Resilience Unveiled: Shaping the Future of Central Europe

Ed. by Lucie Tungul

Project Partners

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Lucie Tungul graduated from Miami University, Ohio (International Relations), and Palacky University in Olomouc (Politics and European studies). She worked as assistant professor at Fatih University, Istanbul, and Palacky University, Olomouc. Her areas of interest are European integration with a special focus on Europeanisation, democratisation, EU decision making processes, Euroscepticism, migration processes and identity discourses. She is currently the Head of Research at TOPAZ and assistant professor at the Department of Politics and Social Sciences, Law Faculty, Palacky University, Olomouc, Czechia.

Abbreviations

AfD	Alternative for Germany
AI	artificial intelligence
BDR	Federal Republic of Germany
BRI	Belt-and-Road Initiative
CDU	Christian Democratic Union
CEEC	countries of Central and Eastern Europe
CSU	Christian Social Union
ČPS	Czech Pirate Party
ČSFR	Czech and Slovak Federal Republic
ČSSD	Czech Social Democratic Party
ČSSR	Czechoslovak Socialist Republic
DDR	German Democratic Republic
EC	European Commission
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
ESG	Environmental, Social, Governance
ESSI	European Sky Shield Initiative
EU	European Union
FPÖ	Freedom Party of Austria
KACPU	Regional Assistance Centres for Ukraine
KDU-ČSL	Christian and Democratic Union - Czechoslovak People's Party
KSČ	Czechoslovak Communist Party
KSČM	Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia
LNG	liquefied natural gas
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ODA	Civic Democratic Alliance

ODS	Civic Democratic Party
OF	Civic Forum
OH	Civic Movement
ÖVP	Austrian People's Party
R&D	Research and Development
SPD	Freedom and Direct Democracy
SPÖ	Social Democratic Party of Austria
SRŠ	Equal Opportunities Party
STAN	Mayors and Independents
UK	United Kingdom
USSR	Soviet Union

Foreword

Marek Ženíšek, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic

Czech EU membership is an indisputable prerequisite for our prosperity, whereas NATO membership is a fundamental pillar of our security. Since 1999, we have been part of the largest international defence alliance, which works to safeguard and ensure the safety of our citizens. The NATO alliance operates on the principle of collective defence, requiring each member state to meet its obligations to ensure the security of all. Considering current threats, we strongly support increased defence spending to safeguard our collective safety. The advantages of participating in the EU common market and other associated benefits have proven to be highly advantageous for our nation located in the heart of Europe, a fact that deserves acknowledgment. Soon, Czechia will transition from a net beneficiary to a net contributor to the EU budget. This move towards affluence enables us to extend assistance to other nations. The recent polycrisis, particularly the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, highlight the significant importance of NATO in ensuring security and the EU in promoting solidarity among European countries during adversarial times.

Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free, but security has never been and never will be free. Let's not forget that.

<div align="right">18 March 2024</div>

Introduction

In 2024, Czechia celebrates the twenty-five year anniversary of its entrance into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and two decades of active membership in the European Union (EU). These significant milestones have changed the political, economic, and security landscape of Czechia and the broader Central European region. Czechia entered NATO together with Poland and Hungary and the three joined the EU several years later along with Slovakia. Their "return to Europe" affected not only their mutual relations, but also shaped the geopolitical outlook of both organisations.

Numerous studies have since examined the implications of NATO and EU enlargement for the Central European countries, contributing to a broader understanding of their experiences within the European Union and their evolving role in regional dynamics. This publication adds another dimension to this literature, providing a deeper understanding of the current geopolitical and socio-economic landscape of Central and Eastern Europe. With Czechia at the centre, it looks at the complexities of within and outside the region. The key major challenge facing Europe today is Russia's war in Ukraine. Creating complex geopolitical dynamics, the war highlights a delicate balance between regional security and broader European stability. Despite the proximity of the conflict, Central European countries have not always been able to find a common approach, mostly being affected by domestic political power constellations and individual historical experiences. Several chapters in this volume consequently address various aspects of the Russian threat and the urgent need for regional security.

Cultural exchanges and strengthened diplomatic ties augment regional understanding and collaboration. Such initiatives foster a more integrated and cooperative Central and Eastern European landscape, emphasizing the importance of shared values and cooperative efforts for the collective advancement of the region. This volume therefore also addresses possible venues for further development of positive relations between Czechia and Austria on the one hand and Czechia and Germany on the other. Their mutual good relations have broader implications for the Central and Eastern European region. Economic cooperation stimulates growth and stability in the region, fostering a climate favourable to investment and trade. Diplomatic collaborations within the European Union contribute to regional cohesion, aligning policies and initiatives for the collective benefit of Central European states. Additionally, cultural exchanges and improved diplomatic ties enhance regional understanding and collaboration, creating a more integrated and cooperative Central and Eastern European landscape.

The collection also provides a critical examination of the dangers of backsliding in Central Europe, highlighting the challenges that certain countries within the region may face in maintaining democratic

principles. The main threats include the erosion of democratic institutions, the rise of populist movements, and the impact of illiberal external influences, mostly Russia. Among the long-term threats are low pluralism, discrimination, and unequal representation. Czechia, just like Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, comes out as quite a conservative country when it comes to the social and cultural values of its general population. One clear indicator is the low representation of women in the political process. Although often neglected, this under-representation of women is an important component of potential backsliding risks within the wider context of democracy in Europe.

We start our publication with an essay penned by Jakub Forst-Battaglia, a former diplomat and an eyewitness to the monumental transition from socialism to liberal democracy. This deliberate choice to commence with an essay, rather than a traditional academic analysis, positions Jakub Forst-Battaglia's narrative as a cornerstone for the discussions that follow. The integration of individual insights with historical examination offers a deep understanding of the intricate changes in political, social, and economic realms that Central European nations experienced during this critical era, which carries significant legacies still valid today and frames the academic analyses that follow.

The rest of the publication is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 by Peter Hefele suggests concrete steps for enhancing Central and Eastern Europe resilience in the face of quickly changing geopolitical and economic realities. As Czechia proved its potential when holding the EU Council Presidency in the second half of 2022 demonstrating its crisis management skills, Vendula Kazlauskas in Chapter 2 reflects on this experience, analysing its impact on Europe and the nation itself. She acknowledges the management and mediation successes, but argues that the country lacks a clear European vision and provides specific recommendations on how to form a more long-term profile in the near future using the presidency experiences. Focusing on regional cooperation outside the Visegrad radius, Ladislav Cabada explores in Chapter 3 the dynamics that shape the relations between Czechia and Germany.

Turning to the interplay of external and internal challenges, Ondřej Filipec and Lucie Tungul critically examine in Chapter 4 the influence of external actors on the democratic performance of Central European countries. Their systematic overview lays the groundwork for understanding the complex interplay of internal and external forces allowing for a better response to antidemocratic developments on both the domestic and European level. Chapter 5 by Zdeněk Rod offers a strategic perspective on addressing the growing challenges of disinformation in the region that includes education, critical thinking, fact-checking, behavioural nudging, and strategic communication.

Related to the broader security and (de-)democratisation risks, the final two chapters address migration and political representation. First, Ondřej Filipec in Chapter 6 analyses the Ukrainian refugee crisis in the broader context of information warfare in Czechia. He identifies the main narratives that exploit

the topic of Ukrainian refugees to promote an anti-immigration agenda, polarisation of society and anti-systemic attitudes, and proposes recommendations that prevent and limit their negative impact. Finally, Veronika Šprincová in Chapter 7 addresses a crucial dimension of Czech politics by exploring the role and representation of women. The author identifies the challenges and opportunities for women in the political sphere, contributing to ongoing discussions on equal participation and representation, a fundamental aspect of strengthening and enriching democratic societies.

Resilient and democratic societies serve as the foundation for the future of Europe, providing essential elements for enduring security. From internal stability and economic strength to social cohesion and international collaboration, we need to prepare for current and future security challenges in a rapidly changing global landscape. The publication offers its readers not only a deeper appreciation for the Central European region's historical significance, but also an enriched perspective on how Central Europe contributes to solving some of Europe's contemporary challenges.

PART 1

Between Prague and Vienna – Reminiscences of a Diplomatic Eyewitness

Jakub Forst-Battaglia

I felt that my transfer to the metropolis on the Vltava in the summer of 1989 was a stroke of luck: from up-and-coming Madrid with its tireless Movida, into the supposedly grey Prague of the late-communist system that still seemed to be resisting the fresh wind of Gorbachev's Perestroika that was already blowing in from Moscow. Only the stalwart defenders of the "achievements of Socialism" in the neighbouring German Democratic Republic (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, DDR) were stricter than the comrades in Czechoslovakia. Thanks to the strong will of the voters, the results of the first – largely free – elections in Poland on 4 June 1989 had tipped the scale in favour of a pluralist democracy under the restored *Solidarność* around Lech Walesa, despite the fact that "cohabitation" was needed with sectors of the former power structure around the previous upholder of the martial law dictatorship General Jaruzelski. The Polish Pope John Paul II acted as a moral force behind the scenes and had a particularly strong effect on the Poles, as well as the neighbouring populations in the Soviet sphere of influence: the originally Christian motto of "be not afraid" took on a highly political significance. Hungary also recognised the signs of the times and political change was in the process of being rapidly and resolutely fulfilled. The symbolic rehabilitation and reburial of the legendary Imre Nagy could be interpreted as an eloquent expression of this movement.

For me – as a historian and Slavist in the diplomatic service of the Republic of Austria – the late 1980s provided a unique field of observation and activity despite the fact that it was still impossible to predict how and when the situation would change in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (*Československá socialistická republika*, ČSSR). Among the members of the top party bodies, the Prague Party Secretary and youth leader Miroslav Štěpán was the only one who could be thought of as an – albeit questionable – "renewer". The fossilised party apparatus around First Secretary Miloš Jakeš, that saw any signs of reform as a threat, clung desperately to the established structures. The former head of the Communist Party Gustáv Husák, with his Slovak Catholic origins, had defected to the communists in his youth, and had to be satisfied with the function of State President in his later period in office.

In addition to the required official contacts with the authorities which were characterised by their impersonal pragmatism, my duties as embassy counsellor included regular dialogues with the

multifaceted opposition that had come together around the activists of the Charta 77 group, and often met in private flats. What a colourful collection of committed writers, artists, and scientists from various spheres they were; the intellectual cream of the Czech nation that included a Trotskyist like Petr Uhl alongside a Moravian Catholic like Václav Benda, the priest Václav Malý, the human rights activist Dana Němcová, the sociologist Ivan Gabal, the geographer Saša Vondra, and the left-liberal, former journalist, Jiří Dienstbier, to name just a few of the most important, extremely likeable, interesting personalities. These people had a firm belief in the democratic future , freedom, and constitutionality, and were prepared to make sacrifices to achieve this. Many had lost their positions, and been forced to work as janitors, window cleaners, or night security guards. Faced with the repressive Communist state apparatus, and the passive resignation of wide sections of the population that had withdrawn into an unobtrusive, petit-bourgeois garden idyll between their prefabricated high-rise flat (*panelák*) and small country cottage far away from politics, the strong determination to act was accompanied by doubts about the outcome. They kept a sceptical eye on Moscow. Would the hawks in the Kremlin seize power and nip in the bud any timid attempt at reform? After the bloody night on Tiananmen Square in Beijing on 4 June 1989, they were not so sure.

The civil rights movement, as derived from the so-called Basket Three of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, was to be rewarded, however, for its persistence. This Final Act also made it possible for individual countries to campaign for the observance of human rights in the other signatory states. It was therefore one of my duties to make regular representations to the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry to request the easing of detention conditions, or permission to visit, and these were usually approved in one way or the other. The authorities showed themselves to be somewhat more open to dialogue in the summer and autumn of 1989, however, this did not rule out the police taking harsh action against demonstrators, such as the events on the anniversary of the 1968 invasion on 21 August. On that occasion, Austrian journalists who had entered the country as tourists, had also been manhandled and taken into custody. We were able to get them released and deported from the country.

Those in power also became increasingly nervous as it was slowly becoming clear that they would be left to their own devices seeing that the Soviet leadership no longer had any desire to bring back the old Brezhnev doctrine of limited sovereignty for the Socialist sister states, and militarily intervene in another country in the Warsaw Pact. The catastrophic economic situation in the Soviet Union (USSR), which had lost the Afghan War and the arms race with the USA, caused the Kremlin to unload useless ballast, and give freedom to the satellite states in Central and Southeast Europe. One example of the success of our efforts – and especially of Ambassador Karl Peterlik, who spoke perfect Czech, and attempted to solve the most difficult problems by visiting the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSČ) – concerned the permission granted

to the former Foreign Minister of the Prague Spring of 1968, Jiří Hájek, to leave the country to attend the conference of Social Democratic Party of Austria's (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ) in Graz. We – Envoy Wolfgang Paul and myself – drove the old man to Vienna where he was met by the then club chairman of SPÖ, Heinz Fischer.

Divided Germany constituted a central sticking point in the process of major political change. Even in strictly governed and – with the exception of western television channels – isolated DDR, discontent from below was growing inexorably. The demonstrations in Leipzig and other cities increased, and a movement of fleeing summer holidaymakers, who sought asylum in the embassies of the Federal Republic of Germany (*Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, BRD) in Budapest, Warsaw, and Prague with the goal of being able to leave for the West unhindered, was spreading. Here in Prague, we could see Trabis and Wartburgs that had been parked and left on0 the streets every day, while their occupants headed with bag and baggage towards Palais Lobkowitz, the seat of the West German Embassy in the Lesser Town. At the end of September, Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher secured the unhindered departure of the fugitives. This rang in the beginning of the end of the old DDR that was, nevertheless, still able to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of its founding on 7 October. The Berlin Wall was opened on 9 November; a decisive event that also gave courage to the cautious Czechs.

Developments also began to unfold dramatically in Czechoslovakia. Although a large demonstration by Prague students was brutally dispersed by the police on 17 November, the movement continued to proceed unstoppably forward. As early as 19 November, the Civic Forum was established under Václav Havel, the poet, dramaturge, and moral instance of the democratic opposition, a truly charismatic man, who I was fortunate to have already met at a performance in the Divadlo Na zábradlí theatre when he struck up a lively and friendly conversation with me. This was now followed by days of upheaval when the government under Ladislav Adamec suddenly took notice of the unpopular dissident whose petition "A Few Sentences" (*Několik vět*) from the spring of 1989 had been contemptuously dismissed as a foul pamphlet signed by "self-proclaimed flops and failed existences" (*ztroskotanci a samozvanci*) who had dared to demand that constitutional rights be upheld at the time. In Laterna Magica, the temporary headquarters of the Civic Forum, I was able to hear about the dialogue with the government from Václav Havel, who repeatedly welcomed me late at night for a short, but trenchant, conversation to describe the development of the political situation. Pavel Bergmann, a German-speaking member of the Prague Jewish community, also acted as an intermediary between the Civic Forum and the embassies of Austria and the Federal Republic of Germany. This was accompanied every day by hundreds of thousands of demonstrators who assembled peacefully on Wenceslas Square in the afternoon after they had finished their work, and rattled their keys to symbolically represent the end of the Communist Party's regime. I also took part in these protests, which had now also started

to attract visitors from Austria, as an observer, and was impressed by the discipline of the crowd that would not be provoked to carry out any acts of vandalism similar to those that occurred regularly in the riots of the violent radicals in large western cities.

Remarkable events took place on the weekend of 25-26 November. Cardinal Archbishop František Tomášek celebrated the *Te Deum* for the canonisation of Agnes of Bohemia in St Vitus Cathedral. I visited the aged spiritual leader, an impressive personality who lived almost alone in the archbishop's palace, a few times before the Velvet Revolution. He passed on his messages to the outside world – and received answers – through us. In this way, Austria acted discretely as an intermediary for the Czech Church that had suffered greatly under the oppressive normalisation system of the Husák-Jakeš era. In spite of the widespread laicism in the socialist Czechoslovakia, the population still regarded the church as a moral authority on account of its upright attitude, embodied by the Cardinal. Under the old regime, we had already granted visas to thousands of Czechoslovak pilgrims who wanted to attend the canonisation celebration in Rome, and who had been permitted to make the journey. I will also never forget the second major event of that weekend, which was founded on a tremendous spirit of optimism, and a call for freedom and self-determination that no state power could match: the rally on Letná Plain in icy weather, was attended by a good half a million people, moderated by the clergyman Václav Malý, who invited a series of well-known speakers to the stage one after the other. Finally, on 10 December, Human Rights Day, Gustáv Husák appointed a new, post-communist government under a former party member, the Slovak Marián Čalfa, before resigning himself. Václav Havel was elected president on 29 December.

