

CENTRAL AND SOUTH EAST EUROPE

THE POWER OF POPULISM IN FOREIGN POLICY DISCOURSE

The Case of the Czech President

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Abstract

Over the past few years, populism has become the go-to buzzword within many political fields, yet its meaning and significance particularly in foreign policy, remain unclear. This paper seeks to determine whether the foreign policy discourse of populist actors is distinctive and impactful. The analysis draws on literature pertaining to foreign policy analysis and populism which is then applied to the case of the Czech President, Milos Zeman. His controversial rhetoric and behavior serve as a compelling case study in light of the rise of populist discourse within the region as well as the geopolitical positioning of the Czech Republic within Europe in general. The analysis finds that the President's populism spills over into his foreign policy discourse, especially when it comes to issues of immigration and, to a lesser extent, relations with the EU and wider Europe. Nevertheless, the impact of this discourse remains vague. Indeed, the analysis showcases the importance of contextual factors and reveals indirect impacts on foreign policy, such as the ability to influence political narratives and create contentions between different sources of power.



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Introduction

Assigning the word ‘populist’ to political actors has seemingly become a regular pattern in the global political scene. Yet the concept of populism remains elusive, as academics and policy-makers alike struggle to pinpoint its significance and implications. One aspect that necessitates greater understanding concerns the extent to which populist discourse spills over into foreign policy (FP). The purpose of this essay is to examine whether the foreign policy discourse of populist actors is particularly unique and impactful. The analysis draws on concepts from the literature pertaining to FP analysis and populism then applies them to the case of the Czech President, Miloš Zeman, whose blunt rhetoric has often garnered significant media attention and criticism. The case study is highly relevant, especially when examined against the backdrop of anti-establishment and populist discourse within Central and Eastern Europe. This phenomenon has increasingly gained traction in a number of countries such as Hungary and Poland and could be an essential component when considering the region’s geopolitical framework and its implications on broader European-Russian relations. Ultimately, the analysis finds that the basic ideas behind populism can be seen in President Zeman’s FP discourse, especially when it comes to issues concerning immigration and, to a lesser extent, relations with other European countries and the European Union. Still, the power of this discourse is not clear-cut, as the Czech case demonstrates the importance of contextual and structural factors. In turn, indirect impacts on FP can be more clearly identified, such as the ability to shape dominant narratives and create contentions between different sources of power.

Before delving into the analysis, it is important to briefly shed light on the political system of the Czech Republic. This will help clarify how the effects of Zeman’s populism are felt, particularly when it comes to FP. The Czech Republic is a parliamentary democracy in which the government is the highest executive body. Consequently, the powers of the Czech President are rather limited, especially when it comes to independently developing policy. Other than a few presidential powers stipulated in Article 62 of the Czech Constitution (such as the right to veto bills already passed by Parliament or to dissolve the Chamber of Deputies under special circumstances), presidential acts usually require the countersignature of the Prime Minister or another authorized member of government (Article 63 of the Czech Constitution).

Theoretical Framework

Keeping this general power structure in mind, it is now worth going into relevant ideas about foreign policy discourse analysis and post-structuralism. These can serve as important backdrops for the analysis.

In this framework, language is performative: It is not a mere medium for communication but is rather an instrument through which meaning is constructed and transformed. What matters is not ‘objective’ reality per se, but how words shape and frame it. Importantly, the construction of the ‘self’ necessarily relies on the existence of an ‘other’. This idea was promoted by Derrida, who claimed that words have certain meanings only because they are opposed to what they are not. For instance, the civilized are only ‘civilized’ because they are juxtaposed against ‘barbarians.’

When transposed to foreign policy, post-structuralists argue that identity, which cannot be independent from discourse, is often a precondition for the development of a foreign policy decision or stance concerning ‘national interest.’ This discourse also plays a role in constituting and defining the problem that is to be solved. Securitization is a prominent example of how a certain issue could be framed in terms of a ‘threat’ or a ‘crisis’. Finally, another crucial idea explains how discourse locks actors into certain positions through the use of strategic delineations such as an ‘illegal immigrant’, a ‘refugee’, a ‘terrorist’, or a ‘war criminal’ (Hansen, 2016). These can lead to the marginalization and even exclusion of certain categories of people.

