

Andrej Babiš as a Populist Leader: Media Framing of the Czech Presidential Elections 2023

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Abstract: Leadership, as a concept within political science, has not received adequate academic scrutiny. Leaders play a pivotal role in politics, wielding either formal authority derived from their institutional positions or informal authority, such as charisma. The latter is often associated with populist leaders. This paper examines how news media in the Czech Republic frame the concept of populist leadership, with a specific focus on Andrej Babiš, the former prime minister and a prominent populist figure. Babiš's populist leadership is characterized by a technocratic, catch-all approach. The analysis is grounded in framing theory, which asserts that media coverage influences public opinion by framing issues in specific ways. The study combines quantitative content analysis with aspects of pragmalinguistics to investigate how Czech news media (Seznam Zprávy, Novinky.cz and iDnes.cz) constructed the notion of populist leadership during the hot phase of the presidential elections in the Czech Republic in 2023. It builds on media framing theory and works with both generic and issue-specific frames. The results based on the analysis of 859 articles (news, comments and interviews) confirm the opportunistic nature of Andrej Babiš's career with a generic "strategic-game frame" and issue-specific "warmonger frame" being the most used when informing about Babiš during the chosen period.

Keywords: Andrej Babiš, presidential elections 2023, media framing, populism, Czech Republic

Political leadership as a political science concept has not received sufficient academic attention (Leach et al., 2005; Masciulli et al., 2009). Traditionally, political science has focused on institutions, ideologies, political systems or elections. The topic of leadership is mainly studied in management, sociology or psychology, and in political science it is perceived as a "soft" or ungraspable topic - which has for a long time pushed it aside from the main interest. Political leadership is often associated with value judgments - "good" vs. "bad" leader - which can be seen as biased in the academy - on the other hand, in recent years, this characteristic has brought him into the focus of interest in the context of various crises (covid, war, and the aforementioned decline of traditional parties).

However, in the last few years, the traditional concept of established parties in Europe has declined. The numbers of party members are falling, both in absolute terms and as a

percentage of the electorate (van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014) and new political parties have been created across Europe trying to address its unpopularity and loss of trust by reinforcing personalisation and emphasis on the person of the leader (Voženílková, 2018) - a new type of politician is entering the arena and the study of leadership and charismatic leaders is becoming a very attractive topic. Even though these new leaders might be positioned on opposite sides of the right-left political spectrum, they are united by “identity politics” (Bernstein, 2005) and leadership politics (Shavit & Konrádová, 2025a), usually encompassed by the leader of the populist political party (Moffit & Tormey, 2014).

It is not the ambition of this text to deal with individual approaches to the study of populism nor to discuss the possible threats it poses to democratic (liberal) politics. Populism is present in contemporary political discourse as an ideology, strategy, or communication style. Within these different approaches to populism, their proponents among academics mention the critical position of the populist leader, who represents for the 'people' a figure who inspires them, who advocates for them or with whom they can identify (see Mudde, 2004, p. 558-560; Weyland, 2017, p. 50; Ostiguy, 2017, p. 92). Populists disrupt the orderly competition between left and right by shifting the debate from ideological to procedural and forcing disorganized pluralism where political entrepreneurs compete to catch any voters, replacing established political parties as the primary mechanism for capturing votes (Jones, 2007, p. 38).

So, this text draws on framing theory (Entman, 2007), which posits that media coverage can shape public opinion by framing issues in a particular way. Manucci (2017) argues that populists and journalists maintain a certain symbiotic relationship, wherein each plays a crucial role in sustaining the other. Populists frequently generate highly visible and sensational pseudo-events (Boorstin, 1992), which tend to enhance the appeal of news headlines and often serve as effective clickbait for audiences. News media allow populists to address their voters and build public image (Araújo & Prior, 2020, p. 5). At the same time, journalists see populist leaders as a danger to democracy and often frame them as such (Mazzoleni et al., 2003, p. 234) while populists attack the media as part of the corrupt elite (Haller & Holt, 2018, p. 1669).

This study will focus on how the news media in the Czech Republic construct the concept of populist leadership, characterized by appeals to the “people against the political elite” struggle, anti-establishment rhetoric, and a focus on national sovereignty (e.g., Mudde, 2017). It focuses on issue-specific and generic frames, as will be described later in the Research design section. Specifically, it is a case study focusing on the politician Andrej Babiš, former Czech prime minister and a prominent populist leader, during the 2023 presidential elections. His form of populist leadership lies in a catch-all strategy (Hájek, 2017) that concentrates on anti-establishment rhetoric and promises to address corruption and inefficiency in government (Císař & Štětka, 2016; Havlík, 2019).

The research focuses on the frames used by the news outlets Seznam Zprávy, Novinky.cz, and iDnes.cz. These media outlets were selected based on their high readership in recent years (NetMonitor, 2023) and their different political positions during the elections. Seznam Zprávy openly supported the retired NATO general Petr Pavel, a candidate with one

of the greatest electoral potentials from the beginning of the election, just like Babiš (Kubík, 2023). iDnes.cz belonged – at the time of the elections – to the media group Mafra, which used to be a part of Agrofert holding, formerly owned by Andrej Babiš, which he subsequently placed in a trust fund due to a new Czech law. However, according to the competent authorities, Babiš continued influencing Agrofert (Guryčová, 2020)¹ and Mafra (Waschková Císařová & Kotišová, 2022). Novinky.cz were selected as a representative of a rather neutral news outlet. The authors emphasize the importance of examining media framing in relation to populist leadership due to the notable rise of populist movements, especially in Europe, and the media's role in their emergence (Lochocki, 2018; Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 5). As Araújo and Prior (2021, p. 231) note, widespread media repetition of populist rhetoric can shape public perception, raising questions about whether such coverage legitimizes these leaders or highlights threats to democracy.

Focusing on leaders rather than parties or ideologies reflects the scholarly view that populist movements often form around a dominant, charismatic figure (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mény & Surel, 2002; Weyland, 1999). While this leader-centric view has critics (Pappas, 2016), the current trend toward personalized politics supports it. In many systems, especially those with direct presidential elections, leaders increasingly overshadow party platforms, with political competition driven more by personal appeal than by policy or institutional alignment (Poguntke & Webb, 2005; McAllister, 2007; Karvonen, 2010; Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 15). This makes the study of media framing and populist leadership particularly timely.

1 Populism and Leader(ship)

Populism has many forms and definitions (see Gagnon et al., 2018). It is a vivid concept that is very complex to generalize. It is undoubtedly a driving force changing the logic of contemporary democracies and political parties, media, political communication, and rhetoric (compare Nadeem & Azhar, 2021). Individual cases show that populism can be understood as an ideology, a set of ideas, or a movement but also as a political, communicative, or even discursive strategy (Mudde, 2017, p. 1). Although populism has various manifestations, certain common elements can be identified in the centrality of the people and their uniformity, in anti-elitism, in the use of tools of direct democracy, in the creation of an external enemy, in the amplification of a “crisis,” in the straightforward style of communication aimed at simplifying complexity, in the polarization of political positions and, about the leadership, in the use of the image of an outsider and the plebiscitary bond between leader and voters (Viviani, 2017, p. 287). In this respect, we are particularly interested in leadership.