As early as 4 December, Austria unilaterally lifted the visa obligation for Czechoslovak citizens, and Austrians were able to travel to Czechoslovakia visa-free after the eighteenth of the same month. Czechoslovaks were able to use the public transport and visit the museums in Vienna free of charge. The borders, which were now open, made it possible for thousands of people to finally get to know their immediate neighbourhood and became drastically aware of the deep socio-economic disparities that had developed over the past decades. The two Foreign Ministers Alois Mock and Jiří Dienstbier – who had advanced from janitor to members of the government overnight – symbolically cut through the barbed-wire entanglement separating the northern Weinviertel region of Austria from South Moravia near Laa an der Thaya.

The autumn of hope and the winter months of social thaw were followed by a Prague spring which, in the blossoming of the Petřín Gardens, reflected the joy of unimagined possibilities that was expressed in the preparations for the first free elections to be held in June 1990. Everything had to be reorganised, starting from Civic Forum (*Občanské Fórum*, OF) that formed the core of the country's new democratic forces. It was my responsibility to explore and describe the entire new political

landscape, which was changing rapidly. In addition to the OF, whose headquarters I visited regularly on Jungmann Square 9, and where the press spokesman, the later television entrepreneur Vladimír Železný, sat next to Václav Havel's brother Ivan and his wife Dagmara under a map of the Habsburg monarchy, I sought out the heads of various sub-groups of the OF, prominent personalities such as the conservative philosopher Daniel Kroupa, and the social-democratic sociologist Rudolf Battěk. I made the acquaintance of the prominent political theorist and spokesman of Charta 77 Jaroslav Šabata from Brno on one of his frequent visits to Prague. I had close relationships with representatives of the Christian Democrats including the then Vice Prime Minister Antonín Baudyš, and to the Social Democrats who had once again appeared on the scene. Their leader, Jiří Horák, who had returned from exile, left the country, disappointed, only three years later. The Communists played a role as a new opposition party whereby they paid lip service to pluralist democracy. At least they had an intellectually brilliant leading figure in the person of Miloslav Ransdorf.

Over the years, I had a lively exchange of ideas with one of the most likeable figures in politics at the time, the head of the Czech government, Petr Pithart. He represented the Christian Social group within the Civic Forum. The temporary Minister of the Interior Jan Ruml, an avowed liberal, was also one of my acquaintances among the leading politicians. Although I came into personal contact with almost all of them, I can only name a few here. It was quite easy for diplomats to maintain informal contacts with government offices in those years of upheaval, so great was the need among those responsible to cultivate a friendly relationship with the outside world, and especially their neighbours.

This was all received with great interest by us, members of the Austrian Embassy, as we wanted to maintain a regular dialogue on a broad basis with the leading figures in politics, society, science and culture. The elite of intellectual Prague was happily engaged in the public sphere that, after the fall of Communism, offered unimagined opportunities for shaping the future. The changeability of this period meant that the OF soon split into several factions with a more right-wing or left-wing orientation, from which structured political parties emerged, whose representatives became our regular dialogue partners: Civic Movement (*Občanské hnutí* OH), Civic Democratic Alliance (*Občanská demokratická alliance*, ODA) around Vladimír Dlouhý, finally the successful, right-wing liberal Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS) led by the Minister of Finance, Václav Klaus, who was later to become Prime Minister, then President of Parliament and, finally, Head of State. Three prominent intellectuals stood out among those who returned from exile: the publicist Pavel Tigrid, the political scientist Otto Pick, and the German scholar Eduard Goldstücker. They proved to be extremely interesting, open-minded dialogue partners for me whose cosmopolitanism and international contacts helped to lead the country out of the artificial isolation into which Moscow's Communism had forced it for so long.

Among those who had remained in the country, mention should be made of the psychiatrist and publicist Petr Příhoda, the renowned historians Otto Urban, Jiří Korálka and Jan Křen, the charismatic priest and author Tomáš Halík, the translator Helena Tomanová-Weissová, Havel's brilliant protocol chef Egon Ditmar, the economist Ivan Pilip and his wife, the think-tank manager Lucie Pilipová, the journalist Blanka Kovaříková, the doctor and senator Jaroslava Moserová – she had treated the student Jan Palach after he burned himself in protest in 1969 – and the impressive art historian and conservationist Hugo Rokyta, a native Moravian, an old Austrian with Czech as his mother language, and former prisoner in Buchenwald, with whom I had a particularly close friendship. I have vivid memories of engaging discussions with progressive thinkers like economist Valtr Komárek and lawyer Zdeněk Jičínský, as well as conservative intellectual Rudolf Kučera, who openly endorsed monarchist beliefs. I enjoy thinking back to my contacts with well-known writers including Ivan Klíma, Bohumil Hrabal, Ludvík Vaculik, Bohumila Grögerová, Josef Hiršal, and Pavel Kohout – each one of them an unmistakeable original.

The members of the Bohemian aristocracy played a special role; they were all steadfast people who had remained loyal to their homeland throughout the grey years of real socialism in Communist Prague, Josef Kinský, František Lobkowitz and Hugo Mensdorff-Pouilly. Their class consciousness, coupled with personal modesty, natural, open-minded patriotism, unagitated piety, a deep sense of family, and multilingual urbanity, was characteristic of all of them. After the fall of Communism, they were able to, once again, enjoy some of their lost, restituted property, and public recognition. In 1990, Otto von Habsburg spoke to his "Bohemian compatriots" in front of hundreds of enthusiastic listeners at Charles University. He took part in a mass in Wenceslas Chapel and hosted a dinner with members of the Bohemian nobility and the Austrian Embassy on behalf of the Pan-European Movement. Karel Schwarzenberg arranged for him to visit Václav Havel at the Prague Castle. In 2023/24, a special exhibition at the Moravian Museum in Brno is being dedicated to some of the old aristocratic families in which visible appreciation is shown to their unbending stance after the class struggle defamation in the era of Communism.

The Velvet Revolution brought about profound socio-political changes. The restitution laws provided for the return of property confiscated after the communist takeover on 25 February 1948. The property of native Germans and Czech collaborators, which had already been confiscated in 1945, was excluded from this restitution. The same applied to the property of those aristocratic families who had been categorised as "German" according to the 1930 census, as well as that of the broad mass of Sudeten Germans who had been expelled from the country after the end of the war. After his election as President of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel rushed to condemn the "savage" – and often brutal and ruthlessly carried out – "deportation" (*odsun* is Czech term for the expulsion of the Sudeten

Germans). The government did not go as far, of course, as to subsequently revoke the presidential decrees of President Edvard Beneš, based on which most Sudeten Germans were expropriated and expelled from the country. This would have turned all the property and settlement relationships, that had developed in the meantime, upside down.

Even after 1989, a measure of this kind would have been politically unenforceable since, in 1945, a theory of forfeiture was assumed, and also supported by the Allies, which ruled out further coexistence without addressing questions of personal guilt or responsibility as a result of the Nazi terror and the collaboration of no small number of Bohemian-Moravian Germans with the Nazi regime. Was it possible to revise everything decades later, even under completely new conditions? How did people in Germany, and indeed in Austria, view the matter and the new neighbourly relationship in general? The proverbial "return to Europe" had become a motto of Czechoslovak foreign policy, which was now completely reorientated towards the West.

It is important at this point to take a closer look at Austria's relations with Czechoslovakia and subsequently with Czechia. The fall of the Iron Curtain led to an enormous opening euphoria on both sides of the border. Special crossings were opened at weekends and on public holidays, people visited each other for pilgrimages, fire brigade festivals, and club hikes, and the authorities here and there endeavoured to issue permits quickly, which was routinely done through diplomatic channels. For me, it was an activity that was as frequent as it was enjoyable. There were more and more visits at the state and provincial political level, with high-ranking people from Austria, such as the governors of Upper and Lower Austria, and delegations from a number of province parliaments, coming to Prague. They were curious and hoped to rekindle old ties and they remembered former prejudices that had been fuelled by the unfriendly sealed-off border, the consequences of the First and Second World Wars, and even the ideological incompatibility of the social orders after 1945. As a result, people had grown apart and often talked past each other. The relationship between Vienna and Prague remained cool and unfriendly, particularly during the normalisation era after 1968, despite efforts to deal with each other objectively. In Austria, the Czech and Slovak nuclear power plants were viewed with absolute hostility, especially after the shock of the Soviet Chernobyl disaster in 1986. Even after 1989, their technology was dismissed by the tabloid media a priori as "scrap metal", which deeply hurt the technical and industrial pride of the Czechs, who wanted to move away from environmentally harmful brown coal, an ecological legacy of the Communist regime, by relying on nuclear power.

High-level visits took place, with Federal Chancellor Franz Vranitzky officially travelling to Prague in 1991, and Federal President Thomas Klestil visiting the city in 1993. Prior to this, there had been taciturn disagreements in 1990, when Václav Havel travelled to Salzburg to give an opening speech at a famous festival. He had to meet the then Federal President Kurt Waldheim, who was on the US

watch list because of his controversial military service. Some of those around Havel did not want to expose him – the symbol of morality in politics, the "power of the powerless" (*moc bezmocných*) – to contact with an internationally isolated politician who was, nevertheless, Austria's elected head of state. In the end, there was a brief, frosty meeting with a handshake. Without mentioning Waldheim by name, Havel dedicated his speech to the topic of honesty and ethics in politics. Admittedly, a number of Austrians took offence at this without it having any far-reaching consequences.

The Political Academy of the Austrian People's Party and the Renner Institute of the Social Democratic Party of Austria (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ) helped to build up a modern party system on the occasion of a joint seminar at Liblice Castle, where I met Heinz Fischer, who was then the SPÖ parliamentary group leader, and later President of the National Council before becoming President of the Federal Republic. Shortly thereafter, Fischer – as President of the National Council – returned to Prague to visit Alexander Dubček, who had been granted the honourable position of President of the Federal Assembly, but not that of Head of State that he had hoped for, under the new democracy. In a salon discussion in the Austrian residence, Dubček professed his unbroken belief in the "socialism with a human face" he had wanted to introduce during the first, sadly failed, Prague Spring of 1968. After 1989, however, nobody wanted to hear about this "third way" any longer.

In these first years of regained freedom, Czech social democracy orientated itself strongly on Austria. Party leader Miloš Zeman, whom I visited several times in his Prague People's House, the Lidový dům, saw himself as a disciple of Bruno Kreisky, Willy Brandt and Olof Palme. In 1992, he endeavoured, in vain, to prevent the disintegration of the federation. He later became reconciled with his arch-rival Klaus and was his successor in the Prague Castle, although he almost lost to Karel Schwarzenberg in the popular vote.

While for Foreign Minister Alois Mock, Austria's aspiration to join the EU was the primary goal, he was also a committed Central European and endeavoured to maintain good relations with the neighbouring countries to the east. He made himself an advocate for the expellees, however, by repeatedly arguing that the presumption of their collective guilt, on which some of the contested Beneš Decrees were based, be cancelled, but was unable to convince either the Federal Foreign Minister Dienstbier or later the Czech Foreign Minister Zieleniec. He and Jiří Dienstbier also held opposing positions on the Yugoslavia conflict. Mock was in favour of the rapid recognition of Croatian and Slovenian independence in 1991, while Dienstbier initially wanted to maintain the indivisibility of old Yugoslavia. Events proved Mock right and Dienstbier, who was obviously thinking of the example of his own country, Czechoslovakia, wrong.

The Czechs and Slovaks were actually becoming increasingly estranged from each other without slipping into open hostility, as was the case in former Yugoslavia. In a long series of talks between Prague and Bratislava, attempts were made to regulate the mutual relationship between the two parts of the state. Was the common Czechoslovak state superior, or were Czechia and Slovakia the two starting points from which the larger, dual state system had emerged? A two-year series of negotiations over the three options of federation, confederation, or disintegration took place, with the Czechs favouring the idea of federation and the Slovaks that of confederation. Finally, after the 1992 elections, the Czech Prime Minister Klaus and the Slovak Prime Minister Mečiar agreed on a peaceful partition, *i.e.*, dissolution of Czechoslovakia. As Austrians, we could only observe, but at the time we would have preferred the preservation of the whole state over separation for reasons of stability in Central Europe. Economic reasons – the clear development of more successful Czechia into a liberal market economy under the reform policy of Václav Klaus, whereas Slovakia, which was initially still much poorer and orientated towards a dirigiste state economy under Vladimír Mečiar, took a different path – ultimately tipped the scales. Austria was then the first neighbouring country to officially recognise the newly created subject of international law, Czechia, immediately after midnight on 1 January 1993 by means of a note deposited by Ambassador Peterlik.

We also endeavoured to establish good, constructive relations with Czechia. Dynamic links had already been established in all areas of business, science, education, culture, and sport, in line with the natural conditions of an ancient community of destiny, and then a close neighbourhood, characterised by diverse connections over the centuries, with the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, which had been restructured after the fall of Communism in 1990. Diverse links between companies and banks, an Austrian grammar school in Prague, a number of lectureships, and several Austrian libraries, as well as cultural events such as theatre performances, exhibitions and readings presented a colourful picture. We also organised a number of well-attended events with the Kafka Centre and the Institute of International Relations.

Two personalities in particular made a lasting contribution to the positive development of relations. The first was Erhard Busek, Deputy Mayor of Vienna, then Minister of Science, Vice-Chancellor, and Chairman of the Austrian People's Party, who had always been a staunch advocate of an active neighbourhood policy in the Danube region. He had supported the democratic opposition in the ČSSR even before 1989 and wanted to put what we had in common with Czechia above what divided us. The other was Karel Schwarzenberg, Havel's astute advisor and chancellor during his federal presidency, a Bohemian-Austrian aristocrat of European stature and far-sightedness, to whom his deliberately chosen Czech homeland owed an immense amount in terms of international reputation and credibility. As Czech Foreign Minister, he then cultivated relations with his neighbours, including Austria and

a united Germany. Together with Poland and Hungary, the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic (*Česká a Slovenská Federativní Republika*, ČSFR) had already formed the Visegrad Group in 1990, which then dissolved the Warsaw Pact with the USSR in 1991, to better coordinate the region of Eastern Central Europe. A midnight visit with Busek to the Prince at Hradčany remains unforgettable to me. I also had the opportunity to have repeated, always friendly and fruitful, conversations with Schwarzenberg, whether in Prague, Vienna, or Kyiv, where I later worked as a diplomat. He was a visionary with a sense of balance and realistically be achieved in a community of nations that operate on principles of mutual respect.

Around the turn of the millennium, in the run-up to the EU enlargement in 2004, relations occasionally did not seem to be under a lucky star. The discussions about the Beneš decrees and the Temelín nuclear power plant reached their polemical peak. There were forces in Austria, particularly in The Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) circles and some federal provinces, who wanted to make the cancellation of the decrees, or even Czechia's renunciation of nuclear power, a condition for the country's accession to the EU. The federal government, led by Wolfgang Schüssel, steered the discussion in a rational direction by means of the Melk Protocol on the orderly flow of information on nuclear power plants agreed with Czechia, and had no intention of thwarting the enlargement of the European Union, which Austria had been a member of since 1995 and which was beneficial to all parties involved. Czechia, together with Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Poland, and the Baltic states, has been a member of the EU since 2004. The seven-year transition period for workers from the new member states was also lifted in 2011, and all neighbours have been part of the open Schengen area since 2008.

Austrian-Czech relations have developed dynamically – at both the national and regional level – in all areas, as well as trilaterally in the Slavkov/Austerlitz format between Vienna, Prague, and Bratislava. Since the Sudeten German *Landsmannschaft* under the pan-European-minded Bernd Posselt began to focus on a constructive relationship with Czechia, renouncing claims for reparations, this painful frontline position has also become a thing of the past for today's generation. As early as in 1997, the German-Czech Declaration settled open questions about the past between the two states. As far as nuclear power is concerned, its use in Europe is the exclusive decision of each nation state. Austria can rely on its hydropower, wind power and solar energy, while Czechia and many other countries can rely on nuclear energy. Overall, we can look back with satisfaction on our rich neighbourly relationship in every respect as we strive to master the major international problems of our turbulent times in a spirit of solidarity and shared responsibility for Europe.

PART 2

Chapter 1: Towards a Resilient Europe: New Development Options for Central and Eastern Europe

Peter Hefele

Abstract: The Russian war on Ukraine is only the latest piece in a series of "polycrises" that have brutally unveiled the manifold weaknesses of European societies. As a result, reducing vulnerabilities and strengthening resilience have become priorities of the European Commission. This policy concept goes beyond protecting critical infrastructure or supply chains. It also includes the functioning of democratic systems and managing a sustainable transition. Surprisingly, the role of countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEEC) in this adaptation process is rarely debated. This region offers many opportunities to become a significant pillar for a more resilient Europe. This article will analyse the region's current challenges and explore different areas where CEEC can make a major contribution – to their development and that of the whole of the European Union.

Keywords: resilience, transformation, Central and Eastern Europe, the European Union, critical infrastructure

Introduction

The Russian war on Ukraine is only the latest piece in a series of polycrises that have brutally unveiled the manifold weaknesses of European societies, notably, economies based on extensive trade relations or fossil-based energy systems. These fairly "traditional" external shocks have forced Europeans to critically examine their "societal infrastructure" – an infrastructure which is much more than the physical ones, such as pipelines, railroads or telecommunication systems. Moreover, in times of hybrid warfare, the lines between civil and military defence capabilities no longer exist, nor is there any longer an essential difference between the virtual and physical infrastructure (cf. Hefele and Knoskova 2022).