When it comes to populism, one should take into account that it is a “difficult, slippery concept” (Taggart, 2000, p. 2). While it can be studied through various lenses, the discursive approach is particularly useful in complementing that of foreign policy discourse analysis and allows for an effective interpretation of the Czech President’s case.

The discursive approach to populism can be mainly attributed to political theorist Ernesto Laclau. Laclau (2007) states that populism is a form of political ‘logic’ through which primary opposition exists between an ‘underdog’, the people, and an elite. Furthermore, an important condition needs to be achieved for populism to emerge. This is what he calls a ‘logic of equivalence’ – a situation in which the elites are not able to meet individual societal demands (Laclau, 2007). So, the constitution of a singular ‘people’ is “simply the result of an aggregation of social demands” (*Ibid.*, p. 224), which then leads to a populist rupture.

This ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ dichotomization is a central tenet of populist discourse, but it is very often vague and subject to the interpretation of the populist actor (Mudde, 2004). Some populists appeal to ‘our people’, which can exclude those that do not belong, such as immigrants (Canovan, 1999). The elite could also vary from one context to another. Rooduijn (2014) explains that they are most often represented as the political establishment but could also include journalists, judges, and academics. In the end, the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’ are just ‘empty signifiers’ of what constitutes the self and the enemy, respectively. One can then expect this framework to be copied to a foreign policy discourse through a similar dichotomization and a stark opposition towards a particular, but often loosely defined, opponent. Here, the construction of internal/external frontiers and what constitutes the ‘interests of the people’ are particularly relevant.

Finally, it is noteworthy to briefly mention another approach to populism which denotes it as a political style. This goes beyond discourse by also considering the broader and more performative aspect of populism (Moffitt, 2016). Characteristics of this performance include ‘bad’ manners such as coarse language, constant representations of threats/crises, and a desire to break from traditional and appropriate ways of behavior. This is particularly important for what could be seen as ‘populist’ diplomacy. While this approach will not serve as the main analytical framework, it will nonetheless be useful to pinpoint a few aspects concerning the Czech President’s rhetoric.

The Case of Miloš Zeman

Zeman has been one of the most prominent and polarizing political figures since the establishment of the Czech Republic. His political career dates back to the 1990s, but his influence has been most potent since he won the presidential elections in 2013 (Riches and Palmowski, 2019). He is the first president to be directly elected by the Czech citizens and has often been linked to the deteriorating nature of Czech democracy. This is partly because he has called for greater presidential powers and acted in ways that oppose the constitution and parliamentary nature of the Czech Republic (Hanley and Vachudova, 2018). Importantly, and alongside populism, scholars have linked this to what is known as ‘democratic backsliding’, a phenomenon which is increasingly seen in Central and Eastern Europe. It refers to situations in which “existing power-holders drive a gradual process of democratic regression, and not that outsiders cause a sudden democratic breakdown, as in a classic coup d’état” (*Ibid.*, p. 278). So far, the president’s desire to move towards greater presidential authority has been mostly contained by Czech institutions, but this concept remains especially useful when assessing the inner affairs of Czech politics. It can also be tied to the tensions caused by Zeman’s FP discourse, which will be examined later on in the analysis.

Zeman's presidential rule demonstrated strong populist tendencies from the start, as he portrayed himself as a 'non-partisan' figure and solidified his legitimacy through the newly established popular vote (Naxera and Krčál, 2018). As presidents were previously elected by the parliament, he expressed his support for the new system by claiming that, contrary to politicians, the people are 'incorruptible' (as cited in *Ibid.*). He also refers to his supporters as 'normal people' and gives his opponents vulgar labels and distinctive metaphors such as the 'Prague café' – an expression used to denote the alienated elites and the well-off (Hornát, 2015). Still, one could see the vagueness of this term and the extent to which it can be exploited by the President to disregard his opponents.

While more could be said of Zeman's populist characteristics, a brief reflection on Václav Havel's foreign policy views and contributions can provide a stark contrast and shed light on the populist idiosyncrasies of Zeman's own discourse. Havel, the last President of Czechoslovakia and the first President of the Czech Republic, was often characterized as 'shy yet resilient' and 'unfailingly polite' (Bilefsky and Perlez, 2011). He is perhaps most known for his leading role in dismantling the Warsaw Pact and steering his country towards the West. Indeed, he paved the way for the Czech Republic to join NATO in 1999 and later the EU in 2004 (*Ibid.*). He was also



recognized for his humanitarianism, as he emphasized the need to deal with 'evil' wherever and whenever it occurs rather than succumb to inaction or appeasement (Zantovsky, 2014). Havel believed that his country could "play a meaningful international role only if it engaged with the acute problems of international politics and security in the name of values larger than narrow national interest" (*Ibid.*).