Different authors (Silva, 2016; Zhao & Li, 2019; Dinh, 2014; Lipentsev & Romanyuk, 2021) understand the concept of leadership in other contexts. In the last two decades, the study of political leadership is developing and the most researchers agree that the following elements should be taken into account in defining political leadership (Masciulli et al., 2009, p. 5):

- the personality and traits of a leader or leaders,

¹ Mafra was sold to the billionaire Karel Pražák on September 1, 2023.

- the traits and ethical-cultural character of the followers with whom the leader interacts,
- the societal or organizational context in which the leader–follower interaction occurs,
- the agenda of collective problems or tasks which confront the leaders and followers in particular historical situations;
- the nature of the leader’s interpretive judgement,
- the means – material and intangible – that the leaders use to attain their ends and/or their followers’ goals;
- the effects or results of leadership.

Scholars who stress that political leadership is a special part of social leadership also affirm that leadership is ‘related to power: a leader (in the behavioral sense) is a person who is able to modify the course of events’ (Blondel, 1987; Wildavsky, 2006). In this respect, populist leadership is a special category. The relationship between populism and leadership plays a crucial role in the reconfiguration of political forms and players in the lengthy, and not without contradictions, the transition from a democracy of political parties and ideologies to a democracy characterized by the personalization of politics and top political leaders (Viviani, 2017, p. 279). For example, according to Weyland, populism is a “political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (2001, p. 14). Similarly, according to Urbinati, “While the epistemic interpretation of democracy is headless, populism can hardly exist without a politics of personality; while the former aims at erasing ideology and all forms of sedimentation of opinions, the latter lives out of a strong ideological rhetoric” (2014, p. 131).

It is the leadership that connects different kinds of populist tendencies. In this case, the populist leader did not acquire his superior position through a typical gradual process but by imposing himself in a party that was previously struggling with instability and a weak institutional structure, or founded the party himself (see personal party, Bobba & Sedone, 2011). Building on this theory, Taggart (1995) uses the personalization of leadership as a criterion for defining the concept of populism). In such a case, it is necessary to have an audience that supports and demands the narrative of the populist leader. If there is no audience for a populist narrative, there are few chances for a populist party or a group to thrive in a state (Nadeem & Azhar, 2021, p. 20). Populist leadership is essentially an identity leadership.

Leadership is understood as a group process of mutual influence between leaders and followers within the same social group (van Knippenberg, 2012). Populist attitudes—often tied to nationalism and anti-immigration—are thus seen as products of group dynamics rather than individual charisma (Uysal et al., 2022, p. 7). Key to this approach is the leader’s ability to build identification with followers, motivate collective goals, and gain influence (Uysal et al., 2022, pp. 7–8).

First, leaders must be seen as prototypical—“one of us”—embodying the group’s defining traits while also standing out as exceptional representatives (Hogg, 2001; Turner & Haslam, 2001; McDonnell, 2017). Populist leaders achieve this by presenting themselves as ordinary people (Soare, 2017, p. 126).

Second, identity advancement requires leaders to act in the group’s interest, especially against perceived outgroups such as “the elites,” reinforcing their role as defenders of collective values (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

Third, through identity entrepreneurship, leaders define what it means to be “us” versus “them,” fostering group cohesion and shared purpose (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

Finally, identity impresarioship involves organizing events (e.g., rallies) that ritualize group membership and embed shared identity in practice and structure (Haslam et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2014; van Dick et al., 2018; Pappas, 2019).

However, texts on populism do not de facto focus on leadership style but rather categorize populism as such. One of the few exceptions is that of Meyer (2022), who divides populist leadership into three categories:

1. **Cultural populism** claims that the “true people” are the native members of the nation-state, and outsiders can include immigrants, criminals, ethnic and religious minorities, and cosmopolitan elites. Populists argue that these groups threaten “the people” by not sharing their values. Cultural populists emphasize religious traditionalism, law and order, anti-immigration positions, and national sovereignty.
2. **Socioeconomic populism** claims that the “true people” are the honest, hard-working members of the working class, and outsiders are the big businesses, capital owners, and international financial institutions benefitting unjustly from the working class’s difficult economic circumstances. A left-wing economic ideology almost always accompanies this populism, though the specific policy agenda varies across contexts.
3. **Anti-establishment populism** claims that the “true people” are hard-working victims of a state run by special interests. Often, these special interests are the elites empowered by a former regime (such as former Eastern European communists).

This approach views populism as a flexible, context-dependent phenomenon shaped by leaders’ strategies and audience expectations. Meyer’s typology offers ideal types that capture how populist leaders frame the relationship between the people and elites, each relying on distinct symbolic constructions and oppositions. Rather than assuming a universal model, this framework highlights the strategic, adaptable nature of populist leadership across political and media contexts. Crucially, analysing media coverage requires not just identifying populist discourse, but assessing which type is framed, how, and with what implications—an area where Meyer’s typology offers valuable analytical insight.

2 Media Framing Populist (Leaders)

Media framing refers to how news outlets selectively emphasize certain aspects of a story while downplaying others. Entman (1993, p. 52) defines framing as selecting elements of perceived reality to promote specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. Framing thus defines issues, attributes causality, passes judgment, and proposes solutions (*ibid.*). Media shape salience through placement, repetition, and symbolic associations (*ibid.*, p. 53). As Gamson (1992, p. 43) notes, frames can hold great social power when embedded in familiar terms. Entman adds that once a dominant frame is widely accepted, alternatives may seem less credible (1993, p. 55).

Scholars distinguish between thematic and episodic frames (Iyengar, 2005, p. 6), or between generic and issue-specific frames (De Vreese, 2003, p. 54). While issue-specific frames apply to particular topics, generic ones offer broader historical and contextual relevance.

Aalberg, Strömbäck, and De Vreese (2012) highlight the strategic game frame, often used in election coverage. Rooted in “racehorse journalism,” it portrays politics as a competitive race. Some scholars differentiate between the game frame—focused on polls and conflict (De Vreese, 2005)—and the strategy frame, which emphasizes politicians' styles and actions (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002). More broadly, this framing emphasizes winners, losers, and campaign tactics (Aalberg et al., 2012, p. 163). It simplifies politics into a win-or-lose narrative. While some research links this to public cynicism and disengagement (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), others suggest it boosts interest by making politics more accessible (Iyengar et al., 2004).

This study focuses specifically on the framing of populist leaders who represent a specific kind of political actors. The relationship between the media and populist movements has experienced a gradual decline with the advent of social media platforms like Facebook and X (see Křovák & Charvát, 2022). However, it has not entirely disappeared. Mazzoleni states that the media usually plays a vital role in the emergence of populist movements (2008, p. 53; comp. Ociepka, 2005, p. 223). It is precisely the charisma and personality traits of a populist leader that catches media attention. Mazzoleni describes political actors such as Andrej Babiš as “political pop stars” or “media icons” (p. 55-56). The relationship between populists and journalists is inherently ambivalent though. From the journalists' perspective, populists are valuable because their often outrageous behavior generates public interest and attracts larger audiences (Bos & Brants, 2014, p. 707), yet the populists are simultaneously portrayed as a threat to democratic values (Stanyer et al., 2019). From the populists' point of view, the media are necessary tools for gaining visibility and mobilizing voters, even as they frame journalists as part of a corrupt elite to delegitimize critical coverage while continuing to exploit media exposure. Populist parties and movements typically accuse mainstream media of serving establishment interests, suppressing critical issues through political correctness, and deliberately deceiving the public, thereby reinforcing the portrayal of media as untrustworthy (Haller & Holt, 2018, p. 1669).