There is another aspect of resilience, however, which is related to the issue of sustainability which is often less discussed. For many years, the concept of sustainability was narrowed to carbon-emissions reduction measures.[1] It has been only recently that sustainability has been increasingly linked to building

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1   For the history of "sustainability", see the overview in Spindler (2013). Interestingly, the notion of sustainability was much broader in the 1970s/80s when this concept was first discussed, e.g., in the Brundtland report of 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development 1990).

resilience and decreasing the vulnerability of societies comprehensively. In other words, the ambitious and ground-breaking transformation process in the European economy and society has to be guided by the objective of a resilient society.[2] As heated political discussions within the European Union (EU) demonstrate, European countries and regions will face different challenges along the way (Cătuți et al. 2020). Thus, political opposition against new concepts and regulations from the European Union and the nation-states is often high. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEEC) are often overlooked regarding their specific challenges *and* potential contributions to a more resilient Europe. The following article will, therefore,

- *first*, analyse the current *horizon of threats and vulnerabilities* in Europe, with a particular focus on CEEC;

- *second*, identify the specific potential of CEEC to enhance comprehensive *societal resilience* within the region and give some recommendations to unleash and develop this potential for a sustainable transformation in CEEC and what it means for the rest of the EU.

The European Council defines resilience as "the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner" (European Council 2023). Resilience, therefore, cuts across different policy fields, e.g., the political system, infrastructure and economic development. This requires new political concepts and instruments to overcome thinking and acting in "silos". Part 3 will present certain recommendations for policy innovation.

The Current Horizon of Threats and Vulnerabilities in CEEC

The experiences of the ground-breaking transformation after 1989 have made societies in CEEC more apt to cope with adaptation – or did they not? There might be some truth in such an assertion, but massive social tensions, unbalanced national economies, and fragile constitutional systems have stretched the resilience of societies, economies and political systems to a breaking point (Csergö, Eglitis and Pickering 2021). Understanding "political resilience" (Boese et al. 2021) has to take into account the specific challenges for the democratic systems in CEEC. First, their comparatively young democratic systems still face various internal and external threats: populist movements, unstable party systems, corruption and low trust in the democratic systems *per se*, as far as internal factors are concerned. Moreover, economic development remains fragile in large parts of CEEC, as will the parliamentary and party systems.

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2   For the European Commission's approach towards a resilient society, see the resilience reports at European Commission (2023b).

Exploiting their weaknesses, CEE societies have been, over the long run, also the target of sophisticated measures of *foreign interference* from autocratic countries, including Russia, China and states in the Middle East (Conley et al. 2016). As part of its revisionist strategy, Russia has tried to exploit its historical relations with the "Slavic world" (Bulgaria, Serbia); Russian minorities (in the Baltic countries), or its dominance in specific economic sectors (in particular energy) to build up clientelist networks. While the Russian war on Ukraine gave these efforts a significant blow, channels of influence remain, e.g., through political parties in Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, and Slovakia. Within China's Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI), the "17+1" format was meant to make inroads into the CEEC region and develop special relations (Gupta 2020; Bergsen and Sniukaite 2020). Western European members of the EU often criticised this as a strategy of "divide and rule" by China.[3] Even if this format has lost its momentum (Tonchev et al. 2021), however, the presence of China will continue to grow, including its political influence.

The accession to the European Single Market and integration into global economic value chains since the fall of the Iron Curtain has lifted the living standard of most of the people in CEEC. A significant part of society still lives, however, in poverty (OECD 2023). Moreover, the current economic structure and external dependencies, e.g., with the larger Western economies such as Germany, make these countries highly vulnerable to external shocks as contagious effects cannot be adequately mitigated even by state interventions. Intraregional economic integration within CEEC is only slowly improving, and the loss of the Russian market is difficult to compensate for many of them in the short term. Moreover, structural deficits such as an almost unstoppable brain drain (Council of Europe 2019) from the less developed regions, or weak infrastructural connections within the area, have led to an evil circle of slow or even underdevelopment. In the coming years, requirements for sustainable transformation by the EU will impose heavy burdens on traditional economic structures. CEEC will therefore be a significant testing ground for a "just transition" (European Commission 2023a).

Demographic change has dramatically hit CEEC since the end of the Cold War. Even before the accession to the Single European Market and the Schengen area, massive emigration led to unsustainable distortions in some countries and regions, particularly in South-Eastern Europe (Batog et al. 2021). Larger regions can no longer maintain themselves demographically and can survive economically only by massive transfers, e.g., through remittances from migrant workers. This development will continue as pronatalist efforts have largely failed thus far.[4] A widening urban-rural gap (Allianz SE 2019) has become a significant factor in electoral behaviour in CEEC, strengthening populist and nationalistic forces.

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3   Major powers in Western Europe, such as France and Germany, had also developed "special relations" with China that dwarf any sino-CEEC relations in political and economic terms.
4   The findings of Basten (2015) still prevail today.

The Potential of CEEC to Enhance Europe's Resilience: Areas of Action for the EU

Against this rather gloomy picture of the current situation in CEEC, building a resilient society provides a concept with a promising set of options for turning the wheel and creating a new level playing field in and for CEEC. Unfortunately, the few gains are low-hanging fruit and require vision, perseverance, a broader political consensus, better coordination within the European multilayer system (Börzel 2020) and acknowledging the diversity in instruments and approaches.[5] The EU and large member states play a decisive role while at the same time undergoing a massive transformation in their own countries. One can therefore speak of a "transitory co-evolution". Several key areas are essential to Europe's transformation process and enhancing resilience. Many of them have already been discussed but need further investigation.

Driven by technological forces and geo-economic shifts, the economic geography of the European single market is in a continuous reshuffling. Caused by developments within Western Europe's more advanced economies, e.g., Germany, "upgrading effects" are already "rippling along" their supply chains into supplementary economies in CEEC. Disentangling from or restructuring global value chains to "de-risk" (Kynge 2023; Huotari and Stec 2023) them will immediately impact the positioning and contribution of CEEC providers. The challenge for CEEC economic policies now lies in using this momentum of "nearshoring" to move along the value chain and implement, e.g., higher Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) standards (Dordevic 2021).[6]

As intra-European dependencies are changing, more and more independent developments can be identified emerging from the CEEC region. One advantage of relative latecomers are "leapfrogging" effects, particularly in digitalisation. The CEE region is already well prepared to contribute to the emergence of a single digital market in the EU. Many CEE countries have a highly skilled workforce in the IT sector, and the region has become a major destination for outsourcing and software development. By investing in CEEC's digital infrastructure and skills, the EU as a whole can strengthen its digital resilience and competitiveness.

The competitive, or at least complementary, advantages of CEEC are not limited to the digital economy. The energy sector is also a crucial pillar in Europe's resilience policy. The EU has to reduce the block's dependence on a single supplier to diversify its energy system. In parallel, many CEECs urgently need to modernise their energy infrastructure, which often dates back to the socialist era and relies primarily on fossil energies. This region could become a significant "battery" for the Union in investing and providing renewable energy sources. From a longer perspective, further enlargement

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5   The link between the basic European principle of "subsidiarity" and resilience cannot be dealt with in detail in this article. For more, see Schout (2023).
6   On ESG in CEEC, see Turp-Balazs (2022).

processes with Ukraine or the Black Sea region will strengthen the region's role as a hub and turnstile for energy production, imports and processing. This large-scale modernisation in renewable energies could trigger a diversified re-industrialisation by investments in modern light industries, creating new and diversified sources of value creation. This requires, however, a reverse of the brain drain, long-term investment in the education and research sector and improvements in governance.[7]

The knowledge in CEEC of how to cope with hybrid threats, including disinformation, cyberattacks, and foreign interference, is of particular benefit in strengthening the resilience of the entire EU. Sadly, with foreign attacks constantly undermining the CEEC region and resulting in a great deal of political and social turbulence, their expertise in countering such threats has also grown. This knowledge can contribute to the efforts of the EU to protect its citizens and democratic institutions and strengthen democratic forces outside Europe.[8] Additionally, by sharing this expertise and developing joint approaches, the EU can more quickly and effectively create a safer information space and assure the integrity of its core democratic processes. This is of utmost importance for a more resilient CEEC political infrastructure.

Europe will see the return of a Cold War situation with a Russia that has not abandoned its expansionist policy. The current ramping up of the defence capabilities will significantly take place in CEEC – in line with the more substantial role of this region within a European/NATO security architecture. It has to be accompanied by re-building sufficient industrial capacities in the defence sector. As civil and military technologies are merging into one other, spin-over effects for the sake of a broader re-industrialisation, like the energy sector mentioned above, can be assumed.[9]

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7   The Research and Development (R&D) expenditures in CEEC are only half of those in the leading Western European countries. For a detailed analysis, see the European Investment Bank (2018).
8   On the European Democracy Action Plan, see the European Commission (2020).
9   This development will not be affected by debate on integrating NATO and the EU into a future European defence architecture; see Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (2022).

Recommendations:

- The enlargement and strengthening process of the European Union has to reflect more on the specific conditions of the "development belt" between the "Three Seas"[10] and extend this concept to the Balkans as well as Ukraine and Moldova as potential new EU members.

- CEEC should engage more actively in developing alternative concepts for the future of the European Union's constitution.

- European Political Parties have to strengthen their support for their member parties in the CEEC to avoid the further rise of populistic, anti-Western and pro-Russian parties and movements.

- Strengthening the European Pillar of the European Security Architecture has to acknowledge the specific security demands of CEEC and contribute to their dual-use re-industrialisation.

- The CEEC has to engage more in R&D programs both by state and private actors to reverse the brain-drain and create the bases for sustainable, long-term growth potential.

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10   Three Seas is an initiative that brings together 12 EU Member States between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas. [EN]

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Chapter 2

CZ PRES 2022: Czechs Surprised Europe and Themselves. Can Czechia Capitalise on Its Potential?

Vendula Kazlauskas

Abstract: The Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2022 was very positively evaluated. The Czech diplomatic service has built a strong reputation that Czechia should maintain and leverage to advance its interests in the European Union (EU). One objective is to build a robust portfolio in the European Commission after the 2024 elections. Euro 7 exemplifies a situation in which Czechia effectively advocated for its position in EU legislation, benefiting from the expertise of the Presidency. On other issues, however, the Czechs do not seem to be as ambitious. For example, the Czechs are taking a back seat in the current debate on the EU internal reforms, although they strongly support the enlargement of the EU to Ukraine and other countries. The Czech political representation should enhance its proactive and constructive approach to EU affairs, while also improving communication about the EU to domestic audiences.

Keywords: presidency, Czech European policy, Euro 7, veto power, European Commission

Introduction

"I have seldom seen a presidency that has been more successful and more focused and more professional than the Czech presidency", said the then First Vice-President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, in December 2022. The praise came where few would have expected it at the start of the Presidency - at the Environment Council, where Czechia had spent the previous six months negotiating agreement on most of the initiatives in the Fit for 55 package. In total, Czech diplomats concluded 33 trilogues (out of the 98 negotiated), almost a third of which contribute to meeting the EU's climate ambitions.[11] They were able to reach agreements even in fields that were not typically considered strong points of Czech foreign policy. In doing so, they were able to fulfil the motto "Europe as a mission" and the five priorities of the Czech Presidency (Office of the Government of the Czech Republic 2023), demonstrating that the Czech diplomatic apparatus was very capable and able to approach the agenda in a factual, constructive and creative way.

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11 Czech diplomats concluded nine out of the 13 proposals within the Fit for 55 package, including for example the reform of the EU emission trading scheme and a substantial limitation on the sale of internal combustion engine vehicles starting in 2035 (Urbanová 2022).

At the same time, the well-managed role of "crisis manager" and "honest broker", not explicitly expressing its views, allowed the Presidency to mask the lack of government unity on key European issues. Since January 2023, however, this strategy has proved inadequate, and the long-standing problems of Czech European policy - the lack of discussion on European issues and the absence of a vision of what Czechia wants to achieve with the newly acquired positive reputation at the EU level - have once again come to the fore. This chapter discusses the impact of the Czech Presidency experience on Czech European policy, the remaining weaknesses, and the long-term implications for the Czech position within the EU.

Missing Consensus and a Long-Term Approach

The evaluation of the first Czech Presidency in 2009 already underscored the "competence of officials and diplomats", while the weaknesses included "Czech political scene's inability to cooperate at the European level" (Druláková et al. 2009, 136). The uncoordinated approach of the government, relevant ministries and political parties, ignorance, lack of ambition and vision still significantly affect Czech European policy thirteen years after the first Presidency.

An evident illustration of the missing unified approach to matters deliberated at the European Union level was demonstrated by the Czech stance on the contentious topic of restricting the sales of vehicles with internal combustion engines after 2035. Despite being a highly sensitive topic for Czech citizens,[12] the Presidency successfully reached a consensus in a trilogue, marking the first completed trilogue of the Fit for 55 package during the CZ PRES. This agreement also aligned with the preferences of Czech car manufacturers. However, less than three months after the Czech Presidency ended, Czechia (together with Germany) rejected the compromise it negotiated and strongly advocated for the incorporation of a provision that would exempt vehicles powered by synthetic fuels in the final draft.

Minister of Transport, Martin Kupka, then used his experience and contacts from the negotiations during the Czech Presidency to build and successfully lead a strong coalition of states pushing for a significant alleviation of the proposed Euro 7 emissions standard. A coalition of eight like-minded countries (Czechia, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania and Slovakia)[13] forming a blocking minority was able to find and use convincing incentives and arguments to defend its position and push through until the final compromise reached at the EU Council in September

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12   The *Czech (Non)transformation 2022* research shows that ending the internal combustion engine car production is a "very sensitive and difficult-to-pass issue" for the Czechs. A significant number of people (6%) prefer rationing electricity and heat to ending internal combustion engine car production by 2035 (4%) (STEM and Institut 2050 2022, slide 50).

13   Germany, Portugal, and Cyprus shared the view as well.

2023. Opposition to the Euro 7 proposal was one of the few issues on which the entire political representation was unanimous and the government was able to send a clear political message. Czechia managed to have its position included in the Council conclusions and the European Parliament's position, thanks to the rapporteur, Alexander Vondra from the Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS). When Czechia clearly defines its interests, it is very effective in promoting them, can win support for them and can lead more powerful EU countries such as France or Italy into coalition.

A similarly clear-cut issue with support across the political spectrum is nuclear energy. By 2050, Czechia aims to derive approximately 50% of its electricity from nuclear power sources. The official policy agenda of Petr Fiala's administration underscores the prioritisation of nuclear energy within the country (Programové prohlášení vlády ČR 2023, 9). The Czech public has shown strong and enduring support for nuclear power, with approval ratings hitting a peak of 72% following the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine.[14] Again, clear national priorities led to their successful promotion at EU level. For example, Czechia was one of the eleven founding members of the French-led "nuclear alliance" (Ministère de la Transition écologique et de la Cohésion des territoires 2023), and both sides value their strategic cooperation (Ministerstvo průmyslu a obchodu 2024). This cooperation facilitated the promotion of nuclear energy both in the negotiations on the final form of the Renewable Energy Directive as well as the Net-Zero Industry Act, where it represented the red line for Czech endorsement (Parlament České republiky 2023).

However, apart from issues related to the car industry or nuclear energy, there are not many other areas that Czech politicians would be willing to support so strongly and unequivocally - despite having gained direct experience of negotiating at the European level and the importance of building coalitions that enable them to promote national interests. The programmatic inconsistency of the current governing parties, not only at the level of the government but also at the level of individual coalitions, also hinders more pronounced support for individual issues. This is clear, for example, in the approach to European climate policy, on which even the parties running together in the 2024 European Parliament elections (Civic Democratic Party, Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party and TOP 09 on the SPOLU candidate list) have a fundamentally contradictory stance.

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14   As of late 2022, Czech public approval for nuclear power has surged to its peak level since the monitoring by the International Business and Research Services (IBRS) agency started in 1999 (Beneš 2023).

Support for EU Enlargement Versus Rejection of EU Reforms

Czechia's long-term priorities include support for EU enlargement, especially Ukraine[15] and the Western Balkans, a stable European neighbourhood and the expansion of the single market. At the same time, however, there is virtually no debate what their accession would mean for the single market and the Union as a whole. The EU internal reforms are necessary to maintain the EU's operational capacity after the increase in the number of members. The "old member states" condition further enlargement by EU reforms that would have very tangible implications for Czechia - whether the most often discussed expansion of qualified majority voting in the Council of the EU, the transformation of the EU's institutional set-up or, for example, changes in the multiannual financial framework.[16]

Following the EU enlargement to include Ukraine and the associated fundamental transformation of the EU's cohesion and agricultural policies, Czechia would become a net contributor to the EU budget. This would undoubtedly be exploited by populists and EU critics to erode trust in the EU among the Czech public. After decades of top Czech politicians either directly questioning the importance of Czechia's EU membership or reducing it to the dimension of financial benefits from the EU budget, the Czech public debate lacks a deeper understanding of the EU membership added value. Only four out of ten citizens agree that "it is right for Czechia to receive less money in the future because it has become richer than the EU average".[17] The benefits of the EU funds are also appreciated even by opponents of the EU (STEM 2020) - being a net contributor to the EU budget would therefore have a negative impact on Czech public support for EU membership.