Zeman's foreign policy preferences are starkly different and showcase his populist tendencies in rather obvious ways. One of the clearest examples is his stance on immigration. He is notorious for calling refugees 'criminals' and for claiming that the majority of them are 'economic migrants' (as cited in Čulík, 2017). He even compares them to a 'tsunami that will kill [me]' (*Ibid.*) and

says that their arrival to Europe is a 'controlled invasion' (as cited in Naxera and Krčál, *op. cit.*). Such expressions blatantly reveal their use as strategic tools, especially when one relates them to post-structuralist thought. Assigning the term 'economic migrant' or 'criminal' to someone inadvertently locks them into normative categories. He is effectively marginalizing refugees by painting them as an 'other' who "no one invited" (Zeman, as cited in Čulík, *op. cit.*). This also reveals typical staples of populist discourse, such as the 'us' vs. 'them' dichotomization, as well as the constant referral to large-scale crises that have the potential to endanger the 'self' or the 'people.'

Indeed, during his first presidential term, Zeman highly securitized issues of immigration and Islam, viewing them as the largest threats facing contemporary Europe (Naxera and Krčál, *op. cit.*). As mentioned earlier, securitization is one example that strongly shows the power of language in framing events in particular ways. It is also evident that the President conflates his perceived threats of extremist Islamism and terrorism with that of immigration, as these concepts virtually become one and the same in Zeman's speeches (*Ibid.*). For example, he believes that refugees are "Islamists who are coming to subjugate Europe" (as cited in Čulík, *op. cit.*).

Accordingly, two main ideas can be deduced: First, Zeman greatly engages in the populist tendencies of ‘othering’ as well as remaining vague (or at least imprecise) on who that ‘other’ actually is; second, what truly matters is how he constructs meaning through a particular framing of the refugee crisis rather than any ‘objective’ reality.

He has often managed to delegitimize the EU as well. As the Czech Republic and a few other EU member states were outvoted on the mandatory quotas, Zeman claimed that the EU is ‘forcibly’ taking these measures rather than basing them on consensus (Prague Monitor, 2017). To be sure, while Zeman has been extremely vocal in opposing refugee quotas, he has also showcased his populism on other EU dimensions. For instance, he has called for a Czech referendum concerning EU (and even NATO) membership (John, 2016). While Zeman supposedly endorses both, his support for ‘direct democracy’ and his experience in politics have led him to believe that the “citizens' intelligence is higher than the politicians' and that is why they should make decisions on fundamental questions” (as cited in Prague Monitor, *op. cit.*). Once again, this demonstrates the dualistic nature of populist discourse, especially when it comes to the distinction between ‘good’ people and ‘bad’ elite, which, in this case, denote politicians who are incapable of making adequate decisions on behalf of the populace.

What is evident from this preliminary analysis is that Zeman’s populism is most palpable when it comes to FP issues that could arguably be seen as extensions of domestic politics/national interest. Indeed, Zeman has expressed his support for a “foreign policy based on [our] own interests” (as cited in Spiegel Online, 2016) rather than one that is ‘subservient’ to pressures from the United States or the EU, for instance.

Issues connected to foreign relations are notoriously more difficult to tackle within the populist framework. Zeman has been criticized for having a penchant for Russia and China, which, to some extent, has seemingly become common among European populists. While this can indicate a populist desire to break away from the established system and to actively pursue an ‘alternative’ (by being ‘anti-EU’ or simply ‘anti-establishment’), issues such as economic interests and historical factors can equally be relevant. For instance, Zeman starkly opposed sanctions against Russia and called them ‘nonsense’ (*Ibid.*), yet it is difficult to accurately determine the extent to which Zeman’s populism plays a role, for the measures taken greatly relate to the Czech Republic’s economic stability as well (Sharkov, 2015; Fritz et al., 2017).