Araújo and Prior claim that there are usually two types of frames seen in the news media coverage of populist leaders: “the populist leaders, who challenge the social order and the system, and try to raise a framework of injustice that is in need of repair or reform; and the traditional media institutions, which respond with the need to foster respect for institutions, law, and social order” (2020, p. 6). In contrast to what Mazzoleni (2008, p. 63) describes as “convergence of goals” between media and populist logic, there is empirical

evidence that shows an adversarial relationship between journalists and populists (comp. Esser et al., 2016, p. 4). That usually takes the form of the media framing themselves as “paladins of the established political order” against populists described as dangerous to the *status quo* (Mazzoleni et al., 2003, p. 234). The most common frame of a populist leader is thus the *threat to democracy*. Herkman (2016) identifies other frames used by the media in connection to the concept of populism in general. One of those frames – the *empty rhetoric frame* – can be applied in the case of this study. The *empty rhetoric frame*, according to Herkman, is involved in situations where a populist leader’s discourse makes false and open appeals to the voice of the people, which is one of the fundamental pillars of populism that is mentioned across different approaches to the phenomenon (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005; Weyland, 2017; Ostiguy, 2017). This frame also carries a solid negative context related to irresponsible policymaking. Populist leaders are framed as committing to something that subsequently does not translate into reality and does not lead to any real political action or accountability (Herkman, 2016, p. 152).

Populists are also linked to the politics of fear. Bracciale and Martella (2017, p. 1314) note how they mobilize support through fear and uncertainty. Wodak (2015, p. 5) argues fear appeals are especially effective for right-wing populists. Politicians, and populists in particular, simplify crises to maintain a sense of threat. In his campaign, Andrej Babiš invoked the war in Ukraine to criticize his opponent Petr Pavel, often being described as a warmonger (Dolejší, 2023; Janouš, 2023). As such, this study includes the issue-specific warmonger frame, theoretically grounded in the politics of fear and empirically supported by campaign rhetoric and media discourse.

3 Andrej Babiš, the story

Andrej Babiš is variously described as a technocratic (Guasti & Buščíková, 2020), centrist (Havlík & Voda, 2018), or managerial populist (Havlík, 2019). While these labels differ, they converge on a leader who emphasizes competence and efficiency over ideology. Guasti and Buščíková (2020, p. 468) define technocratic populism as “output-oriented populism” linking voters to leaders via expertise. Such leaders claim to represent ordinary people against corrupt elites, typically emphasizing national sovereignty and anti-corruption (Buščíková & Baboš, 2020; Hartikainen, 2021). Babiš’s populism includes a business-like style, portraying himself as a self-made entrepreneur capable of running the state efficiently (Heinisch & Saxonberg, 2017).

This variety in categorization reflects both the fluidity of populist leadership and Babiš’s evolving political identity (Shavit & Konrádová, 2025b). However, as the study focuses on how he was framed in the media—not on confirming his populism—this conceptual ambiguity does not obstruct the analysis. Babiš’s pre-political career as a successful businessman shaped his image as a pragmatic, effective leader (ANO, 2025). His entrepreneurial background and anti-elite rhetoric enabled him to establish ANO in 2011. Through strategic communication, anti-corruption messaging, and political marketing, ANO positioned itself as a centrist force focused on efficiency and reform (Saxonberg & Heinisch, 2024).

The party’s strong performance in the 2013 and 2017 parliamentary elections elevated Babiš to finance minister and later prime minister. However, his dual role as politician and business magnate sparked recurring accusations of conflicts of interest—particularly around media ownership and EU subsidies (Novinky.cz, 2025). After losing the

2021 election to the SPOLU coalition, ANO shifted further left and adopted more nationalistic rhetoric (Shavit & Konrádová, 2025b).

The 2023 presidential campaign began amid speculation about Babiš's candidacy (CNN Prima News, 2022). Once he entered the race in September 2022, he quickly emerged as a central figure alongside Petr Pavel and Danuše Nerudová (iRozhlas, 2022). Although trailing in polls, his strategic campaign regained media attention. His bid lacked thematic focus until the second round, when the war in Ukraine became his dominant issue—an opportunistic pivot that fueled the warmonger frame in media coverage.

Babiš portrayed himself as the “voice of normal people,” pledging to defend Czechia and challenge a government he accused of ignoring citizens (Babiš, 2023). His campaign included nationalist themes and critiques of foreign policy, reinforcing his anti-elite stance. Just before the election, he was acquitted in a subsidy fraud case, briefly raising his media visibility (Muller & Lopatka, 2023).

Despite a high-profile and aggressive campaign, Babiš lost by a larger margin than candidates in both prior direct presidential run-offs—Karel Schwarzenberg (2013) and Jiří Drahoš (2017), both defeated by Miloš Zeman. He received 41.67% of the vote to Petr Pavel's 58.32 %. Media described the result as crushing but noted that Babiš's 2.4 million votes gave him a strong mandate as an opposition leader ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections (Klimeš, 2023).

4 Research design

This case study is conditioned by an assumption based on previous research and expert conclusions categorizing Andrej Babiš as a populist leader of the technocratic type. This – however – does not mean that he cannot be described by each or all of the above mentioned Meyer's (2022) categories (anti-establishment, socioeconomic, cultural) as these are not mutually exclusive. The ambition is not to prove that Babiš is or is not a populist nor to categorize his populist leadership style. The emphasis is on presidential elections (2023), not parliamentary elections, which are by their nature seen as first-order in the Czech Republic. Presidential elections are highly personalised, the rhetoric is not limited by the potential for coalition governance, and Babiš had a similar starting position to the other candidates in the sense that he did not defend his mandate. In such an environment the media framing of a populist leader plays a key role (Araújo and Prior, 2021).

Empirical operationalization of the concept of leadership involves a host of methodological issues, specifically those related to the definition of variables and the problem of spurious correlation (Masciulli et al., 2009, p. 4). We are using the media framing theoretical (and methodological) framework which, according to Cappella and Jamieson (1997, p. 47; 89) enables researchers to identify different news frames if: A) the news frame has identifiable conceptual and linguistic characteristics; B) can be commonly observed in journalistic practice; C) it must be possible to distinguish the frame reliably from other frames and D) the frame must have representational validity (i. e. be recognized by others).

The primary objective is to assess the extent to which the selected media outlets (Seznam Zprávy, Novinky.cz and iDnes.cz) framed Babiš as a populist leader, to identify the strategies employed in this framing, and to examine whether these strategies varied across different media platforms or changed over the course of the campaign. Guided by the

theoretical framework, the study seeks to address the following research question and hypothesis:

RQ1: How did Novinky.cz, Seznam Zprávy and iDnes.cz frame Andrej Babiš during in 2023 presidential elections?