The proposed reforms have significant potential to influence Czech position in the EU. For example, the idea of a "multi-speed Europe", which has long been discussed by French President Macron and has already been included among possible reforms in a German and French expert paper,[18] raises many questions for Czechia. As a country outside the eurozone, it could find itself on the political periphery, which would, among other things, make it more difficult for its representatives to reach the most important positions in EU structures. Differentiation between EU states and a weakening of their relations is not beneficial for Czechia, an export-focused economy in the heart of Europe.

Nevertheless, there is only limited public and political debate about the EU internal reforms, often reduced to a black-and-white perspective on the yes or no need to keep the veto in the Council of the

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15   Clearly articulated, for example, in the Government's Programme Statement (Programové prohlášení vlády ČR 2023, 27).

16   A detailed outline of the proposals for institutional reforms was submitted for discussion by a group of 12 French and German experts to the Ministers of European Affairs on 19 September 2023 (Costa, Schwarzer et al. 2023).

17   A majority (71%) of Czechs agree that the poor EU countries should receive more funds from the EU budget than the rich ones - provided that it involves money coming from other countries into the Czech budget (STEM 2023).

18   They see the future of European integration at four different levels: 1) the "inner circle"; 2) the EU; 3) associate members; 4) European political community (Costa, Schwarzer et al. 2023).

EU. The current Czech government is officially "open to discussions on the possibility of improving the functioning of the EU" and the Czechia is "happy to hear the options".[19] However, if the Czech position is limited to "listening" to other countries' proposals, and if is unable (and not interested) to generate its own views on the future shape of the EU, does not seek support for its priorities and does not negotiate constructively, it risks remaining outside the European integration mainstream.

Only Active Czech Representatives Can Play an Active Role in the EU

After a successful Presidency, Czechia seemed interested in playing a more active role in Europe. For example, the government declared its ambition and willingness to change the under-representation of Czechs in the EU institutions. Although Czechia's population should account for 3.1% of the EU institutions' staff, only approximately half (1.6%) currently do. During its EU presidency, Czechia also underlined the under-representation of certain countries among the EU institutions staff. After the presidency, Czechia wanted to use its reputation to assist more Czechs in securing employment in the EU institutions.[20]

The new-found confidence of the Czech representatives is also reflected in their ambition to obtain a prestigious and powerful portfolio in the next Commission. Although the current Czech representative in the European Commission, Vice-President for Values and Transparency, Věra Jourová, is one of the most influential people in Brussels,[21] there is a feeling in Czechia that her portfolio is not strong enough and not beneficial for Czechia. Therefore, according to the political parties' representatives (Brodníčková 2023), Czechia should strive for a strong portfolio in 2024 that is more in line with its interests. This could include energy, internal market and competition, industry, or foreign affairs.

The Czech EU Presidency has not only brought the political representation closer to the daily life of the Brussels institutions and a greater awareness of Commissioner's work, it increased the confidence of individual candidates - especially the current Minister of Industry and Trade, Jozef Síkela, who was one of the most visible and successful Czech Ministers during the Czech Presidency and who has already expressed his interest in the position (Procházka 2023).

The debate on the next Czech Commissioner is already an improvement compared to the discussions during the previous selection of Commissioners. In 2009, for example, there was no debate on specific

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19   Quoted by "a source close to the government" (Boubínová and Linhart 2023).
20   In April 2023, for example, the government increased support for Czech experts in the EU institutions and approved funding of CZK 80 million per year for civil servants' internships in the EU institutions (Vláda České republiky 2023). From 2024, three university students can use government scholarships to study at the prestigious College of Europe, which prepares graduates for careers in EU institutions. The new Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will also focus on increasing Czech representation in international institutions.
21   In 2019, she became the first Czech woman to be listed among *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in the world.

names even two months after the European Parliament (EP) elections. In 2014, the government agreed on the nomination of Věra Jourová as the Czech candidate in July and was the member state to announce its candidate. However, to successfully win the coveted portfolio, it is essential to first clarify Czech priorities in the next European Commission. These issues should be promoted by Czech representatives in the long run and have a strong voice in the European debates. If everyone agrees on the significance of having a strong portfolio, rather than focusing on party differences, it is crucial to stop suggesting new candidate names. Instead, the priority should be to engage in a comprehensive political dialogue to select suitable individuals, and subsequently introduce and advocate for them in Brussels.

Home View of Europe

Thanks to the ongoing debate about the future commissioner, it might seem that Czech politicians and citizens have stopped perceiving the EU as an external actor. For example, the simplistic label of "Brussels", which is often perceived by the majority of the population as "ordering us around" and "deciding for us without us", appears less in the media (České zájmy v EU 2022). This traditional oversimplification, the creation of a conflict between "us" and "Brussels", and the portrayal of the Union as an organisation that is detached from reality and has a negative influence, as promoted by some Czech politicians in the public space and in the media, resulted in a widespread lack of trust in the European Union among a considerable part of the Czech society.

The successes of the Czech Presidency was not translated into stronger support for the EU in Czechia or into a confidence that Czechia can influence EU affairs and decide on key EU issues (České zájmy v EU 2023). Although Czechs trust the EU more than the national government and parliament, Czechia is among the EU member countries with the lowest level of trust in the EU (Eurobarometer 2023). It is unrealistic to expect that a six-month Presidency alone could change the long-standing low support for the EU among the Czech public. However, the participation of Czech ministers in EU Council meetings (which they chaired and could have used as a communication tool) has not made a dent in public opinion. In 2023, less than half of the Czech public knew that Czechia was represented in the Council of the EU (43%) (STEM 2023 85), and the number of people who believed that "Czechia is able to play an active role in the EU and to assert its position in EU decision-making" even decreased from 2019 to 2023.[22]

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[22] In 2019, the combined percentage of "definitely yes" and "rather yes" responses was 40%, but after the Czech Presidency in 2023, it decreased to 33% (STEM 2023, 89).

The generally low awareness about the EU and the current issues under discussion is largely related to the lack of interest and ownership of European issues among the Czech politicians - as well as their ignorance of the basic EU principles.[23] If politicians are not interested in what is going on at the European level, they will not be able to talk about it objectively, perceive the European agenda as a normal part of their work, show that Czechia participates in decision making and has a voice in the EU. STEM research indicates that the media plays a significant role in shaping Czech public opinion on the EU by largely disseminating political messages.[24] The Czech passive attitude places the country on the EU periphery and may leave Czechia in the slow lane of a possible multi-speed European integration.

Conclusion

Czechia has undoubtedly excelled in its second EU Presidency, maintaining the unity of the Union during an extreme crisis and, to some extent, surprised even itself. The Czech voice has gained more weight at international level, which the country can use to further promote its priorities. The Presidency has shown that Czechia can be a leading voice in the Union, and it would be a missed opportunity to lose this reputation. Moreover, it now has the potential to be a constructive and valued partner for the "old Member States" in the Central and Eastern European (CEEC) region. During its Presidency, Czechia has effectively handled crises that were mostly "forced" upon it, whether it was the war in Ukraine or the energy crisis. The Czech European policy can effectively operate during a crisis when a shared objective or a distinct common adversary compels Czech political leaders to set aside their usual disagreements and work together - or when a crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, highlights the significance of international collaboration.

In the future, Czechia must be proactive. Discussions on the EU enlargement and the related internal reforms require an active stance from the Czech political representation, without succumbing to heated election rhetoric or opinion polls. Especially as the time approaches and Czechia will no longer be a net recipient of the EU funds, it will be crucial to clearly articulate domestic positions on key EU policies and on the EU Czech membership. Only then can the country remain a predictable and a constructive partner, using its hard-won prestige and influence in the EU.

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23   This also pertains to top political figures - for instance, in a survey by Czech Radio conducted five months before the Presidency, three Czech ministers were unable to specify the number of EU member states (Janoušek 2022).
24   STEM Research 2019 - unpublished.

Recommendations

- Czechia should establish its long-term EU priorities and actively pursue them irrespective of changes in government. The first opportunity will be the debate on EU internal reform, especially the potential restriction of unanimity in the EU Council, a matter of concern in Czechia.

- Czech government should systematically encourage Czechs to work in the EU institutions - employed in various institutions, starting from lower positions up. Long-term political support for specific candidates is essential for success.

- Czech political actors, government officials, and various other stakeholders with high public trust such as businesses and the military should work together on a systematic, sustained and coordinated communication with the public. Their joint statements should present the EU agenda as domestic and relevant.

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Chapter 3

Czech-German Relations at the Intergovernmental and European Levels

Ladislav Cabada

Abstract: Czech-German relations are rightly described as the best in history, yet relations between the two countries stagnated between 2013 and 2021 and were even divergent on some key policies. The main objective of this analysis is to reflect on major obstacles to strengthening cooperation between the two countries in the above-mentioned period. Above all, the main focus is on the fundamental change associated with the shift in the governmental constellation in both countries, especially with respect to the impulse to build a resilient Europe and Union in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine. The analysis focuses specifically on the expansion and deepening of cooperation during 2022 and 2023 and on further perspectives for developing Czech-German relations.

Keywords: Germany; Czechia; strategic dialogue; European Union

Introduction

The Federal Republic of Germany (hereafter Germany) is the largest country in the European Union (EU) in terms of population, and the largest economy in the EU. Moreover, it is the largest neighbouring country of Czechia and its most important economic partner. This brief list of characteristics clearly explains why Germany is crucial for Czech politics and the economy. In addition, it is important to highlight a number of other impulses for building Czech-German relations at all levels of governance: local, European, and global. The border area between Czechia and Bavaria and Saxony is almost completely covered by a network of cross-border cooperative structures – Euroregions. Cross-border cooperation between associations of municipalities or individual municipalities on both sides of the border is also intensive, although there is certainly room for further strengthening and expansion of cooperation in both segments. The cooperation on the Czech-German border offers a range of "sectoral" frameworks; this includes activities in the field of border control, cooperation between emergency services, educational and cultural institutions, etc.

Nevertheless, the Czech-German cooperation cannot be perceived as either complete or as problem-free. Groups or activists, who approach the other side of the dialogue with prejudice, can still be

observed on both sides. In Czechia, the anti-German narrative in previous years grew out of a general nationalist or even nativist discourse, which was intertwined with the post-war (primarily communist) narrative of the German "revanchist". The weakening of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*, KSČM) and the broader generational change have managed to tone it down quite significantly, but it remains a latent challenge to the rational presentation of the post-war building of German democracy based on a strong civil society. The (old) new impulse for anti-German sentiment has been the Euro-negativist voices in Czech politics, which present Germany primarily as an imperial leader of the EU or the EU as an instrument of unilateral German policy. Over the last decade, this narrative has overlapped significantly with the illiberal national-populist trend within the Visegrad Group (Viktor Orbán, Jaroslaw Kaczyński, Andrej Babiš), and has not only repeatedly compared the EU to the functioning of the Soviet empire but even portrayed the long-standing German Chancellor Angela Merkel in an almost diabolical form.

If one looks at the German discourse concerning Czechia, one also notices partial prejudices associated with a general distrust of post-communist or new EU member states. Naturally, these prejudices may also have older impulses linked to the negative perception of Eastern Europe and its people. The migration wave to Europe in 2015 only deepened these attitudes and stereotypes. The so-called *Willkommenskultur*, personified by Angela Merkel on one side, and the similarly affected attitudes of a significant part of Visegrad leaders, media, and societies on the other, became a significant stimulus reinforcing these negative stereotypes. From my own experience of discussions in various parts of Germany, I can confirm that the image of the Visegrad Group, of Central Eastern Europe, and thus of Czechia as part of this region, has shifted significantly towards scepticism and negative stereotyping in the post-2015 period. Thus, the perception of the "bad Visegrad", and the "dark core of Europe" (Cabada 2021, 8; Walsch 2018) is in a way a continuation of the earlier negative perception of the "East" with its alleged economic but also cultural and value backwardness.

Czech politics faced a dilemma as to how much to prioritise or even absolutise Visegrad cooperation regarding the weakening of the positive image in the German environment and in the EU-15 environment in general. This decision was at the risk of contributing to further deterioration of Czechia's image in various Western discourses, including the German one. The first strong voices also appeared in 2015 calling for Czechia not to risk its reputation and position by cooperating with national populists in Hungary and Poland, and instead to focus clearly on ties with key EU-15 countries and especially Germany. To a large extent, the approach of the former director of the Institute of International Relations, Petr Kratochvíl (2016), was the initiating step in this matter. He raised the issue of a clear break with the Visegrad partners who had strayed from the path of liberal democracy. Kratochvíl formulated the "double bond" as the fundamental dilemma of Czech foreign policy and

European policy, with Germany on the one hand, a key neighbour and key economic partner, and on the other hand the cooperation with populists within the Visegrad Group. "The sustainability of the perception of Czech diplomacy as a bridge between German and Visegrad politics, however, seems questionable to Kratochvíl, especially in light of the internal political developments in Poland and Hungary" (Urbanovská 2017, 84), which is why he prefers strategic cooperation with Germany, which he describes as democratic, liberal, and economically successful in apparent contrast to the Visegrad countries mentioned above.

Kratochvíl's position was in line with the values of politicians and other participants in the discourse on Czech regional, European and foreign policy, who fundamentally rejected the transformation of the Visegrad format into an anti-liberal populist anti-integration project based on personalised management and mobilisation activities against "Brussels" and liberal democracy (Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi 2021, 14-16). Indeed, the latter was also perceived in the broader context of the Czech foreign policy's break with the human rights tradition and the turn towards pragmatic economic diplomacy (Cabada 2020). Kratochvíl's most prominent opponents, in contrast, were the supporters of Viktor Orbán or Jarosław Kaszyński, led by Andrej Babiš, Tomio Okamura, and some visible politicians of the Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS), such as Jan Zahradil. Both analysts (e.g., Vít Dostál in a public polemic with Kratochvíl in 2016; 2017) and diplomacy sought to overcome the dilemma of "Germany or Visegrad".

This discussion on Czech-German relations can thus be seen as another "field" in a more general debate on Czech national interests, on the Czech position in Europe, on the priorities the country wants to pursue in its foreign policy, etc. In other words, in the case of relations with Germany, it is even more true than in any other case that we must not only consider the bilateral and primarily intergovernmental level but must always keep in mind other levels of analysis, whether sub-state or multilateral. In this brief reflection, the focus will only be on the bilateral and multilateral levels, in the latter case specifically with regards to the European Union and NATO. It is of importance, however, to stress once again how important the sub-state level is for strengthening Czech-German relations and the necessary building of trust.

Czech-German Relations Before 2021

One of the key elements of the rhetoric of Czech politicians and diplomats after 1990, and even more so after 1997, was the notion that relations between the two countries have never been better. I fully agree with this general statement, although some prominent active participants have at times expressed and continue to express condemnation or prejudice against Germany. Mainstream

politicians on both sides of the border have been able to build solid partnership relations based on the Good Neighbour Agreement between Czechoslovakia and Germany of February 1992 and, above all, on the basis of the Czech-German Declaration on Mutual Relations and their Future Development of January 1997. Among the Czech political parties, one should mention the Social Democrats, whose partner party in Germany has repeatedly been a member of federal governments, as well as the parties operating together with the dominant Christian parties, the Christian Democratic Union (*Christlich Demokratische Union*, CDU) and the Christian Social Union (*Christlich-soziale Union*, CSU) within the European People's Party fraction (TOP 09 and the Christian and Democratic Union - Czechoslovak People's Party, KDU-ČSL). There are also, however, significant activities aimed at strengthening good relations with Germany within the ODS, which has broken away from the EPP-ED by establishing a new fraction of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

Czech Prime Minister Petr Nečas' speech in the Bavarian state parliament in February 2013 can rightly be considered the imaginary peak of building good Czech-German relations. It was followed in the next decade by similar speeches and activities of politicians from the KDU-ČSL (Minister of Culture in Bohuslav Sobotka's government, Daniel Herman), TOP 09 and, after the change in the composition of the government coalition after the elections in 2021, also most of the parties in the government of Petr Fiala. Even Petr Pavel himself joined these activities very intensively after taking office as President. That came in sharp contrast to both of his predecessors, whose approach was mostly defined by disinterest or even aversion towards the German political mainstream, and who cultivated relations with entities destabilizing German liberal democracy.

