent increase in preferences since 2017. However, the Senate and regional elections during the outbreak of the second wave in October revealed that ANO’s support plateaued. However, due to political fragmentation, no other party is in a position to challenge ANO’s dominance (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017). In the pandemic, ANO continued to build a strong electoral foundation by maintaining ideological flexibility, expanding the state, running large deficits and targeting voters with benefits.

Babiš established a direct link with voters to selectively communicate expertise. The novel coronavirus response was consulted with health experts but was not subject to expert deliberations. Expertise was used instrumentally to bypass institutionalized channels to combat crisis and it strengthened a mode of populist responsiveness. In the first wave, Prime Minister’s party ANO won the pandemic popularity contest. We now turn to the Slovak case.

Pandemic Response in Slovakia

OLaNO’s victory in 2020 signaled a rejection of the previous party, Smer-SD (Direction – Social Democracy), which was in power since 2006. Smer-SD, led by Robert Fico, was founded as a social democratic party but later embraced populism (Bugarcic, 2008), building on a what has become a perennial feature of Slovak politics. Smer-SD combined targeted welfare policies with fiscal liberalism to maximize power. Two ruptures reshaped party politics in Slovakia and strengthened OLaNO. First, the migration crisis of 2015, which coincided with the parliamentary elections campaign in March 2016, destabilized the political system. Second, the politically motivated murder of an investigative journalist, Ján Kuciak, and his fiancée in 2018 destroyed Fico’s legitimacy.

The murder of Ján Kuciak accelerated the rise of an anti-establishment “movement”, OLaNO. Deep ties between the leading figures of Smer-SD, the mafia, and corrupt

members of the justice system undermined public trust in the ruling parties and state institutions. Public outrage, followed by mass protests, forced Prime Minister Fico to resign. Igor Matovič, a prominent and credible critic of corruption since 2010, a self-appointed leader of the opposition, seized the opportunity and won the 2020 parliamentary elections with 25% of the popular vote.

Igor Matovič rejected established parties, which he refers to as “the partocracy” (Dolný and Malová 2016: 4). As a very innovative presenter, skilled in utilizing social media and in attracting media attention, he prefers direct communication with citizens and does not have a spokesperson (as of October 12, 2020). Richard Pekar, the head of the Press Office of the Government, told media in June: “*Igor Matovič is too sensitive to allow anybody to speak in his name.*”¹⁴ After being asked if he advised the Prime Minister on what he posts on Facebook, he replied: “*No. The Prime Minister considers his Facebook profile to be his personal matter. ... He insists rather strongly he remains himself.*”

As a people’s man, he prefers to connect directly with voters, yet at the same time, similar to Babiš, he exercises a firm grip on his party. Like ANO, OĽaNO has an almost non-existent party organization and no party base. The party had only four members between 2012 to 2016. In late 2019, the government amended the Law on Political Parties, which introduced minimum standards for political parties, such as a minimum number of party members. To comply with the rules, OĽaNO increased the number of its members to 45.

During the 2020 campaign, Matovič broadened the scope of his populist appeals. OĽaNO’s core appeal was anti-corruption, but it expanded the platform to include salient issues such as healthcare and childcare. In a brazen populist move, the party crowdsourced its electoral manifesto. Igor Matovič launched an online opinion poll that proposed eleven policy ideas. The poll was open to all Slovak citizens, regardless of political affiliation, and it attracted considerable media attention. 67,415 people participated in the poll. However, most policies proposed by Matovič were impossible to implement or of questionable legal standing. For example, one of the policies was a pledge to cancer patients that they will have a right to be operated in two weeks after their diagnosis. The poll sent a strong signal that OĽaNO responds to ordinary people’s grievances.

On February 29, 2020, OĽaNO won elections. Matovič formed a governing coalition and his government was appointed on March 21. The vote of investiture took place in the middle of the pandemic on April 30. In the meantime, the outgoing Prime Minister Pellegrini and the Central Emergency Task Force (CETF) spearheaded the Covid-19 response. The Law on Governing State in Emergency Situations (no. 382/2002 Coll.) defines the Central Emergency Task Force as the supreme advisory and coordinating body that synchronizes the various ministries, regional authorities and municipalities. The government, as the only executive body with the power to approve binding decisions, has to approve CETF's proposals to make them legally valid.