H1: Strategic game frame and warmonger frame were the most used by each media.

The strategic game frame is a dominant approach in political reporting, portraying politics as a competition focused on tactics, polls, and candidate strategies rather than policy (De Vreese, 2005). Its appeal lies in boosting the entertainment value of news and audience engagement, particularly during elections. It is also considered the most "generic" frame analyzed, applicable to Andrej Babiš even when he is not explicitly shown as a populist. In contrast, the issue-specific warmonger frame reflects traditional news values like conflict, negativity, novelty, drama, and shareability (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017, p. 1482).

H2: Seznam Zprávy used critical frames more frequently than Novinky.cz and iDnes.cz in their coverage of Andrej Babiš.

This hypothesis draws on the political context and editorial profiles of the selected outlets. Seznam Zprávy openly backed Petr Pavel and portrayed Babiš as a threat to democracy (Kubík, 2023). iDnes.cz, linked to Babiš's trust fund, has a record of editorial influence and regularly featured his opinion pieces (Waschková-Císařová & Kotišová, 2022). Novinky.cz remained neutral, with no ownership ties or endorsements. Given this, the authors expect all three outlets to use framing strategies reflecting Babiš's leadership and populist image.

The study employs a quantitative content analysis, complemented by pragmatolinguistic elements, to assess framing in political coverage. The media outlets were selected based on their significant readership, which enhances the societal relevance of the analysis, and their differing editorial alignments during the presidential campaign.

A sample period of two weeks between the first and the second round of the presidential election and one week after the election ended was chosen for the research. Thus, the complete period spans from 14 to 28 January (the second round took place on 27 and 28 January), extending until 4 February 2023. The time frame was chosen to capture the most intense phase of the campaign, during which media coverage is typically heightened, framing strategies are most prominent, and narratives about the candidates crystallize (including pointing out the problematic aspects associated with the candidates, part of which is the populist nature of their policies). Including the week immediately following the election allows for an analysis of post-election framing, providing insight into how Babiš's portrayal as a populist may have evolved in response to the election outcome. The analysis focuses on news articles, opinion pieces, and interviews, as each journalistic genre offers distinct but complementary insights into media framing. News articles are essential for examining the ostensibly objective presentation of events, while opinion pieces reveal the subjective

interpretations and value-laden evaluations that contribute to constructing political identities. Interviews, although reflecting the perspectives of individual interviewees, also involve editorial mediation, as the selection, framing, and publication of interview content represent deliberate editorial choices that shape public discourse. By incorporating these three genres, the study aims to capture both the explicit narratives and the underlying editorial strategies that collectively contribute to the framing of Andrej Babiš as a populist leader.

We selected a quantitative content analysis (QCA) for the research but we included aspects of pragmalinguistics to the method. This step enabled a comprehensive examination of the frequency of different frames and the contextual factors, diverse linguistic patterns, and persuasive devices employed throughout each entire article. We use a deductive approach (focusing on described frames) because Hertog and McLeod (2001) state that inductive approaches have been criticized for relying on too small a sample and for being difficult to replicate. The chosen method is inherently quantitative as we present the results as statistics (in numeric graphs). Quantitative content analysis is mainly concerned with studying communication by pinpointing particular features within messages (Brunnerova & Charvát, 2020, p. 438). Berelson (1952, p. 18) described QCA as a research method designed to systematically, objectively, and quantitatively describe the manifest content of communication. Based on this definition, QCA presents itself as the appropriate method for this analysis. Rourke and Anderson (2004, p. 5) state that description – in the context of QCA – is a process that “includes segmenting communication content into units, assigning each unit to a category, and providing tallies for each category” – which is precisely how the authors conducted the research.

Our aim was to identify selected outlets' framing strategies. It was necessary to add a pragmalinguistic aspect to the QCA - to be able to identify the frame not only from the manifest content, but also from the context of the utterance which is a shift from purely positivist tradition of the QCA (Wesley, 2009) into a more interpretative paradigm. Within the pragmatic perspective, the primary focus lies on language use and language users in interaction, as opposed to the language being considered solely as a system of signs or a set of rules (Bublitz & Norrick, 2011, p. 4). The pragmatic approach encompasses entire speech events and considers the broader domain of "language games," taking into account the immediate language use and its connection to preceding and subsequent actions (Ibid.). Our approach aligns with what Tognini-Bonelli (2001, p. 65) describes as a corpus-based approach, which utilizes a corpus primarily to expound, test, or exemplify theories and descriptions formulated prior to the availability of large corpora for language study. As Bednarek (2011, p. 546-547) highlighted, written language is more readily collectible and studyable than spoken language (which is also a reason to select only media that publish textual material). Incorporating a more comprehensive range of diverse texts enhanced the generalizability and representativeness of our findings. We used the theoretical framework to create a Coding Book (see Attachment n. 1), a fundamental basis for the empirical analysis. We present the statistics for each category in the chapter below as a basis for discussion.

The coding was conducted independently by two coders. An intercoder reliability test was subsequently performed on a sample of 32 articles (representing over 6% of the relevant dataset). The ReCal2 tool was used to process the data. The resulting Krippendorff's Alpha coefficient (nominal) was 0.809. According to Marzi et al. (2024), values exceeding 0.80 are generally regarded as indicating satisfactory levels of agreement. On this basis, the authors consider the coding process to be reliable and the codebook sufficiently clear (for further details, see Attachment No. 2). Following the coding phase, all authors collaboratively analyzed the data and developed the study's conclusions.

The analysis did not encompass only articles directly linking Babiš to populism (by literally using the words 'populism' and 'populist') and populist attributes like being the voice of people fighting against the corrupt elite and so on but also those that frame Babiš as a person and a political actor in any manner. The occurrence and frequency of different frames and their salience in the media was analyzed, expecting that frames related to the *threat to democracy*, *empty rhetoric*, and the *strategic game frame* (see more in Chapter 3) would feature prominently. Simultaneously, we assume other frames associated with the persona of populist leader Andrej Babiš were also observed. Regarding the *danger to the democracy frame*, the authors searched for signifiers (de Saussure, 1989) connected to threat, risk, abuse of power and so on. The *empty rhetoric frame* focuses on signifiers such as lying, unfulfilled promises, vacuity, and Babiš's connection to disinformation. Signifiers linked to the *strategic game frame* encompassed terms like winning, losing, and fighting, among others. The authors also searched for an issue-specific frame we call the *warmonger frame* since the war was Babiš's main topic during the second round of the election. The signifiers connected to this frame should be fear, scaring people, extortion, etc.

Using the Newton Media² tool, the authors collect a comprehensive dataset of news articles, opinion pieces, and interviews related to Andrej Babiš during the specified period. The researchers used the keywords *Andrej Babiš* and *presidential elections* to search the Newton database and retrieve relevant articles. Irrelevant entries, such as those mentioning Babiš only in hyperlinks, were excluded by the coder.