If one takes Nečas' visit to Bavaria as the imaginary peak of building mutual trust, in practical terms these symbolic steps resulted in the launch of a strategic dialogue between the two countries. A declaration on the establishment of this strengthened form of partnership was signed in early July 2015 by Foreign Ministers Lubomír Zaorálek and Frank-Walter Steinmeier. The joint statement of the two politicians emphasised that this dialogue is a new framework for bilateral relations and brings a new quality and extent of cooperation. Strengthening mutual trust and ensuring a continuous exchange of information is a key objective of this strategic dialogue by both sides. Although the dialogue is primarily intergovernmental, the need to involve representatives of parliaments, local governments, or civil society in relation to a specific topic is emphasised. Although the "dilemma" of Czech foreign policy and European policy "Germany or Visegrad" has been presented above, the noticeable symbolism of the petrification of Visegrad cooperation as primarily intergovernmental should also be stressed, and the emphasis on multi-level Czech-German cooperation.

The Czech-German Strategic Dialogue was gradually institutionalised under the coordination of the German Ambassador to Czechia and the Deputy of the European Section of the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs of Czechia. It was also structured into more than ten working groups, which can be characterised by their focus on specific sectoral or public policies (energy and climate protection, transport, security and defence, foreign and European policy, agriculture, research and development, culture, labour market and dual education, health and drugs, etc.). After less than five years of formal existence of the strategic dialogue, this framework was confirmed in September 2019 with a new *communiqué* by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs Tomáš Petříček and Heiko Maas.

As in other areas, the normal processes in bilateral Czech-German relations were disrupted in the context of the global coronavirus pandemic after February 2020. The measures taken were aimed at limiting the spread of the disease and included, among other things, border closures between the two countries, which had a negative impact on the economy and other areas of social life. The restriction of cross-border mobility of people, commuting daily to work abroad, significantly weakened activities in the border regions of Bavaria and Saxony. Moreover, these developments need to be placed in the broader context of the development of Czech-German relations and Czech foreign policy and European policy after the arrival of the government led by Andrej Babiš. He has cast himself in the role of the dominant figure in the Czech government's European policy and, along with cooperation with other Visegrad leaders, has produced populist attacks against "Brussels", which he has often identified with Germany. This became very evident in the case of one of the key policies of the EU, *i.e.*, climate protection policy, when he repeatedly attacked the "German climate madness". Alongside Chancellor Merkel (who was seen as a symbol of a flawed pro-immigration policy), the second target of the Central European populists was the new President of the European Commission, the German politician Ursula von der Leyen. In the days of the pro-Chinese and pro-Russian President Zeman and his minority partner in Babiš's government (the Social Democrats), Tomáš Petříček and his pro-European, pro-German and anti-Russian course were completely marginalised. At that time, the pro-Chinese actors Lubomír Zaorálek and Jan Hamáček played the leading role. Consequently, Czech-German relations were somewhat relegated to the back burner and were maintained from the Czech side primarily by the opposition parties TOP 09 and KDU-ČSL.

The weakening of the intensity of relations between the two countries is undoubtedly evidenced by the fact that the German Chancellor did not visit Czechia in 2020 and 2021; in July 2020, Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer visited Prague and in August 2020, Justice and Consumer Protection Minister Christine Lambrecht visited Prague and Terezín; and in August 2021, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier visited Prague and Ústí nad Labem. Therefore, we state that Czech-German relations have been overshadowed by major international and European crises. Moreover, the fact that the two countries have disagreed on several key issues has had a significant impact on these relations before 2022: "for example, the debate on the future, enlargement and reform of the EU, or the level

of military support for Ukraine. In 2015, Czech and German societies were on opposite sides of the argument over the so-called migration crisis. Moreover, the uncoordinated border closures in the pandemic years 2020 and 2021 temporarily interrupted contacts between the two countries. Russia's aggression against Ukraine then revealed different geopolitical perspectives - Prague was active, Berlin hesitant." (Eberle, Lang and Handl 2022).

Czech-German Relations During Major Challenges

The turn of 2022 brought significant changes to Europe and to the internal and bilateral policies of Czechia and Germany. In the context of internal political developments, the change in the governmental constellation and the building of the so-called semaphore coalition was undoubtedly crucial for Germany, as was the departure of long-time Chancellor Angela Merkel. As already mentioned, Angela Merkel was perceived on the one hand (especially by Central European politicians with a tendency towards populism) as a symbol of what they considered to be the negative development of European politics, and on the other hand she had built personal relationships in the Czech environment due to her research stay at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in the mid-1980s. There was also a fundamental change in the governmental constellation at the turn of 2022 in Czechia. The minority government of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, consisting of his ANO 2011 movement and the Czech Social Democratic Party (which relied on the support of the communists and, not infrequently, the radical and nativist Freedom and Direct Democracy movement of Tomio Okamura), was replaced by the government of Petr Fiala.

These changes did not offer much potential, however, for positive change. The long-standing link between German and Czech Social Democrats was broken by the marginalisation of Czech Social Democrats (*Česká strana sociálně demokratická*, ČSSD), which became a non-parliamentary party. Instead, two parties of a Christian Democratic orientation were represented in the Czech government and had no partner in the new German government, in which the Unionists moved into opposition. As Eberle, Lang and Handl (2022) accurately summarise: "a coalition of five centre-right parties has emerged in Prague, linking the 'Eurorealist' ODS party of Prime Minister Petr Fiala with pro-European partners, although its emphasis is clearly conservative and Atlanticist. In terms of party politics, there were no significant points of contact between the two governments". The strongest ideological links between the two new governments are seen in parties with an environmental profile, namely the German *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* and the Czech Pirate Party, which are partners at the European level in the Greens/European Free Alliance faction.

Despite the relatively little programmatic agreement or different perceptions of priorities, a significant dynamic in the relations between the new governments in Berlin and Prague can be observed. The

Russian aggression against Ukraine and the search for a new consensus became crucial stimuli to improve communication, not only in terms of the relationship between the two countries and the EU as a whole to the Putin regime but also because of the need for rapid and coordinated modification of key strategies, especially energy. The fact that no major Czech politician, not even the major mass media, has resorted after February 2022 to criticizing Germany's focus on Russian gas as a temporary energy source in the transition to zero-emission energy is extremely positive news in this context.

This does not mean, however, that geopolitical and geo-economic criticism of the Russian-German Baltic Sea pipeline concept, based primarily on the environment of Central Eastern Europe, was not justified. It is in the field of energy, however, that rapid and coordinated action has been seen. Economic ministers signed a declaration on energy security and solidarity, and additionally the capacity of the TAL pipeline between Italy and Germany was expanded. These measures are aimed at increasing the supply of Czech refineries and gradually eliminating dependence on Russian oil. An additional strategy is to allow Czechia to use the capacity of the planned German liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal, in which Prague is expected to acquire a direct stake (Eberle, Lang and Handl 2022).

The final goal was formally met in November 2023, when the Czech government, in cooperation with the ČEZ Group, contracted a capacity of two billion cubic meters of gas per year from the Stade terminal near Hamburg starting in 2027, which is more than a quarter of Czechia's current consumption (ČTK 2023). Both governments have made a declaration to further strengthen connectivity and build a new strategic infrastructure including smart grids, decentralisation of the energy market, strengthening energy efficiency and the use of hydrogen, in which Germany is considered a pioneer, especially in rail transport. All of these sectors are only part of a larger whole of interconnected economies (Havlíček and Lang 2022, 3-4).

Mention has already been made of the symbolism of Prime Minister Nečas' appearance in the Bavarian state parliament. The speech aimed at projecting the future of European integration, delivered by the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz at Charles University on 29 August 2022, can be presented and interpreted in a similar style. The speech is seen, among other things, as clear confirmation of a turnaround in German policy towards Russia, *i.e.*, the end of the period of "hesitation" and Germany's clear stand for the interests of Ukraine, including the need to strengthen European defences against Russia's aggressive aspirations. His speech offered a distinctly geopolitical dimension, which nevertheless did not abandon the Union's value orientation as a community of democratic states. He supported the idea of further enlargement of the Union, including Ukraine, Moldova and possibly Georgia. He also strongly supported the idea of majority voting in the EU Council in new areas, including foreign and security, and tax policy. He outlined further support for the general idea of innovative, knowledge-based, and technology-based integration (Scholz 2022).

The speech undoubtedly followed the basic goals of the new German government as presented after its accession, *i.e.*, a strongly pro-European policy, including deepening European integration and strengthening the "strategic sovereignty" of the EU (Eberle, Lang and Handl 2022). These intentions are not in line with the priorities of the Czech government and its Euro-realist and Atlanticist currents in the ODS (and even less in line with the current Czech parliamentary opposition, which tends towards anti-Brussels populism or directly threatens with the idea of Czexit). One can also see, however, themes that are fully in line with the declared needs and priorities of the government, as well as with the priorities of ANO 2011, if it prefers the original programmatic (knowledge economy, energy security, etc.).

As Eberle, Lang and Handl (2022) state, one can observe "pragmatism and constructive cooperation" between the German and Czech governments, which were ideologically and programmatically quite different, after 2022, which "contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of unpretentious normality". The crisis related to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as well as the Czech Presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2022, have significantly intensified direct contacts between the two governments. In addition to August, Chancellor Scholz also visited Prague as part of the informal EU summit in early October. The Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Protection, Robert Habeck, also visited Prague twice in 2022. In addition, the Czech government also welcomed the Minister of Transport and Digitalisation, Volker Wissing, and last but not least the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Annalena Baerbock, who visited Lidice in addition to Prague. During her visit, a new work programme for strategic dialogue for the period 2022-2024 was signed by the Minister and her partner Jan Lipavský. The Prime Ministers of the two Free State governments bordering Czechia, Markus Söder (Bavaria) and Michael Kretschmer (Saxony), also travelled to Prague at the end of June 2022.

Security and defence issues have become a completely new impulse for cooperation. Czechia has not made any significant use of the German arms industry. "A fundamental breakthrough" (Urbanovská and Novotný 2023, 86) in this respect was the agreed "handover of 14 German Leopard 2 tanks to the Czech army to compensate for Czech deliveries of Soviet-made tanks to Ukraine" (Eberle, Lang and Handl 2022). "In October 2022, Czech Ministry of Defence officials signed a series of contracts under which Rheinmetall was to buy decommissioned Leopard tanks from the German and Swiss armies and make them operational for the Czech military" (Urbanovská and Novotný 2023, 86-87).

Analysts also see the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), the first outlines of which were presented by Olaf Scholz during his speech in Carolina, as an important impulse for cooperation between the two countries. The German Chancellor announced "massive German investment in air defence in the coming years, and also that the resulting capabilities would be exploitable in the NATO framework. He offered that Germany would conceive its air defence so that other Central European, Baltic and Scandinavian countries could become involved if interested" (Urbanovská and Novotný 2023, 89).

All recent analyses note the strengthening of cooperation between the two countries in security and defence policy. Eberle, Lang and Handl (2022) thus see Germany as a partner "without which an effective EU defence policy to strengthen NATO in Europe is impossible. Given its planned investments in armaments, the Federal Republic could play a central role both in strengthening NATO and in building a stronger EU defence role. Germany will not be, however, a European leader or hegemon in the future either. It could play a role as a long-term contributor to strengthening EU security and defence policy without weakening transatlantic ties". This formulation suggests a difference between the French and German positions, particularly towards the United States. The authors also emphasise that cooperation with Germany opens up space for rebalancing the Franco-German engine and offers the possibility of involving not only Czechia but the whole of Central Europe more in the shaping and direction of European defence and security policy. "From the Czech perspective, Germany is often a source of frustration. But unlike the US, it is not in danger of losing interest in Europe or European security. Unlike France, Germany has a genuine interest in lasting and stable cooperation in relation to Central and Eastern Europe" (Eberle, Lang and Handl 2022).

The analyses presented in this regard support a much broader Czech-German cooperation. Havlíček and Lang (2022, 4) call on Czech politicians to engage much more intensively in a dialogue about the future of Europe and the concept of strategic autonomy, thereby bringing the German government and its priorities closer to them. They also see great scope for cooperation in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. The position of the Czech actors and the Visegrad Group has long been based on support for the aspirations of the candidate countries, both from the Western Balkans and, more recently, Ukraine and Moldova. This is precisely the situation in which the Czech policy could serve as a role model, bringing its experience of EU accession and the EU-15 to the candidate countries, and alleviating fears of further enlargement, particularly in German politics, economic actors, the media, and the public. Germany is more supportive of further enlargement than e.g., the Netherlands or France, and the Czech-German dialogue could thus serve as a tool to break down prejudices, including the tendency of some governments or societies to applaud the Putin regime and consider building new geopolitical blocs and barriers in Europe.

Conclusion – An Agenda for Czech-German Relations

As demonstrated in the previous section of the analysis, the last two years have seen a substantial intensification of Czech-German relations, despite the different ideological foundations of the two new governments. The substantive and pragmatic approach of both governments has created room for enhanced cooperation in a number of policy sectors. Germany's role as Czechia's largest trading

partner has been expanded by extensive cooperation in the energy sector, including the transport of energy raw materials, as well as a new dimension of cooperation in defence capacity building. At the same time, additional already established cooperation frameworks, including important cultural and linguistic initiatives, have not been weakened. The public-diplomatic activities of German political foundations, the Goethe Institute, and Czech centres and individuals such as Tomáš Kafka or Jaroslav Rudiš have also strengthened the image of reciprocity, shared history and cultural togetherness. In this context we can mention the 2024 Prague Book Fair and Literary Festival, whose theme was German-language literature.

Both chambers of parliament and the newly elected President Petr Pavel are also contributing to the positive development of Czech-German relations at the intergovernmental level. During his first weeks in office, the President visited all the neighbouring countries of Czechia. During his visit to Berlin in March, he met with President Steinmeier and Chancellor Scholz. According to the President himself, the main topics of the talks included Ukraine, energy, and security. President Pavel welcomed Germany's move away from China and Russia. The President also stressed that he supports the idea of raising the Czech-German strategic dialogue from the ministerial level to the level of prime ministers. He said that he and his German counterpart had discussed the possibility of umbrella cooperation by "meeting once a year and doing a review of what we have succeeded or failed to do based on reports from our governments" (Lucovič 2023).

Up until the next parliamentary elections in both countries (probably in the autumn of 2025), the current development of Czech-German relations promises further deepening. At the same time, however, future elections and their results may pose serious challenges. As far as Czechia is concerned, the possible return of Andrej Babiš to the head of government (in the most dramatic scenario in a coalition with Freedom and Direct Democracy party (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*, SPD) would prompt a turn towards Babiš's natural partners in Slovakia (Robert Fico) and Hungary (Viktor Orbán). Even in Germany, however, continuity cannot be assumed. A weakening Social Democracy will in all likelihood not be the winner of the elections and there is a major question as to whether there will be room for renewed cooperation between the CDU/CSU and the German Social Democrats, which can no longer be described as a "grand coalition". Moreover, developments in the CDU and the CSU indicate changes in ideological paradigms, the aim of which is, among other things, to weaken the position of the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD), but which may also hide the possibility of cooperation with this formation. In this context, I view cooperation on the basis of the electoral alliance SPOLU in the European Parliament elections as an extremely useful tool for stabilising Czech-German relations, which, among other things, encourages Prime Minister Fiala and ODS as the dominant government party to seek a compromise between the positions of the EPP and the

ECR. The Czech political parties in government and in the EPP can play an important role in finding this compromise after the European Parliament elections and possibly also when the governmental constellation, in one or even both countries, changes after the next parliamentary elections.

Recommendations:

- Continuously introduce the Czech-German strategic dialogue agenda into the government agenda and strengthen cooperation with the CDU and CSU.

- Through the SPOLU coalition, seek opportunities for constructive cooperation between the EPP and ECR fractions at both the domestic and European level in areas of common interest.

- Use the electoral alliance SPOLU to balance and seek consensus between the EPP and the ECR, including for the European Parliament elections.

- Integrate the priorities of the Czech-German strategic dialogue at all political levels, from local to European, and strengthen mutual cooperation.

- Promote Czech-German educational and cultural activities, including support for teaching of German in Czechia and, conversely, Czech in the border districts of Bavaria and Saxony.

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Chapter 4

The Role of External Actors and Democratic Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe: A Systematic Overview

Lucie Tungul and Ondřej Filipec

Abstract: For several decades now, democratic backsliding has been a subject of academic interest. In recent years, this topic has gained new momentum in relation to Central and Eastern Europe, especially in connection with the developments in Poland and Hungary. This is at the core of an analysis where intra-political development is assessed in the context of EU influence. The main aim is to explore the key issues covered by the academic literature dedicated to democratic backsliding and the role of external actors in this process. We are interested in identifying the main drivers behind the limited role of external institutions and looking at the proposed solutions. The importance of the research is highlighted by the fact that democratic backsliding might, over the long term, not be exclusively linked to Poland and Hungary but might as well become a threat in other countries in the region.

Keywords: democratic backsliding, Central Europe, conditionality, institutions, external actors

Introduction

Influencing stability and the nature of regimes from the outside is not a new phenomenon. There are hundreds of cases documented in which foreign powers or international organisations have managed processes amid the changing in stability of regimes in both directions: towards democracy consolidation and build-up, or an anti-democratic shift and decline (Levin 2016 and 2019; Shulman and Bloom 2012). While we have accepted that both the domestic and external factors influence the democratisation and illiberal tendencies in the reform countries, recent works have shown that the connection is far more complex than often believed and theorised (Tolstrup 2014; Obydenkova and Libman 2015).