The lines are therefore blurred when it comes to pinning down what constitutes a purely populist approach to Czech-foreign relations. Nevertheless, the ways in which Zeman converses with other leaders is relevant, as his rhetoric can further be linked to the process of ‘othering’ and, in particular, populism as a style. The President’s coarse and blunt language shined through when, during a visit to China, he joked with Vladimir Putin of ‘liquidating’ journalists (as cited in Santora and Goeij, 2018). He has also mentioned to the Serbian President how he plans to discuss the issue of revoking Kosovo’s recognition with the foreign minister, as he ‘likes Serbia but dislikes Kosovo,’ a country run by ‘war criminals’ (as cited in Gec, 2019). Such denouncement and denigration can be linked to the process of shaping the ‘other’ into an illegitimate actor. It has undoubtedly made Zeman popular for his ‘diplomatic fault lines.’

When assessing the impact of the President’s rhetoric, the story becomes more complex. As mentioned earlier, the Czech President, although not just a ceremonial figurehead, retains limited powers. Still, Zeman’s indirect influence can be primarily seen in two ways.

First, it is evident through his anti-immigration stance. Čulík (2017) notes that xenophobic and overly nationalist sentiments are not necessarily new in the Czech Republic. However, it seems that Zeman has been successful in exploiting these attitudes and distilling them into a “potent xenophobic anti-refugee anti-immigration mixture” (*Ibid.*) since the beginning of the refugee crisis. In reality, the Muslim community in the Czech Republic consists of around 11,000 people, and a very minimal number of refugees have been accepted there (*Ibid.*). Yet Zeman, from his fairly revered presidential seat, was effective in catalysing these sentiments and in shaping the overarching narrative and public debate. In fact, a 2015 opinion poll revealed that 72.3% of Czechs like the President for his anti-refugee statements, and 69% of them opposed accepting refugees and migrants coming from the Middle East and Africa (Britské listy, 2015). Zeman was even targeted for his xenophobic rhetoric on the international level, as both the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights and the Council of Europe’s European Commission against Racism and Intolerance singled him out (Čulík, *op. cit.*).

Second, Zeman’s discourse has created contentions, especially between the foreign ministry and the Prague Castle. Zeman’s undiplomatic and confrontational behaviour has often led to the expression of two different foreign policy preferences on the international scale. With the President expressing himself in ways that are not in line with his government’s official policies, several political actors have attempted to ‘cover up’ his statements later on. The clearest examples lie with former Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka. On the issue of a ‘Czexit’ referendum, Sobotka later declared that there are “no social, economic, security, strategic or any other relevant reasons” to hold such a referendum (Prague Monitor, *op. cit.*). In addition, the two had been embroiled in a ‘war of words,’ particularly when it comes to Russia. When Zeman criticized the sanctions and called the annexation of Crimea a ‘fait accompli’ in an address to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, the former Prime Minister rejected the statements, emphasizing that they are “in sharp contradiction of [our] foreign policy” and that Zeman “had no mandate” to make the speech in the first place (Foy and Oliver, 2015). Another example is the foreign minister’s prompt dismissal of Zeman’s idea to revoke Kosovo’s recognition (Gec, *op. cit.*). These are some of the instances that have apparently led to measures that ‘restrict the flow of sensitive information’ to the castle (Foy and Oliver, *op. cit.*).

It is then clear that Zeman’s discourse, while not capable of translating into concrete decisions (perhaps primarily due to the power structure within the Czech Republic), has had the potential to nevertheless undermine the country’s foreign policy and leave Czech diplomats scrabbling to explain his comments to allies. Indeed, Sobotka feared that a lack of coordination of their statements might alienate the Czech Republic’s NATO and EU partners (*Ibid.*). This was particularly problematic during the Ukrainian conflict, as EU leaders were calling for unity to effectively solve it.

Analyzing populism in FP discourse is a multi-faceted exercise. As the analysis reveals, populist patterns are most seen when the issue discussed might have major effects on national interest and domestic politics. In Zeman’s case, this primarily entails his anti-immigration rhetoric. Other preferences, particularly those entailing relationships with other countries like Russia, are less obvious. This is because it is difficult to distinguish between what is truly ‘populist’ and what is a representation of ideological, historical, or economic factors. Nevertheless, Zeman’s diplomatic activities as head of state showcase his populist ‘style’ in various ways. When it comes to the impact of populism on FP, context and power structures matter. Due to his limited presidential powers, the Czech President might not be able to directly steer his country’s FP, yet he is still capable of creating tensions and shaping dominant narratives in the Czech Republic. With more powerful and more contested presidents employing such discourse next door and overseas, further research on the power of populist rhetoric is becoming ever more essential.

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