On account of the large size of the corpus, Bednarek states (2011, p. 552), the description could be more detailed. That is one of the limitations of our chosen method. Furthermore, our research is constrained by selecting a single populist actor, which prevents comparisons between the frames employed on different populist leaders. In the Czech context, an example could be Tomio Okamura, characterized as a right-wing populist with narrower political views and narratives (e.g. Křovák & Charvát, 2022). The authors considered including opinion-based, public, and audiovisual outlets, but doing so would require broader inclusion to maintain balance across media types and ideological spectra. This would render the analysis overly complex. Thus, the decision to include three comparable online outlets—differing mainly in their alignment with candidates—is, in our view, a methodologically justifiable compromise.

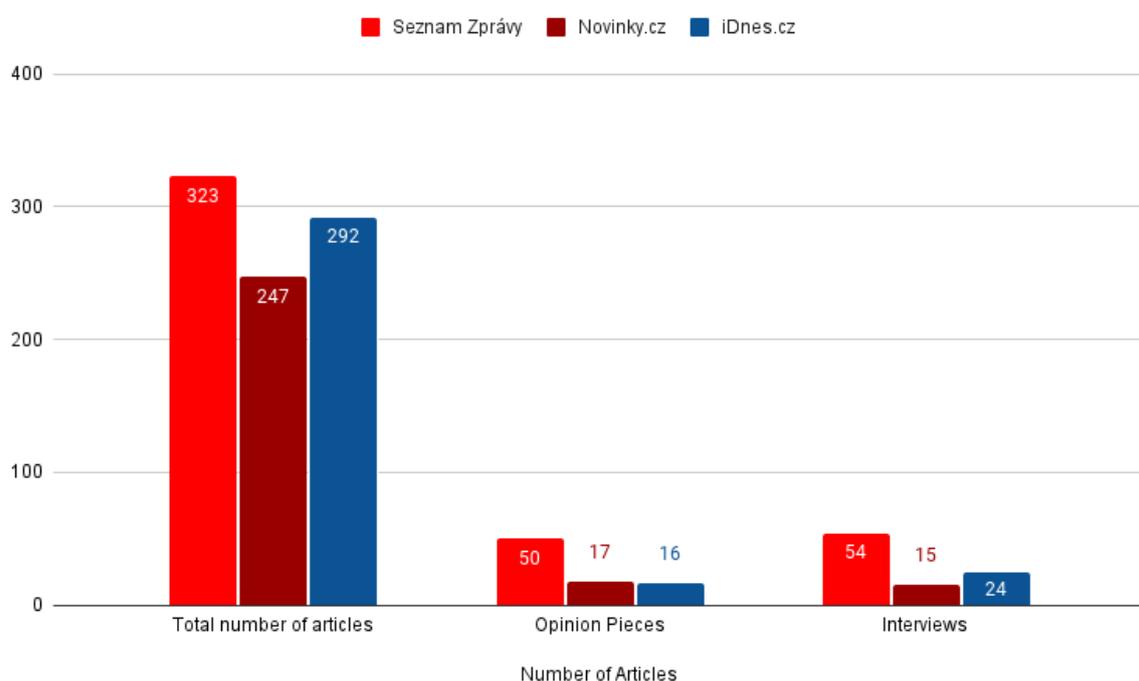
² Newton Media has an extensive database of monitored sources containing data from print, television, radio, internet and social media. It monitors Czech and foreign traditional media, news and social media.

The authors believe this study can help broaden the understanding of the relationship between populist leaders and the media, the media framing strategies help to create the public's understanding of certain topics.

5 Results and findings

During the specified timeframe, the selected media outlets collectively published 859 articles that mentioned Andrej Babiš (i.e., included his name in the text). Among them, Seznam Zprávy published the highest number of articles overall (323), as well as the most opinion pieces (50) and interviews (54) — see **Graph n. 1** for a comparative overview of the three media sources. Notably, 350 articles (40.75 %) lacked any identifiable framing.³ This absence may be attributed to the articles' objectivity, a primary focus other than Babiš or the elections, or their overall uncodeability. This proportion was relatively consistent across the outlets: 44 % for Seznam Zprávy, 43.3 % for Novinky.cz, and 40.5 % for iDnes.cz.

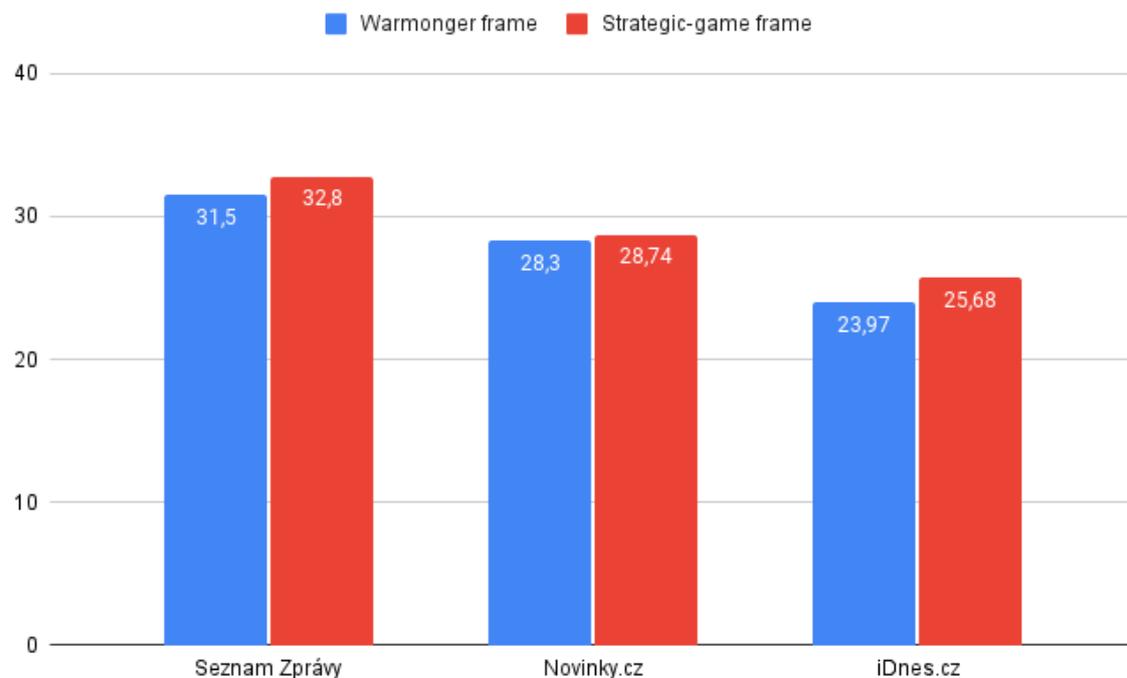
Graph n. 1: Number of Articles mentioning Andrej Babiš.



Regarding the RQ the authors state that during the 2023 presidential elections, *Novinky.cz*, *Seznam Zprávy*, and *iDnes.cz* framed Andrej Babiš predominantly through a set of interrelated frames that highlighted his populist leadership, strategic behavior, and polarizing role in society. While issue-specific frames such as the **strategic-game** and **warmonger** frames were prominent (as seen in Graph 2 and Graph 3), the media also consistently portrayed Babiš using the **populist (leader)** frame and its subcategories, underscoring how central the perception of Babiš as a populist figure was to their coverage.