Assuming that external actors *can* affect democratic performance in the target countries, we acknowledge that the impact of the external dimension on the political development in a target country rarely becomes a prime mover and that its relative strength changes over time. Scholars such as Börzel and Lebanidze (2017) have argued that we need to more systematically understand, not only the impact

of external actors like the EU and Russia on the target countries and the role of the local domestic actors, but also how the political and economic interests of the domestic actors influence the strategies of the external actors. We have to understand clearly what is happening inside these countries in order to refine our understanding of their (de-) democratisation paths. We can then establish which variables are important and how the causal mechanisms work – uncovering the positive and negative effects of external actors in temporal and spatial terms. This article deals with democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe, with a special focus on external actors. The main aim of the article is to reveal the tools and the ways in which external actors (mainly EU institutions) interact with Hungary and Poland (represented mainly by the governments). This exploration is based on a comprehensive and systematic literature overview of more than 200 resources. These were collected by the authors in the early months of 2023 and deal with democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. Alongside the academic databases, specific journal archives in Czechia, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary were examined.

Democratic Performance and External Actors

The assertion that the international dimension is important for democratic transition links domestic politics with the international context and analyses to what extent the international context matters - in *what way and how much* external actors influence domestic regime change in their target countries. Diffusion literature has focused most on the regional and global surroundings that influenced democracy promotion and its positive effects (Pridham, Herring and Sanford 1994; Linz and Stepan 1996; Kubicek 2003; Levitsky and Way 2005; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Tolstrup 2014b), while other scholars have looked at specific external actors. More recently, authors have pointed to the positive western bias and increased attention has also been directed at autocratic regimes and their possible role in promoting autocracy (Bogolomov and Lytvynenko 2012; Obydenkova 2022; Ademmer, Delcour and Wolczuk 2016; Ambrosio, Hall and Obydenkova 2022; Shyrokykh 2022a; 2022b).

The role of external actors in democratisation has been widely researched in the Europeanisation literature. Europeanisation has been defined broadly as a process where countries adopt the broad scope of both formal and informal European Union (EU) rules (see for example: (Ladrech 2004; Ladrech 1994; Buller and Gamble 2002; Cowles, Caparaso, and Risse 2001; Olsen 2002; Radaelli 2004; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Bulmer 2008) and "redefine their interests and behaviour to meet the imperatives, norms and logic of EU membership" (Featherstone and Kazamias 2014, 13). The EU's conditionality creates an opportunity structure (dis)empowering particular sections of the

target state's society (Featherstone and Kazamias 2014; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005) and requires credibility of commitment, resources and legitimacy (Risse and Babayan 2015). Domestic politics, the distribution and relative power of veto actors in society, the actors' expectations, societal conditions and the domestic security situation play a vital role (Dandashly 2018; Risse and Babayan 2015). The domestic elites "shape what the EU can do" (Dandashly 2018, 77). The empowered groups can use the EU conditionality to reinforce their position in the domestic system and limit the power of the veto players. The Europeanisation literature still has significant gaps in its understanding of the role of external factors in democracy promotion and its mechanisms. The target countries are exposed to a number of external and internal forces – globalisation, international organisations, change in public perceptions and expectations, in social norms, values, beliefs – and it is hard to specify the role the EU plays in this process.

In their seminal work, Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2011) proposed three perspectives for examining the EU's external democracy promotion: linkage, leverage and governance. Linkage is focused on support for the societal conditions for democracy including democratic actors, leverage was defined by political conditionality which emerged in the 1990s and was linked to the Eastern enlargement, and finally governance aimed to promote democracy through policy-specific functional cooperation and became more pronounced with the launch of the EU neighbourhood policy in the early 2000s. The outcome depended on the EU versus regional illiberal powers leverage defined by the credibility of commitment, resources and legitimacy and the economic and security linkages between the target states and the EU. The regional illiberal powers (Börzel 2015; Risse and Babayan 2015; Börzel 2015; Börzel and Lebanidze 2017) argued that the EU's ability to support democratisation was more effective in countries where the EU acted consistently and where the target country had domestic elites and active civil society supporting democratic reforms or resisting an illiberal backlash. The existence of pro-democratic actors, that have internalised liberal norms, were strong enough to push for reforms, and had resources to introduce domestic change, were crucial for the effectiveness of the EU conditionality thus, the EU's transformative power because the EU could empower liberal but also illiberal forces (cross-over empowerment) in the target countries enhancing or stabilizing illiberalism.

In relation to the EU, various institutions have been involved in the processes related to democratic backsliding. Studies on the EU influence stress the values enshrined in Article 2 Treaty on the European Union and ill-working mechanism of their enforcement while referring to the *de lege ferenda* options (Kochenov, Magen and Pech 2016; Pech and Scheppele 2017; Ágh 2018; Theuns 2020), often in connection with article 7 TFEU (Theuns 2020). Within the conducted analyses, the European Commission and European Parliament are at the heart of this process, which is often put

into a comparative perspective highlighting the different attitudes of these institutions toward Poland and Hungary (Pech and Scheppele 2017; Ágh 2018; Zamecki and Glied 2020).

In relation to the European Commission, a valuable contribution was made by Sonja Priebus who provided an assessment of the available tools and their effectiveness in the context of management and enforcement approach. There is the issue of multiplication of tools of a similar kind, which are aimed at dealing with consequences but rarely with the causes (Priebus 2022). In line with this finding, some authors claim that failure in effective treatment from the European Commission is embedded in the institutional nature of the institution, which is too linked to technocratic legalism instead of ideological pluralism. As a result, depoliticisation of the process provides ground for populism and ties the hands of the Commission (see Oleart and Theuns 2023).

The position of the European Parliament has been well analysed in the context of inter-political processes related to ideological preferences and partial interests. Both ideology and party affiliation played important roles in shaping the attitude of the European Parliament. The results of Meijers and van der Veer (2019) are not surprising; the parties connected (by affiliation or ideology) to Hungary and Poland had a tendency to avoid voting critical towards their democratic backsliding (Meijers and van der Veer 2019). The institutions were more active, however, and Poland was considered a more significant player than Hungary. This was also valid for the intergovernmental institutions. Valuable insights were provided by Peter Oliver and Justine Stefanelli (2016) who highlighted the hesitance of the EU Council to mitigate democratic backsliding in the case of Hungary and Poland and the reasons behind a different process. Kochenov, Magen and Pech (2016) criticised the Council's selected tools and lack of initiative. Apart from the EU, other organisations adopted policies to prevent democratic backsliding. The Venice Commission, an expert body of the Council of Europe, addressed various key issues with reference to Poland and Hungary, but failed to manage a unified opposition (see, for example, Cameron 2020; Turkut 2021).

We have recently also seen growing attention paid to autocracy promotion by external illiberal actors – or perhaps better countervailing democracy promotion (Burnell 2006; Obydenkova and Libman 2015; Tolstrup 2014a; Dragneva and Hartwell 2022; Risse and Babayan 2015; Vanderhill 2013; Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2020). In Europe, the major point of attention has been Russia and its possible role in helping other countries suppress democracy or promote their authoritarian tendencies. Ambrosio (2007) has argued that Russia was weakening the liberal performance of its neighbours using three external strategies: bolstering the illiberal regime (Belarus), subverting the democratizing regime (Ukraine) and promoting authoritarian norms internationally (Shanghai Cooperation Organization).

Tolstrup (2009) defined, in contrast, Russia's actions in the Near Abroad by its two general approaches: the policy of *managed stability* promoted in countries which were not on the path of democratisation (such as Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan), and the policy of *managed instability* typical for countries that were consolidated democracies integrated with the West or countries that were expressing a commitment to values and norms of democracy and western integration (Moldova, Ukraine). In case of the latter, Russia supported the pro-Russian candidate by political, economic and media support and, where applicable, ethnic conflict or secessionism (Tolstrup 2009; Obydenkova and Libman 2015). It also tried to increase the countries' economic dependency (including embargo and financial destabilisation) on Russia increasing their already existing economic and political fragility. The resulting decline in security and political and economic stability that Russia actively promoted a) decreased the public support for democratic reforms and b) made the countries look unstable and unfit for integration with the West - a weaker prospect of association or membership decreased the EU's interest in the target country and therefore also the push for further reforms and the credibility of the West as a partner (Ambrosio 2007; Tolstrup 2009; Obydenkova and Libman 2015).

Attention should be paid to how the domestic elites respond to the activities of the external actors, but also the bottom-up approach when the elite strategically align with external actors to promote their political preferences or as a survival strategy. Domestic factors continue to be far more important, in hindering promotion of democracy, than active promotion of illiberalism by illiberal external actors. The domestic factors determine how the target state responds to the incentives provided by the democracy and non-democracy promoters and from whom they are most likely to accept help (Börzel 2015). If democratisation threatens the regime and the external incentives are limited, a qualitative change is unlikely. The anti-democratic forces might seek the support of the illiberal regime to counterweigh the democracy promotion strategies of the domestic opponents – and they might even do it without the major power's active support. It also helps them sidestep the democratic conditionality of the external democratic actors. Just as with non-democratic actors, the democratic actors primarily follow their geostrategic interests, which might clash with the proclaimed democracy promotion. The convergence or collision of the democratic and non-democratic actors' strategic interests is an important factor.

The response of the Western democracy promoters to the illiberal regime's activities in the target countries is another important factor. The EU's response to such policies in its neighbourhood depended on two factors: stability concerns and the strategic importance of the illiberal regime (Börzel 2015; Risse and Babayan 2015). Concerns about uncontrolled migration, terrorism, organised crime and energy security or economic preferences could cause discrepancies between the official proclamations of broad political conditionality and the implementation of the policy undermining the EU's ability to promote democracy

and rule of law (Lengger 2012; Dandashly 2018; Börzel 2015; Börzel and Lebanidze 2017). While the EU defined itself as a norm rather than an interest driven entity, it repeatedly demonstrated that it was willing to partially accommodate Russia's concerns and cooperate with Russia in some specific policy fields, especially energy (Youngs 2017; Casier 2020). This tendency was only valid up until the point when the current regime becomes a greater risk to stability than change. Once the illiberal regime became a security threat per se, the dilemma became weaker.

The assumption that democratic external actors lead to democratisation and illiberal external actors lead to a illiberalism is over simplistic. There is nothing automatic about democracies promoting democracy or illiberal actors acting as democracy obstacles (Tolstrup 2009; Wolff, Spanger and Puhle 2013; Obydenkova and Libman 2015). Promoting democracy or illiberalism may bring unintended consequences – they may empower non-democratic forces by creating access to political competition or the liberal pro-democratic ones. Just as illiberal regimes might in the end support the pro-democratic forces in the target countries if it suited their interests, the West might unintentionally support illiberal powers or illiberal outcomes (Risse and Babayan 2015). Using the term "authoritarian resistance" (Way 2005; Levitsky and Way 2006; Ambrosio 2007; Burnell 2006), the relevant literature has investigated how democracy promotion can cause the opposite outcome and how the illiberal forces in the countries push back (often doing so outside of their own countries). Börzel (2015, 527) labelled this situation "crossed-over empowerment". The intended and unintended influences are difficult to identify and analyse because our ability to understand the motivations is limited and often leads to expert speculations (Obydenkova and Libman 2015). This is more problematic in the autocratic regimes which are less transparent than democracies, but even then the intended actions can be masked behind unintended consequences including business matters conflict over property trade relations, etc. or the unintended results might actually be presented as if they were intended.

Towards an Effective Solution?

The solution seems to be a mixture of attitudes. First, the application of sanctions is accompanied by support for domestic actors. Conditionality seems to be the key to integration and adaptation (De Ridder and Kochenov 2011). Theuns (2020) advocates conditionality, for example, and the use of positive and negative stimuli at the same time. While sanctions hit without a negative reverse effect, pro-democratic support should be supported (positive and negative arm), or as stated by Sedelmeier (2016) – pressure and persuasion. Second, the key in this process seems to be enhancing the awareness of citizens that some actions lead to consequences (sanctions). Additional authors highlight the necessary correct combination of the right tools, instead of relying on one single tool (Priebus 2022). Other studies emphasised the management of the domestic crisis which might

produce a vital environment for populist (anti-EU) criticism and reconstruction of existing tools as a process of integration strategy (Ágh 2018). Some authors highlight the coordination of actions or institutions (Pech and Scheppele 2017) and changing the attitude of the Commission towards a fuller and healthier concept of democracy, based on ideological pluralism instead of a legal technician (Oleart and Theuns 2023). Some potential can also be found in case of the increased effectiveness of the legal tools associated mainly with the infringement procedure, however this step alone seems to be of limited significance (Blauberger and Kelemen 2017). Finally, it is important to mention that undemocratic actors cooperate with the aim of undermining the supranational arena and limiting the sanctioning capacities. They learn this in the form of transfer of democratic backsliding policies in relevant areas (justice reform, media reform or electoral process) and the example of the "other" is used for justification of domestic actions or to attack opponents and "the Brussels dictate" (cf. Holesch and Kyriazi 2022). Any cooperation at the EU level should take into account these supportive and synergic factors, which support the forces favourable to democratic backsliding and prevent an effective cure.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is evident that reforming EU primary law is not the key to effective mitigation of the democratic backsliding. It is an extreme issue that requires a long-term strategy and the redefinition of tools, which are now incorrectly applied. This is mainly the issue of the European Commission, the changing discourse in the Council, the systematic approach of the Court of Justice of the EU in applying infringement procedures, and the proactive role of the European Parliament, which might do more to respond to a coalition of backsliding states. Apart from the above-mentioned need for "de-rusting" tools used by the EU institutions, two other important conditions need to be met. First, it is the synergistic approach of the institutions and its tools accompanied by strategic communication aimed at explaining the steps conducted by the actors to prevent polarisation and the negative "fireback" effect of the EU policies. Second, an effective solution would require a departure from technocratic solutions into more politicised approaches, which will require specification of standards that should be met by the countries concerned. Finally, as Hungary and Poland are cooperating and learning from each other and other countries taking the illiberal turn, it is important "to measure" in the same way and apply the same measures in managing the dialogue, based on the principle of conditionality. Other than the EU's response to democratic backsliding, which has received a fair share of scholarly attention, increased attention needs to be paid to the undemocratic external forces. This is a challenging task because the motivations are more difficult to trace due to lower transparency. Another important venue missing in the current research is the well documented impact of business interests.

Recommendations:

- Change the attitude of the Commission towards ideological pluralism instead of legal technocratism. Combine various tools, instead of relying on one single tool.

- Accompany sanctions with support for domestic actors.

- Increase and improve research on the influence of undemocratic external actors. Their motivations are more difficult to trace due to lower transparency.

- Extend the research agenda to the impact of business interests in the target countries.

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Chapter 5

The 360-Degree Approach Unveiled: A Multi-Faceted Strategy Against Disinformation Threats

Zdeněk Rod

Abstract: Czechia has grappled with a surge in disinformation, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, hindering political processes. The adept actions of online disinformation spreaders and prolonged governmental inaction contribute to the challenge. While banning disinformation platforms is considered, it risks being perceived as state censorship, and education efforts face limitations, especially among working adults. Recognizing the emotional nature of individuals, the text advocates an innovative 360-degree approach that includes education, critical thinking, fact-checking, behavioural nudging, and strategic communication. This approach is holistic and universal and is applicable across the EU member states.

Keywords: disinformation, strategic communication, fact-checking, education, behavioural nudging, critical thinking, disinformation monitoring

Introduction

The European Union (EU) and its member states have been unsuccessfully grappling with the impact of disinformation, particularly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, for a long time, aiming to disrupt state establishments and democratic values and undermine people's trust in state institutions, politics or the media. Disinformation has been around for a long time. Massive disinformation campaigns were conducted, for example, during the Cold War. In the recent past, European observers could have noticed what kind of dangerous effect the impact of disinformation has based on the US presidential race between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, where disinformation campaigns deeply polarised Republican and Democratic voters, or how Russia sought to reshape public meaning in 2014 during the illegal annexation of Crimea.

The current disinformation campaigns mostly lack any logical coherence. Disinformers often spread false narratives justifying the brutal Russian war in Ukraine or anti-European Union narratives about the "Brussels dictate". Another series of disinformation narratives is expected before the 2024 European Parliament elections. When zooming in on Czech conditions, it is apparent that Czechia is currently being beset by various disinformation campaigns aimed to harm the reputation of Ukrainian

war refugees, delegitimise the current Ukrainian establishment or misinterpret governmental policies aiming to manage the impacts of energy and economic crisis.