Initially, an emergency situation (výnimočná situácia) was announced on March 11. It allowed the government to procure emergency supplies for hospitals and other medical institutions. The state of emergency was declared several days later.¹⁵ At his request and before assuming the office, Igor Matovič's was regularly invited to the meetings of the CETF organized by the outgoing government. Leaders of the new coalition led by OĽaNO were critical of Pellegrini's pandemic response and viewed the mitigation measures as slow and insufficient.

Igor Matovič assumed power on March 21, 2020 and set on a course of instantaneous responsiveness. The government was sworn in on Saturday. It worked hard the whole weekend, which signaled to the public that the new team powered through sleepless nights for the benefit of the people. The first wave of the pandemic revealed Matovič's populist tendencies in executive office in three ways. First, he created informal structures, parallel to the state institutions, to address the coronavirus pandemic. Second, in the absence of ideology, he relied on expertise as an alternative legitimation mechanism. Third, like Babiš, Matovič was very responsive to public reactions towards the government measures and adapted very swiftly when faced with a vocal, dissatisfied public.

On Monday, March 23, after less than 48 hours in office, Matovič ditched the Central Emergency Task Force (CETF) used by the outgoing government and established a new, parallel institution: "The Permanent Emergency Task Force" (PETF).¹⁶ PETF was officially tasked with gathering and analyzing pandemic related information and coordinating the government, ministries, and other state authorities. However, PETF was problematic. From a constitutional standpoint, Slovakia has a well-developed system of

crisis management including institutions responsible for particular tasks in crisis management. The legal framework explicitly defines the competences of various actors. However, the tasks and competences of the new PETF institution set up by Matovič overlapped with the existing bodies. Second, PETF was illegal, since Matovič created PETF using his “decree powers”: he signed a piece of paper that established a brand-new crisis management task force. Only about a month later, Matovič officially provided the cabinet with the ‘information’ that he founded PETF. Afterwards, the cabinet voted to acknowledge it.

Neither the constitution nor any other law gives the Prime Minister the power to create new governing bodies. Therefore, any consequences that originated from, or were based upon, PETF's decisions might be rendered unconstitutional in the future. Moreover, the PETF statute assumes the existence of an appointed staff secretary responsible for producing and keeping meeting records. The PETF never appointed any secretary and no meeting records have been kept. The new government made critical decisions without transparency and no traceable accountability. Facing crisis, Matovič abused his power. The existing legal framework had processes in place to provide for an optimal functioning of the legal task force. It was unnecessary to establish the PETF, a parallel institution to CETF. The government violated official procedures and did not comply with institutional rules and norms.

During the first wave of the pandemic, Igor Matovič, as well as Andrej Babiš, combined technical expertise with populism. Public health epidemiologists played an important role in taming the public health crisis, and during the first wave Slovakia did exceptionally well. Before the second wave hit the country, Slovakia had the smallest number of Covid-19 deaths per capita in Europe. However, Matovič’s government also relied on medical professionals to provide legitimacy for other decisions as needed. Two examples illustrate this instrumental use of politicized expertise: curfew and supermarket opening hours.

The government introduced a six-day curfew to prevent domestic travel that could increase the spread of the virus, which experts had recommended. To avoid the curfew, many chose to travel one day in advance. Upon introduction, the police units blocked traffic in the capital, and people spent hours stuck on the highway. Dissatisfied people voiced anger on social media, and traditional media soon followed. The Prime Minister deflected

the blame for comprehensive controls onto the Police. The Police chief pushed back and argued that the Police only enforced the government decree, which did not have any provisions that would allow the police to check vehicles randomly. Matovič responded with a press conference and with Facebook posts in which he accused the police chief of misunderstanding government intentions. As a true populist, Matovič's resolved the issue directly with citizens, as he was used to doing as an opposition politician. Yet, this time, he attacked a policy of his own government and a branch of government that was implementing his orders.