³ In other words, almost 60 percent of the articles across the media did contain at least one of the frames that we identified in the previous chapters. The coders frequently discussed their steps during the coding process to avoid cognitive bias.

Graph n. 2: Most used frames (percentage of use).

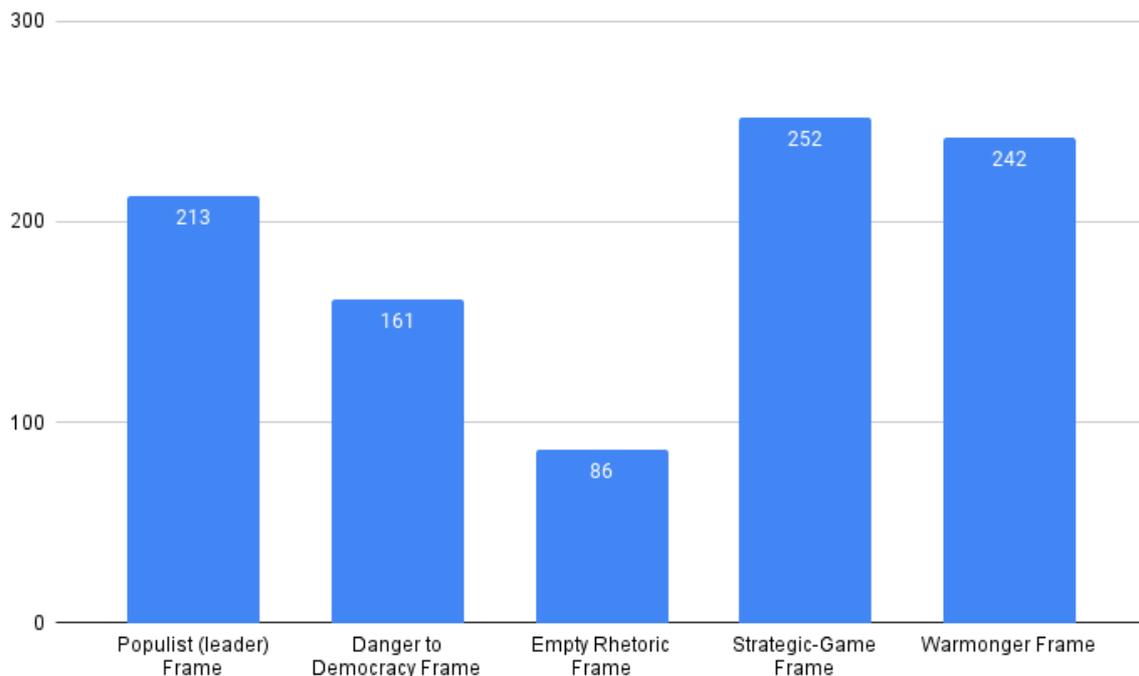


The data from Graph 2 lead us to **confirm H1**, i.e. *The strategic-game frame and warmonger frame were the most used by each media outlet*. As shown in Chart 2, these two frames clearly dominate overall coverage, representing the two most frequently used across all media. Both Seznam Zprávy and Novinky.cz used them in almost equal frequency, while iDnes.cz showed a slightly lower, but still prominent, presence. Importantly, the correlation between these frames is meaningful—since the war was a central campaign theme, it was often covered through a strategic lens, portraying Babiš as a calculating actor seeking electoral advantage. This thematic and rhetorical overlap explains their high usage.

Graph 2 breaks this down by outlet, reaffirming that both frames were used most often across the board. The strategic-game frame ranged from 25.68 % to 32.8 %, while the warmonger frame ranged from 23.97 % to 31.5 %. These proportions are significantly higher than any other frame, which confirms H1.

According to **Graph n. 3**, the **populist (leader)** frame was the third most frequently used overall (213 articles), indicating that Babiš's leadership style—beyond the specifics of the election campaign—was a central concern. This framing presented him not only as a politician engaged in manipulative tactics (strategic-game) or fear mongering (warmonger), but as someone whose **approach to leadership** itself was problematic or ideologically charged.

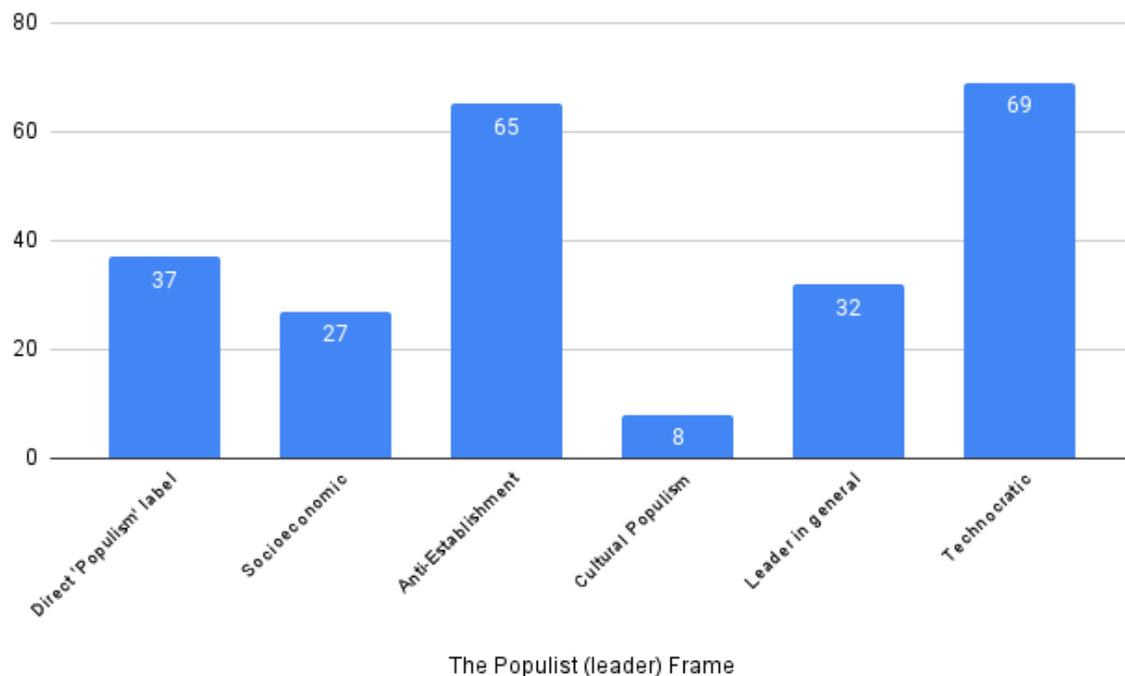
Graph n. 3: More detailed layout of the frames used across the three media (number of articles).



Graph n. 4 provides more depth to this frame, revealing that Babiš was most often portrayed as a **technocratic populist** (69 articles) and **anti-establishment** figure (65 articles). This reflects a nuanced media depiction: Babiš was not framed primarily as a cultural or ideological populist (only 8 articles linked him to cultural populism), but rather as an opportunist who leveraged managerial language and outsider rhetoric to gain electoral advantage. Seznam Zprávy and Novinky.cz especially leaned into this technocratic populist framing—emphasizing Babiš’s pragmatic, problem-solving image while also questioning its authenticity.