Rapid technological development, globalisation of communication, ubiquitous Internet, and the power of social media platforms have resulted in a situation where disinformation messages can instantly target thousands of respondents' smartphones. Another technological challenge is represented by the so-called deepfake videos powered by recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI). One recent example was the 2022 deepfake video, likely spread by Russia as a continuation of its hybrid warfare, portraying Ukrainian President Volodomyr Zalenskyj's call to surrender. Current deep fake videos still face several shortcomings and are mostly easily recognizable, but this does not necessarily have to be true five years from now.

Disinformation can cause dangerous conditions that might get out of control if not managed promptly. Given all the perilous risks described above by various disinformation techniques, European governments have to rely on more than one or two approaches to counter disinformation since their weaknesses surround every counter-approach. Fact-checking is a critical tool, for example, but only sometimes effective. Fact-checking and rationally tackling disinformation is only sometimes efficient as humans are not generally rational as discussed below in the text (Rod 2022).

Given the complexity of disinformation, governments have to rely on various approaches to tackle disinformation. The chapter therefore underscores the need for a new, innovative 360-degree approach to countering disinformation, reflecting on thoughts from the book *Why We Believe Disinformation. Strategic Communication as a Possible Way out of the Vicious Circle* (Kolomazník, Rod and Sarvaš 2024). It combines several traditional and novel approaches, which can be used in short and long-term campaigns to counter malicious disinformation, and refers to a comprehensive perspective to counter disinformation. It focuses on education, critical thinking and fact-checking, behavioural nudging or technologies to detect deep-fake videos. It also advocates for strategic communication, which targets specific audience segments, focusing on those more amenable to changing their views.

Fig. 1: Design of the 360-Degree Approach to Counter Disinformation

Source: Author

To enter an unwanted future of this kind requires thinking out of the box of traditional approaches (see Rod 2021; Kolomazník, Rod and Sarvaš 2024). The 360-degree approach consists of several elements (see Fig. 1) and can only work if all elements of the approach are present. The following pages define each element in detail and address their strengths and weaknesses.

Fact-checking

Fact-checking is one of the primary and first methods to detect disinformation. Bateman and Jackson (2024), from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, argue that fact-checking can be an effective way to correct false beliefs about specific claims, especially for audiences that are not heavily invested in the partisan elements of the claims. In other words, fact-checking is a process of checking that all the facts in a piece of writing, a news article, a speech, etc. are correct (Cambridge Dictionary 2024).

Professional journalists primarily make use of fact-checking. The job of the journalist is to provide factually correct information to the audience by explaining the point of the problem. By doing so, they can also attempt to dismantle false narratives that have emerged in the public space to cultivate public debate. Fact-checking is more, however, than just the domain of journalists. For instance, in Czechia, fact-checking has been used by political parties, such as the governmental party TOP-09. During the Covid-19 pandemic, TOP-09 advocated for fact-checking to dismantle false narratives about the danger of vaccines (TOP-09 2020). Similarly, the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats at the Czech Ministry of Interior regularly debunks disinformation. Apart from political parties and state institutions, numerous think tanks or non-governmental organisations in Czechia, such as Demagog. cz or Manipulátoři.cz, seek to provide the public with correct information. Out of the Czech context, according to RAND Corporation (n.d.), a US research organisation, there are a hundred initiatives worldwide offering access to their tools for effective fact-checking. One of these is the Brussels-based organisation EUvsDisinfo – a team of experts who are part of the EU's diplomatic service.

Despite the fact that fact-checking is a key element to counter disinformation, it also faces several limitations. Decision-makers should not therefore completely depend on fact-checking, although promoting fact-checking may sound fancy. First, an analysis explaining what is wrong with the given disinformation usually cannot be short. The analyst has to explain and debunk the false narratives precisely. People tend to currently consume quick audio-visual messages on social media, and only a few people read hefty fact-checking reports. Strategic communication can help disseminate the message. In addition, fact-checking requires a great deal of time. Hence, analysts cannot handle all the disinformation that occurs.

Second, fact-checking assumes people are rational, but human behaviour is often non-conscious and not purely rational. While most decisions are functional, some could be more efficient and could be considered irrational. As behavioural scientists like Kahneman (2011) have demonstrated, people rely heavily on subconscious decision-making processes. Based on heuristic approaches tied to cognitive biases, factual argumentation may only sometimes lead to optimal decisions. Cognitive biases and mental shortcuts, violating logical rules, can enhance manipulation efficiency. Thus, its impact is limited if factual argumentation is not anchored in cognitive biases (Ramalingam 2022). Further studies have also proved the limited impact of fact-checking. People can reject the corrected information since it goes against their deep beliefs. Rejecting correct information consequently strengthens their so-called belief bias (Nyhan and Porter 2019; Thorson 2015). People at times follow the so-called herd mentality, when they unthinkingly copy and follow others, e.g., politicians, gurus, and celebrities. When they do this, they are influenced by emotion rather than independent analysis (Rod 2022).

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is another crucial aspect when countering disinformation. As Babii (2020) points out, possessing critical thinking involves staying mindful of the information encountered daily, assessing its authenticity, evaluating arguments, and avoiding misleading content. It entails rational thinking, incorporating evidence, and seeking additional sources. Critical thinking also involves reflection, where individuals assess their thoughts, acknowledge mistakes, and demonstrate a willingness to correct them. Critical thinking needs, however, rational thinking, requiring the so-called system two of our conscious brain[25], which is just 5% of brain capacity; the rest of emotions and intuitions run 95%. This process is slow and attempts to rationally evaluate every piece of information, and it also consumes a significant amount of energy in this process (Kahneman 2011). Hence, not everybody wants to think critically. Critical thinking can be taught at schools. The education system has to therefore support and deepen it. This is only sometimes the case in Czech public primary/secondary schools or high schools, where students mostly face frontal teaching and memorisation and rarely touch upon developing argumentation and contextual thinking. Nordic countries (mainly Sweden or Finland) might be an inspiration not only for Czechia, but also for the rest of the EU.

Critical thinking faces another small challenge. Adults do not sit at school desks and teachers cannot deepen their critical thinking on a daily basis. In addition, adults often lack time capacity; they have to work, take care of their children, etc., and they have only limited time left for further education. Although state institutions or non-governmental organisations can lead campaigns to raise awareness about critical thinking among adults, the result is uncertain since it is difficult to explain the basis of critical thinking in a nutshell to busy people. Last but not least, critical thinking requires a deep focus, which people often lack in a wave of permanent social media distractions. Again, as in the previous case, critical thinking supported by education is just one part and is not self-saving.

Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is another supporting tool that can help governments and state institutions counter disinformation narratives. Strategic communication can help citizens to navigate in a confusing jumble of various information platforms. In the past, people generally drew information from a few sources. At present, when we are "information overloaded", especially by consuming content on the Internet and social media, it is essential that a certain message be concise and reach a given audience. Logically, this goes hand in hand with the use of appropriate communication channels that have the best chance of reaching the intended recipient (Kolomazník, Rod and Sarvaš 2024).

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25   Kahneman (2011) distinguished between System 1 thinking, which is intuitive, and System 2 thinking, which is conscious and logical. [EN]

The Chief of the General Staff of the Czech Armed Forces, General Karel Řehka (2017), defined strategic communication as a complex communication process that seeks to plant a particular message in the target group's mind, whereby all the messages released had to be coherent and mutually supportive. Such communication can subsequently change people's behaviour, which is the desired goal of strategic communication. Another essential part is to use the strategic communication feedback to properly evaluate the campaign's effectiveness (Kolomazník, Rod and Sarvaš 2024).

Strategic communication is a valuable tool in the fight against misinformation. Imagine a situation where serious misinformation threatening the interests and reputation of a state is spread, for example, on social media. This kind of message can reach thousands of recipients in a matter of minutes. Therefore, the organisation in question has to have an effective strategic communication model in place (knowledge of the proper communication channels, awareness of its audience, and know-how as to what message needs to be conveyed), through which it can effectively negate the targeted and harmful disinformation narrative. Moreover, strategic communication sets the agenda, is proactive rather than reactive (Kolomazník, Rod and Sarvaš 2024).

The critical question is how to communicate strategically. The planning process begins with defining a long-term but achievable goal and understanding the current state, including the internal and external environments. Analysing the environment involves assessing knowledge, target groups, communication spaces, spending and relevant topics. The following steps include defining the communication strategy, adapting tactics based on the target audience, and determining effective channels and touchpoints. The communication matrix, specifying messages, media, and touchpoints, is crucial for effectiveness, considering the varying impact of the same message in different contexts. The implementation phase involves testing and learning, optimizing formats for different environments, and refining the media mix for diverse population groups. After optimizing the communication and media mix, the full implementation begins, with ongoing measurement of key metrics to ensure the desired effects are achieved. Being agile is crucial, allowing for adapting tactics, channels, or touchpoints based on evolving outcomes. If metrics prove insufficient for strategic goals, adjustments are made to ensure alignment with the overall objectives (Kolomazník, Rod and Sarvaš 2024). Fig. 2 displays the strategic communication process in a nutshell.

Fig. 2: Strategic Communication in a Nutshell
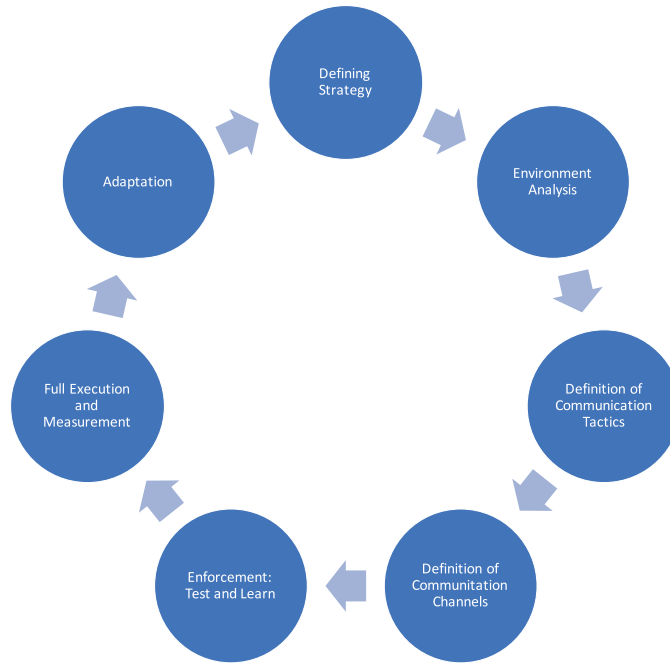
Source: Kolomazník, Rod and Sarvaš 2024

The effectiveness of strategic communication in influencing behaviour hinges on key factors. The intervention scale is first, reaching a substantial audience. The second is hit frequency, emphasizing the need for frequent, successful content delivery. Quality, relevant content that captures attention constitutes the third factor. The recency of interventions also matters, with recent actions holding more influence. Last, data plays a role in measuring behavioural changes, distinguishing between genuine shifts and mere declarations. The concept of a "sonic effect" is essential to achieve a rapid and impactful outcome. This involves swiftly reaching a significant portion of the target audience with high frequency, creating a tipping point for exponential message spread. This strategic approach, known as "flooding the media space", is employed by disinformers and can also be advantageous for legitimate strategic communication efforts (Kolomazník, Rod and Sarvaš 2024).

Czechia still needs to develop a strategic communication system. Some European countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) can serve as a valuable source of inspiration. The British government has developed a comprehensive strategic communication system and communicates via its Government

Communication Service, which employs around 7,000 employees. The UK teaches us that effective strategic communication requires vast human and financial resources, which some governments would prefer to accept (Kolomazník, Rod and Sarvaš 2024).

Behavioural nudging

Behavioural nudging is a modern approach closely aligned with strategic communication to counter disinformation. It is primarily utilised in the UK via its so-called behavioural insights team (i.e., the "nudge units"). The behavioural approach combines natural language processing, social listening tools, behavioural science, and neuroscience (Rod 2022). It is a unique combination that can support the creation of strategies and mechanisms to take preventive and reactive actions to limit the potential of different types of disinformation in the relevant context beyond online and offline media.

The behavioural approach is a reaction to disinformation campaigns whose creators understand how to manage the subconscious and the predictability of human behaviour. They create simple but sophisticated emotional mechanisms driving both credibility and rapid dissemination of disinformation—*i.e.*, conspiracy theories and hoaxes—and, ultimately, can alter human decisions and behaviour. The actions taken in response to disinformation in the last years, which are primarily based on political science, have demonstrated their minimal capability to address and suppress disinformation campaigns. For the successful impact of behavioural approaches, humans' emotional and irrational sides need to be tapped into to exploit the predictability of irrationality. In combination with behavioural science, modern technologies can be utilised to identify sources and create "nudges" that would help address both content and dissemination of hoaxes created in a "hybrid war"; all this is in relevant context/touchpoints. It can be argued that behavioural science can promote the truth to overcome the Bourdieusian saying "that if there is any truth, it is that truth is subject to struggle" (Rod 2022). It utilises an evidence-based approach, including fact-checking and critical thinking, but presents facts in a simple, very emotional way that the brain can process via system one.

The creators of disinformation are fully aware of how to exploit human cognitive biases. We can use the so-called asymmetric approach to combat this. The vast majority of Western countries, however, use traditional disciplines to counter disinformation, such as factual argumentation – let's call it the symmetric approach. Based on strategic observations, it is evident that when symmetrical approaches meet asymmetrical approaches, there is a relatively low chance that the symmetrical approach would outweigh the asymmetrical one. An analogous situation can be found in military strategy, which struggles to deal with asymmetric threats when deploying symmetric warfare initiatives. Although this example is imperfect, general observations can convey the main message to the reader (Rod 2022).

Considering the example above concerning the nature of symmetric and asymmetric approaches, the behavioural approach can be seen as a new tool for asymmetrically countering malicious disinformation by utilizing and targeting mechanisms preying upon the cognitive biases implicit in human nature. For example, traditional approaches generally explained the need for vaccination in the following way: "Getting vaccinated against Covid-19 can lower your risk of getting and spreading the virus that causes Covid-19. Vaccines can also help prevent serious illness and death. All steps have been taken to ensure that vaccines are safe and effective for people aged five years and older". The behavioural approach would rephrase the sentences above in the following way: "By getting vaccinated, you protect not only yourself, but also your loved ones". In the second example, being very careful when drawing up slogans is essential. A communication message such as "If you don't get vaccinated, you can die", for example, can create blowback and ignorance.

Ignorance embodies what is commonly labelled as the ostrich effect, akin to a behavioural pattern where, rather than addressing a problem, we choose to overlook it as if it were non-existent. The human propensity for self-delusion and the rejection of "unpleasant information" is remarkably pronounced. Furthermore, there is the notion of the blowback effect. Individuals disregard facts that clash with their beliefs and actively endeavour to deny them (Kolomazník, Rod and Sarvaš 2024).

Technological Instruments

Deep-fake videos have become a nightmare for disinformation analysts. It is a technology based on AI that essentially collects models of human behaviour and creates a model based on them. Combining images or videos that are available online can model how a person feels and behaves at any given moment. AI can create a believable character and gestures and voice, giving the impression of originality. In five or ten years, we might not be able to recognise whether a certain video, for instance a politician talking to the public, is fake or not. It could result in a state of permanent doubt.

Technological progress, including the integration of AI, offers a dual role in combating deepfakes, serving as both the catalyst for their emergence and a potential solution. Ongoing global research aims to develop innovative technologies capable of detecting manipulated media. Leading tech companies such as Intel are at the forefront, leveraging AI to create tools like FakeCatcher. Released in 2022, FakeCatcher claims a 96% accuracy rate in identifying fake videos by analysing human blood flow in up to 72 different detection streams. According to Intel's press release, unlike traditional methods, FakeCatcher focuses on authentic clues within real videos, emphasizing subtle "blood flow" in pixel analysis (Gregory 2023).

Monitoring of the Disinformation Landscape

Monitoring is the last crucial element of the 360-degree approach. If we want to counter disinformation, we have to understand them. Finding new disinformation platforms and trying to find out the latest disinformation narratives is crucial to effectively utilise all the elements of the 360-degree approach discussed above. There are several ways to analyse disinformation. One way is an old-school technique – manual content analysis. This means that the analysts browse multiple platforms (Facebook, X, Telegram, websites containing disinformation content, etc.) and analyse the narrative. Or the analyst can enjoy the advantages of technologies and AI and can scrap social media data. Scraping tools filter and automatically detect potential disinformation. Those tools also have the potential to analyse thousands of outcomes a day, something that humans could never do. This kind of tool is offered, for example, by the Slovak-based firm Gerulata Technologies, which provides various tools to analyse big data.

Conclusion

The surge in disinformation calls for an urgent and innovative response. The 360-degree approach, considering the limitations of isolated strategies, proposes a holistic strategy incorporating fact-checking, critical thinking, strategic communication, behavioural nudging, technological tools, and continuous monitoring. This comprehensive strategy, adaptable for short and long-term campaigns, is designed to counter existing disinformation and future challenges. Emphasizing a proactive stance, it navigates the intricate landscape of information warfare by addressing human irrationality, cognitive biases, and the rapid spread of disinformation. The chapter underscores the dynamic and multifaceted nature required to effectively combat disinformation, surpassing traditional methodologies, and embracing innovation and adaptability.