The second example relates to shopping regulations during the pandemic. The government made two controversial decisions. First, seniors were limited to shopping only between 9 and 12 (later reduced to 11) in the morning. The association of seniors, lawyers and the Public Defender of Rights criticized this policy. Matovič resorted to expertise to reject criticism: *"I will respect whatever the consilium of experts approve. The Chief Public Health Officer makes the final decision."*¹⁷ This time, the Prime Minister put on his technocratic hat and was not responsive for two reasons. Pensioners typically do not vote for OLaNO and public pressure to change the opening hours was neither strong nor sustained. Second, the Permanent Emergency Task Force decided that shops must close on Sunday to sanitize the shop floors and for workers to rest. The shop closure was unpopular, but Matovič defended it as an expert recommendation: *"Some people might want warm pastries [on Sundays], but the experts will decide"*.¹⁸

The beginning of Igor Matovič's tenure was defined by the combination of technocratic and populist governance. As a former anti-establishment politician who campaigned on mistrust to formal institutions, he established parallel institutions with dubious legal standing to respond to the pandemic. As a technocrat, he relied on the expertise from epidemiologists. As a populist, he did not hesitate to overturn expert decisions when pressed by public opinion. After winning elections, he further cultivated his unmediated communication style with the citizens, even if it undermined his own governance. Responsive and impulsive actions that cater to the immediate voter needs have been key to his leadership. He has enhanced his populist appeal further by instrumentalizing expertise during the pandemic.

Conclusion

How do populists govern in crisis? We compare the Czech and Slovak responses to the threat of Covid-19. In Slovakia, a newly elected populist prime minister used expertise to weaken formal institutions and to legitimize responsive, often erratic, decisions. In the Czech Republic, the pandemic entrenched technocratic populism. Andrej Babiš and Igor Matovič followed the recommendations of health experts. From the epidemiological perspective, both countries performed well during the first wave. However, they did not subject officially endorsed health expertise to alternative viewpoints. Furthermore, during the first wave, they did not invest in state capacity, which would be required to combat the second wave, such as an effective system of tracing, locating and isolating hot-spots. Public health expertise was used to justify policies during the state of emergency that did not follow formal rules and were also exploited to silence criticism. Expertise was also used to bypass institutionalized channels to combat crises and to establish a mode of an instantaneous response to the pandemic threat.

Both countries, especially Slovakia, handled the outbreak of the novel coronavirus well. Using expertise, responsiveness and mass mobilization, Andrej Babiš and Igor Matovič, won the pandemic popularity contest in the first wave. The Slovak success can be attributed to the government's responsiveness, but to other issues as well. First, the international mobility of Slovaks is low, which confines the virus territorially. Second, the Slovak health care system is perceived by the public as inefficient. In anticipation of its collapse, citizens obeyed mitigation measures, for they feared that they would not receive adequate care if infected.

Easy come, easy go. Because the first wave was tamed, and because voters wanted to go on vacation and to ditch their masks, Babiš's government loosened almost all restrictions over the summer. However, new cases started rising up at an astonishing rate in late September, catching the Czech Republic unprepared and without an adequate system of tracing. Nothing can demonstrate the pitfalls of responsiveness better than Babiš's reaction to the autumn surge of positive cases on his weekly Facebook feed.: *"Hi guys, the public demanded that we loosen up, and so, we did. Unfortunately, we were wrong."*¹⁹

Crisis strengthens populists and so did the pandemic (Bieber, 2020; Guasti & Mansfeldova, 2018; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Moffitt, 2015). In both countries, populists used emergency powers to undermine institutional accountability and to paralyze civil society (Bernhard, 2020). Andrej Babiš and Igor Matovič reinforced personalized ties with voters and pursued border-line unconstitutional policies that were both responsive and technocratic. Yet, economies weakened by lock-downs will undermine all governments in the future. The spring surge in solidarity, quick yet blunt measures and responsiveness driven by medical expertise worked miracles in the first wave. Unfortunately, it may have set the stage for failure in the second wave, which requires responsible, de-politicized and fine-tuned governance.

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