Moreover, the **danger to democracy** (161 total mentions) and **empty rhetoric** (86) frames (**Graph n. 3**) complemented this portrayal. They suggested that Babiš’s populism was not only superficial but also potentially harmful, depicting him as divisive, deceptive, or even democratically threatening. For instance, 88 uses of the danger to democracy frame involved setting up a moral dichotomy between Babiš and his opponent Petr Pavel, reinforcing the image of Babiš as the archetypal populist antagonist.

Graph n. 4: Use of each subcategory of the Populist (leader) Frame.⁴



Taken together, the data from Graphs n. 2, 3, and 4 show that Babiš was framed not just in response to campaign events, but through a deeper narrative of populist leadership—a narrative marked by his technocratic style, anti-establishment posturing, and strategic opportunism. This pattern was consistent across outlets, though shaped by their editorial stances, ownership, and journalistic practices.

Regarding H2 Graph n. 5, which details Seznam Zprávy’s coverage, shows high counts for critical frames such as the danger to democracy, empty rhetoric, and populist leader frames. While Novinky.cz (Graph n. 6) and iDnes.cz (Graph n. 7) also used these frames, they did so less frequently—particularly in the case of the empty rhetoric frame, which was used only 15 times by iDnes.cz, compared to 69 in Seznam Zprávy. The danger to the democracy frame, used 50 times in Seznam Zprávy, also reinforces its more adversarial stance.

This aligns with the editorial positioning: Seznam Zprávy openly endorsed Petr Pavel and published opinion content highly critical of Babiš, including an editorial by its editor-in-chief Jiří Kubík. In his endorsement of Babiš’s opponent – Petr Pavel – Kubík described Babiš as a Machiavellian politician who believes that “the end justifies the means.” Kubík also mentioned that Babiš used words like war and totality to attract voters (or the opposite – to discourage Pavel’s voters from participating in the elections). He also labels Babiš as a chaotic leader who refuses to listen to other people’s arguments (Kubík, 2023). This official announced bias towards one of the candidates was further deepened by other aspects of Seznam Zprávy’s work and logic. For example, they published several interviews where the interviewee was a fellow journalist colleague from Seznam Zprávy, and in these interviews, there was no presence of opposing views. Furthermore, more than 15% of their content consisted of opinion pieces—double or triple the amount in the other two media. This greater proportion of subjective content enabled stronger critical framing.

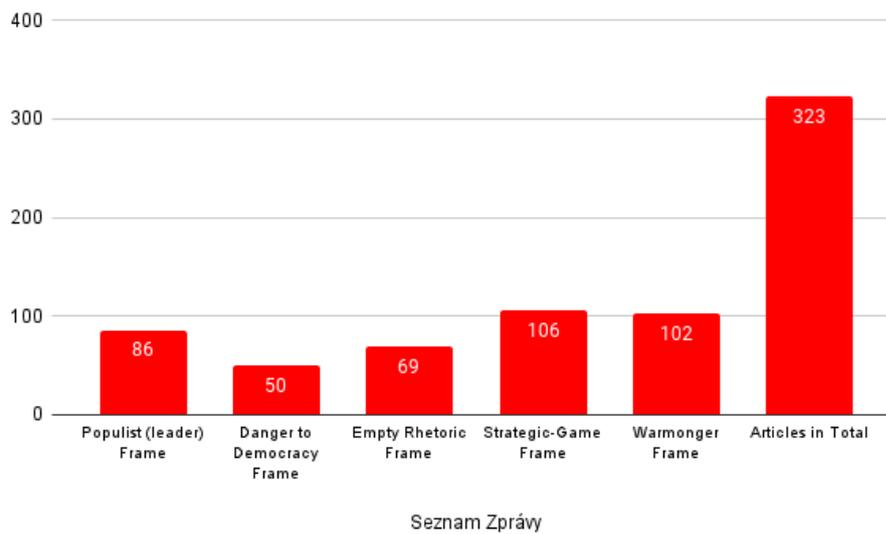
Novinky.cz, on the other hand, maintained a more neutral position and included a higher percentage of Czech news agency (ČTK)-sourced articles, which reduced original commentary and framing. Similarly, iDnes.cz—despite its links to Babiš—did not avoid critical frames entirely, but employed them less frequently and favored general leadership or neutral

⁴ It’s more than 213 in total (see Graph n. 3) because in some articles there were two or even three different Populist (leader) Frames.

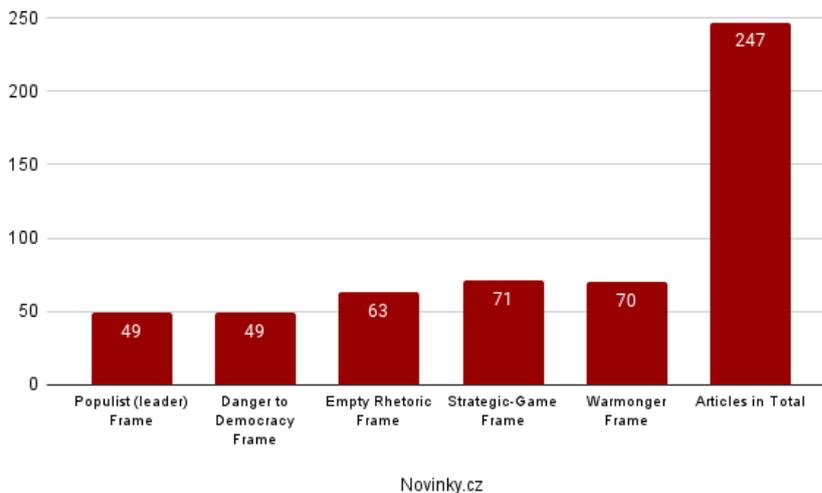
portrayals. This suggests a subtle balancing act rather than outright advocacy. This might be given because the journalists at the Mafra publishing house.

The analysis also shows that Seznam Zprávy used the populist (leader) frame with a stronger emphasis on technocratic populism—portraying Babiš as a micromanager and opportunist. This nuanced critical framing aligns with its broader editorial critique. In contrast, iDnes.cz leaned toward portraying Babiš as a generic charismatic leader, avoiding deeper critique of his leadership style.

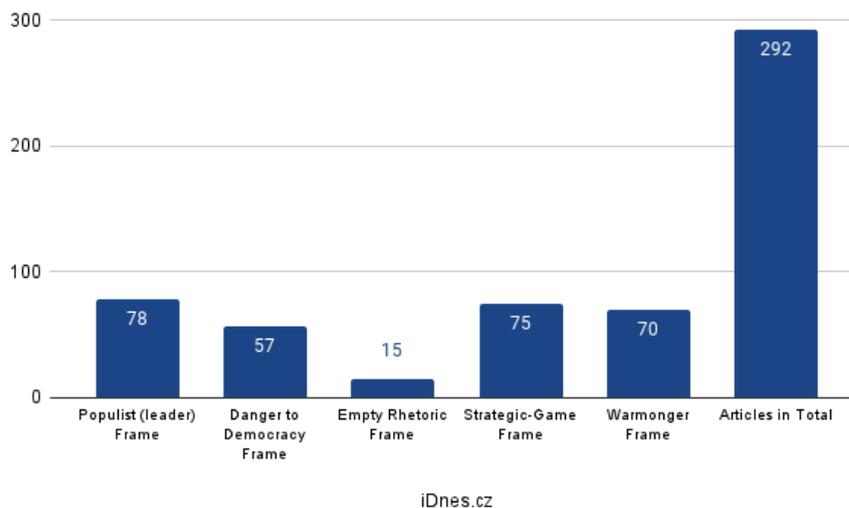
Graph n. 5: Seznam Zprávy



Graph n. 6: Novinky.cz



Graph n. 7: iDnes.cz



6 Conclusion and Discussion

Experts offer various perspectives on populist leadership. Barber (2019) attributes the rise of populism to party weakness, while Kaltwasser (2013) argues that charisma is not essential to populism. Schneiker (2020) highlights the need to study populist leadership in the absence of a populist party, proposing the "superhero" concept. Casullo (2019) examines discursive scripts that mediate the shift from individual to populist leader.

This study analyzed how Andrej Babiš was framed during the 2023 Czech presidential election, focusing on his portrayal as a populist leader. Drawing on Entman's (1993, 2007) framing theory and Meyer's (2022) typology, the research examined how *Seznam Zprávy*, *Novinky.cz*, and *iDnes.cz* constructed Babiš's identity through specific frames. While strategic-game and warmonger frames were most frequent, framing extended beyond campaign tactics. Across all outlets, Babiš was portrayed as a technocratic, anti-establishment populist, echoing academic characterizations (Guasti & Buščíková, 2020; Havlík, 2019).

This framing was not limited to the term "populism." Instead, media employed associated frames—danger to democracy, empty rhetoric, and the broader populist (leader) frame. These are not value-neutral. As Mazzoleni et al. (2003) and Herkman (2016) note, populists are often depicted as threats to democratic norms or as relying on oversimplified promises. The findings confirm this, especially in *Seznam Zprávy*, which used the danger and empty rhetoric frames frequently—aligning with its editorial support for Babiš's opponent.

The populist (leader) frame—used 213 times—was the third most common overall, affirming its salience in personalized campaigns (Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Karvonen, 2010). Subcategories drawn from Meyer (2022) further support Babiš's portrayal as a technocratic populist—an "apolitical" expert who also attacks elites. This depiction matches scholarship on technocratic populism, emphasizing managerialism, depoliticization, and efficiency (Buščíková & Guasti, 2020; Hartikainen, 2021).

Cultural and socioeconomic populist frames were marginal, suggesting Babiš's media image avoided xenophobic or class-based narratives typical of other populist types (Meyer, 2022). Instead, coverage emphasized performative leadership, ambiguity, and opportunism—especially his late use of war-related themes, contributing to the warmonger frame. Though issue-specific, it aligns with Wodak's (2015) "politics of fear" and Altheide's (2006) analysis of media-driven crisis narratives.

Although editorial positioning affected tone and frequency, all outlets framed Babiš as a populist. Even *iDnes.cz*, despite ties to Babiš, used critical frames, though more cautiously. This may reflect internal autonomy among journalists seeking to uphold the outlet's integrity (Kotířová & Waschková Čísařová, 2023). *Novinky.cz* remained neutral, supporting Esser et al.'s (2016) idea of stylistic, rather than ideological, complicity. This convergence suggests populist leadership compels ideologically diverse media to adopt similar framing patterns.

This study confirms the value of integrating leadership studies with media framing to understand populist figures in public discourse. As Araújo and Prior (2020) argue, media not only reflect but shape political dynamics. In the Czech case, Babiš was framed as a strategic, divisive, and technocratic populist, illustrating broader European trends in the personalization and polarization of democratic politics.

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Attachment n. 1 - Coding Book

For analyzing the framing of Andrej Babiš as a populist leader, we used the following coding scheme. Two researchers were involved in the coding, and a basic reliability test was performed on the first coded articles.

1 Analyzed news outlet	1 Seznam Zprávy
	2 Novinky.cz
	3 iDnes.cz
2 Type of an article	1 News Article
	2 Opinion Article
	3 Interview
3 Position of the analyzed statement related to Andrej Babiš in the article	1 Headline
	2 Lead Paragraph
	3 Body of the article
4 Presence of utterances that directly connect Andrej Babiš with the concepts of populism and populist leader	1 Direct (explicit) use of words like 'populist', 'populism' in connection with Andrej Babiš
	2 Expressions connecting Andrej Babiš with 'socioeconomic populism' like the 'people' 'voice of people', 'leader of the people', 'people's favorite', 'candidate of the weak and poor', 'hard working people'
	3 Expressions connecting Andrej Babiš with 'anti-establishment populism' like 'anti-elite', 'good people vs. evil elite', 'anti-corruption' 'corrupt elite', AB vs. government, AB vs. all
	4 Expressions connecting Andrej Babiš with 'Cultural populism' like 'migration threat', 'muslims', 'Ukrainians', 'dangerous immigrants', 'stolen job positions'
	5 Expressions connecting Andrej Babiš with being a leader in general like 'charismatic', 'strong', 'powerful', 'connections', 'one man movement', 'chairman'
	6 Expressions connecting Andrej Babiš with 'technocratic populism' like 'output orientation', 'expertise', 'opportunist', 'PR product'

5 Presence of 'danger to democracy' frame	1 Expressions connecting Andrej Babiš directly to being 'dangerous', 'threat for the future', 'menace',
	2 Expressions like 'future of democracy in danger'
	3 Manichean opposition (Good Petr Pavel or other candidates vs. Evil Andrej Babiš) with indicators 'democracy over populism', 'being polarizing'
6 Presence of 'empty rhetoric frame'	1 Expressions like 'empty' and 'unfulfilled' promises
	2 Statements describing Andrej Babiš as a 'liar', 'untruthful' and statements connecting Andrej Babiš with desinformation
	3 Statements connected to Andrej Babiš promising things he cannot do as a president of the Czech Republic because it is not in president's powers
7 Presence of 'strategic-game' frame	1 Expressions connected with 'race', 'winning', 'losing', 'game', 'betting', 'strategy', 'plan', 'fight'
	2 Expressions connecting the concept of populism with the above mentioned words (e.g. <i>Populism lost against former NATO general Petr Pavel</i>)
8 Presence of the "warmonger" frame	1 Expressions connected with 'fear', 'war', 'soldiers', 'catastrophe', 'recruitment'
	2 Expressions putting above mentioned words in negative connotation, connecting them with words like 'threat' 'false' 'lie' 'extortion' 'buying votes'
9 Presence of a generalizing expression	1 Expressions like 'experts say', 'people think', 'media usually describe', 'everybody knows that...' or expressions without specifically naming anybody like 'the campaign was criticised'

Attachment n. 2 - Intercoder Reliability Test:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1TvvQegV-lgs4n7Djb4pl1ngCa8-0vu14?usp=sharing>

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