Recommendations

- Governments ought to embrace a comprehensive 360-degree approach to combat disinformation effectively.

- In times of relative calm, when a widespread disinformation onslaught does not besiege the state, it is advisable to implement all facets of the approach concurrently over the long term.

- During crises, it is imperative to deploy tools that can be immediately activated, such as strategic communication or behavioural nudging.

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Chapter 6

The Topic of Ukrainian Refugees in the Context of Information War

Ondřej Filipec

Abstract: The topic of migration has long resonated in public debates in European countries and has also been used by the disinformation scene for its emotional charge. This paper traces the experience with disinformation about migrants in Czechia since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, when Czechia received (per capita) the highest number of refugees from Ukraine. The presented development of disinformation narratives is based on a content analysis of eight disinformation websites and a thousand "chain e-mails". The present analysis reveals a high similarity of the communicated narratives to the migration crisis in 2015–2016 and a high complexity of the communicated topics, showing the universality of disinformation narratives for communicating future migration waves. The paper then concludes with several measures that can ultimately mitigate the impact of disinformation campaigns.

Keywords: migration, Czechia, disinformation, propaganda, Ukraine, refugees

Introduction

The topic of migration has long been exploited by populist parties and disinformation websites. While some use the emotional charge and the fear of migration to mobilise supporters and gain political capital, the disinformers use the choice of the topic to gain readers and strengthen their influence to change public opinion. In some ways, there is a synergy between the disinformation scene and populist groups, which deftly offer simple solutions to the threat of migration: from changing government and government policies to securing and closing borders, to leaving the EU and sending migrants back to their countries of origin. However, the consequences of these proposed changes are often not thought through, and their implementation would probably cause more problems than they would solve. The Brexit vote, in which migration played a significant role in voters' decisions, was a warning, despite the paradox that Britain had negotiated a number of exceptions to its migration policy in the EU. The issue of migration is therefore quite dangerous if it is used to stir up fear, anti-systemic attitudes and deepen Eurosceptic sentiment. This is even more important for countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which, unlike the countries of Southern Europe and the post-colonial powers, have

not had extensive experience of mass migration and have so far encountered the issue more from the perspective of transit countries.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 changed many things. Millions of Ukrainians, mostly women and children, fled the war to find safety in countries west of Ukraine's borders. In the case of some countries, including Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, this was an unprecedented wave in terms of the number and speed of refugee arrivals, which presented many challenges to manage, from allocating administrative capacity and providing a legal framework for assistance, providing material assistance to refugees, finding accommodation, providing education, access to the labour market and health care, to psychological support and language courses. One of the challenges accompanying the migration wave was the need to face disinformation in cyberspace, particularly in terms of disinformation websites, social networks, and the so-called chain e-mails, which aimed to damage and undermine support for these activities among citizens.

The main objective of this paper is to identify narratives that exploit the issue of Ukrainian refugees to promote an anti-immigration agenda; narratives that polarise societies and promote anti-systemic attitudes. The secondary aim is then to present recommendations that will support the prevention of these negative phenomena or possibly reduce their negative impact. Although this analysis is based primarily on the Czech environment and the Czech experience in the period from the beginning of the arrival of refugees from Ukraine at the end of February 2022 until 31 December 2023, the conclusions and recommendations are to some extent transferable to other countries, as long as specific national context is taken into account. In other words, the fight against disinformation and propaganda exploiting the topic of migration is not only the domain of Czechia but also of other countries where an information war is being waged in cyberspace[26] and which are facing the aspirations of populist groups.

The main method of research was content analysis of eight Czech disinformation websites (cz24. news; pravdive.eu; infokuryr.cz; necenzurovanapravda.cz; ac24.cz; svobodny-svet.cz and partly also Aeronet and Sputnik) and chain e-mails, which were collected into the database Thenidiel[27] by the civic association Czech Elves 2023 (*Čeští elfové*). In the period under review, from the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022 until 31 December 2023, the Thenidiel database contained approximately 1,000 unique e-mails related to migration from Ukraine. However, their number cannot be accurately determined, as it is only a fraction captured in people-to-people

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26   For the purposes of this text, the term information war is understood broadly, as a battle of true and false information, usually produced and deliberately disseminated by disinformation websites, fake social media accounts, individuals or groups of individuals who benefit economically or otherwise from its dissemination.
27   This is a database, where e-mails are entered by trained volunteers, who carefully check the content. The e-mails go through a multiple checking system and the content is accessible so that researchers can check the relevance of the inclusion.

e-mail communications. Their content sometimes only partially touches on Ukrainian migration, serving as a springboard for other topics. It is therefore difficult to determine when the content of an e-mail is still relevant and when it is not. This decision will thus always be somewhat arbitrary. Nevertheless, chain e-mails usually mirror the content of disinformation websites, and the summary of disinformation e-mails collected in the Thenidiel database offers enough material to reconstruct at least a rough outline of the development of the disinformation strategies concerning Ukrainian migration in Czechia.

Baseline Analysis

The topic of migration entered the public discourse more strongly with the migration crisis in 2015/2016 and culminated in a way with the adoption of the European Agenda for Migration and the Crisis Relocation Mechanism (European Commission 2015; Council Decision 2015/1523 of 14 September 2015). From the very beginning, this agenda was taken out of context by some political actors and some media and was simplified to "migrant quotas" and to the idea that "bad Brussels" was forcing member states to accept migrants, many whom were economic migrants and Muslims. For example, the chairman of the populist Freedom and Direct Democracy party (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*, SPD) spoke in the Chamber of Deputies about the "crazy pro-migration policy of Brussels" where people "do everything possible to allow as many migrants as possible to settle in our country" (Stulík and Krčál 2019). Other political parties and personalities also took a critical stance, which led to a significant securitisation of the topic. As an extensive analysis of media communication on the topic of refugees points out, some public service media also had more fundamental shortcomings: "The spread of the 'equation' that every refugee equals a Muslim and therefore a potentially dangerous terrorist is not an exception even in media that describe themselves as serious. Migrants are not portrayed as people in a critical life situation, but as 'masked propagators of Islam' who will attack European values" (Sedláková, Lapčík and Burešová 2016).

Virtually all political parties elaborated on the topic of migration in their election programmes so that migration become the most prominent issue for populist parties (Filipec 2017). The governments of some countries (Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania) then usually voted under public pressure against the crisis relocation mechanism in the Council of Ministers but were eventually outvoted. Despite this, the quotas were never met and as of 2017, Czechia had accepted only 12 refugees (ČT24 2017). A year later, the Czech Prime Minister, Andrej Babiš, told the Italian Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, that "Czechia will not accept a single migrant" (Český rozhlas 2018). The European Commission stepped into the whole affair and filed a lawsuit against Czechia, Poland, and Hungary,

asking the European Court of Justice to find a breach of duty by all three countries in 2020. It should therefore be noted that the "migration crisis" was rather imaginary in the context of the Visegrad Group countries. Citizens of these countries did not have direct experience with refugees (Jaworsky 2020). Nevertheless, this experience was exploited by the disinformation scene and populist parties, which framed migration and migrants in a negative context, especially as aggressive and maladjusted young men, Islamist radicals and terrorists who came to abuse the generous social system, commit violence and islamise the destination countries. In this way, society was polarised on the issues of migration, the support for European integration and the whole debate on migration was partly influenced by fear and artificially constructed xenophobia.

The Czech disinformation scene, like the one in Slovakia, is quite diverse. Around forty disinformation websites are operating in Czechia, spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda and narratives in line with the foreign policy priorities of the Russian Federation (Jacuch 2022). In addition, there are several political parties critical of Western orientation and European integration that use synergies with the disinformation scene to gain political support. Last but not least, there is a significant part of the population characterised by low media literacy (STEM 2019) and anti-systemic attitudes, which are often reinforced by post-communist nostalgia. For example, according to data from 2019, one in three Czechs over the age of 40 agrees with the statement that things were better under socialism (Post Bellum 2019). The combination of these factors then creates a favourable environment for the spread of disinformation, and thus the use of migration as an issue to polarise society and mobilise supporters of anti-system parties and groups. This negative phenomenon can then be related to other socio-economic aspects (e.g., unfavourable economic situation, social exclusion, the problem of low education, or the specific problem of foreclosures in Czechia), personal or social experience with migration, or the overall economic maturity of the state (Chaloupková and Šalamounová 2006).

Czech society is quite divided in its approach to democracy and the problem of disinformation and propaganda. In a 2023 survey (n = 1,047) only 31% of Czechs were satisfied with the functioning of democracy (either completely satisfied - 4% or rather satisfied - 27%), the rest were either completely dissatisfied (20%), rather dissatisfied (22%) or neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (27%). A total of 23% of Czechs saw the information war as an excuse for Western governments (including the Czech one) to restrict freedom of speech and critical media, and 9% said that Czechia was not affected by the information war at all. A full 28% of respondents did not know whether the information war also concerned Czechia or not (Ipsos 2023). Moreover, trust in government institutions has been relatively low (e.g., Horáková 2020). In other words, disinformation and propaganda have a relatively easy starting point in Czechia. The Ukrainian migration should be seen and evaluated against this context.

Between February 2022, when the Russian invasion began, and 31 December 2022, 3.5 million people left Ukraine. Most of them went to Germany, where 968,000 refugees were granted temporary protection, to Poland (961,000 people) and to Czechia, which granted temporary protection to 432,000 people. Czechia, with a population of 10.5 million, hosted the largest Ukrainian minority per capita (Plevák 2023). By March 2022 at the latest, the topic of Ukrainian refugees came to the forefront of disinformation media, social networks and chain e-mails that focused on the Russian justification of the invasion (for example, the existence of secret biolabs in Ukraine, where the US and Ukrainians were preparing new mutations of the Covid-19 virus, accusations that the US and the West provoked the war, alleged massacres of Russians in the Donbas, linking the Ukrainian regime with Nazism, etc.).

Migration Communication from Ukraine

Almost immediately after the invasion, "after intensive consultations with the state security forces and based on the government's recommendations", eight disinformation websites (aeronet.cz, protiproud.cz, ceskobezcenzury.cz, voxpopuliblog.cz, prvnízpravy.cz, czechfreepress.cz, exanpro.cz, and skrytapravda.cz) that were spreading pro-Kremlin narratives were blocked (News 2022 list). The step was taken by the Czech domain administrator (the sites are blocked by the domain registrar, e.g., CZ.NIC or Wedos and others using DNS records), and about 20 other disinformation websites were blocked by some Internet providers, including, for example, mobile operators (Prchal 2022). The block was eventually not legally supported and was terminated. The affected users interpreted the unprecedented move as an attack on the freedom of speech and as state censorship, but the courts later upheld the government's decision. Assessing the practical impact of this step on the information environment in Czechia is rather problematic, as the readers of these websites generally moved on to other sites of a similar nature and to the environment of chain e-mails distributed mainly among the older generation. As a result, the consumers of misinformation seem to have only changed communication channels.

Around March 2022, the first articles on Ukrainian migration began to appear, using a similar framing to the framing used during the 2015/2016 migration crisis: the incoming refugees were rich, well-dressed, had good phones and drove expensive cars. They abused social security polcies receiving higher benefits than Czechs. In addition, the refugees were ungrateful pointing out their inappropriate or even hostile behaviour (ill-mannered and spoiled children, aggressive youth, picky and ungrateful mothers, etc.). Quite often this misinformation was presented as a "personal experience" or a "confirmed story" of an acquaintance.

One interesting aspect was the attempt to use the racial xenophobia characteristic of the 2015/2016 crisis to stir up fear of Ukrainian migration. The disinformation concerned Africans trying to enter Czechia as part of Ukrainian migration. Indeed, the attention of the disinformation agents was drawn to black people because the refugees included African students who had been studying in Ukraine at the time of the invasion and were trying to leave the country because of the war and cancelled flights. Thus, the videos filmed by an activist at the border crossing between Slovakia and Ukraine were used to spread the disinformation that there were black people among Ukrainians who were entering the EU without registration. This message was then spread not only by the disinformers, but also by some political parties with a pro-Kremlin agenda (Deník.cz 2022).

It should be noted that the topic of Ukrainian refugees was communicated simultaneously with other topics that contextually reinforced the anti-immigration discourse. If the disinformation did not focus directly on migrants, it focused on the characteristics of the environment from which migrants came. Often, such disinformation concerned the state of the conflict in Ukraine, which was portrayed as a safe country on the one hand (after all, nothing is really happening, so refugees have no right to come here) and a problematic country on the other (different culture, corruption, crime, fascist government, etc.), even though these narratives were partly contradictory. In this regard, the trial of a primary school teacher who questioned war crimes in Ukraine in front of her pupils caused some controversy (iRozhlas 2023a). The downplaying of the situation in Ukraine in the first stages of the war went so far that war crimes and massacres were denied (e.g., denying the existence of mass graves in the town of Bucha, claiming that the corpses found in the streets were hired actors) and completely bizarre conspiracy theories were spread such as Ukrainians were bombing their own cities in order to raise money to modernise the country and to falsely accuse the Russian Federation. These sub-themes then added to the context of migration and ultimately reinforced the appearance that migration from Ukraine was illegitimate, and refugees did not deserve any support.

During the spring of 2022, assistance to refugees from Ukraine was launched and systematised.[28] Unsurprisingly, it was during this period that it became a central target of disinformation, which elaborated narratives about the abuse of this aid by migrants. The aid was presented as disproportionately high and at the expense of Czech citizens. Although the financial aid in the form of the so-called humanitarian benefit amounted to CZK 5,000 (approx. 200 Euros) per person for a maximum of five months (Act No. 66/2022 Coll.), the disinformers themselves "calculated" and communicated unrealistic amounts of tens of thousands of Czech crowns that the refugees were allegedly receiving (iRozhlas 2023b). In this context, they criticised the government, calling it the "Ukrainian government

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28   A network of Regional Assistance Centres for Ukraine was put into operation, where refugees found material assistance, were provided with accommodation and dealt with virtually all the necessary requirements for staying in Czechia, from official permits, to access to the labour market, and medical and psychological assistance.

of Petr Fiala" which favours Ukrainians over its own citizens. At the same time, there were reports of a disproportionate burden on the health system from migrants. This narrative was later (in the autumn of 2022) elaborated into "health tourism": due to the lack of health insurance in Ukraine, Ukrainians come en masse to Czechia, where they use local medical facilities, making health care inaccessible to Czech citizens. Migration from Ukraine mainly affected regional centres, where access to health care is generally better than in the regions or their peripheries. Given the structure of migration (mostly women and children), the migration affected only specific medical fields. For example, complications could be noted in the workload of paediatricians and gynaecologists, who together accounted for about 80% of the sectoral workload. However, it should be remembered that in the event of a military collapse of Ukraine, the number of refugees in the country could reach two million, and other areas of medicine would also be enormously exposed (Balík 2022). The collapse of such a large state in the vicinity of Czechia would eventually put pressure on all areas of public life.

The health situation is also linked to reports of the danger of migrants. Especially in relation to the diseases that Ukrainians allegedly spread (including, for example, AIDS/HIV). These narratives were not new in Czechia: within the disinformation about the Covid-19 disease, there were reports that Covid-19 was brought to the EU by migrants. Although there is no evidence for a link between migrants and the spread of Covid-19, this link was communicated in practice by populist politicians. Typical examples include Viktor Orbán or Matteo Salvini, who blamed the outbreak of the pandemic in Italy on the infection of a boatload of African migrants from Sicily (Norwegian Refugee Council 2020). However, it must be acknowledged that Ukrainians come from problematic conditions and, even so, there is a higher risk of certain diseases among them. Here we come to a paradox: while one narrative argues that Ukrainians are a burden on the Czech health care system (and thus care should be denied or charged for), another narrative argues for contagious diseases (which should therefore be treated in the best interest of all). The situation is similarly contradictory regarding Covid-19 disease: in Ukraine, the population vaccination rate is generally about twice as low, reported to be around 33% (Koblizek 2022). This could be a supporting argument for higher vaccination rates, but disinformation spreaders and conspirators are often among the opponents of vaccination or outright deniers of the existence of the disease (Filipec 2023).

Much of the disinformation works and uses real situations and incidents that naturally occur during such a large migration wave to illustrate the narrative. Thus, the incidents with Ukrainian Roma who started to gather during the first weeks after the invasion in front of the railway stations of big cities were used to reinforce the narratives mentioned above (e.g., abuse of benefits or the spread of diseases). Initially, when financial support from Czechia was relatively friendly towards the Ukrainian refugees, there were indeed suspicions of systematic abuse of the system by an organised group of

people who collected the so-called humanitarian contribution (CZK 5,000, approximately 200 euros) and disappeared to an unknown destination after it was paid. This was the case at the main railway stations in Prague and Brno, but also at some regional railway stations and the Regional Assistance Centres for Ukraine (KACPU), which experienced waves of Ukrainian Roma, who were usually difficult refugees who were illiterate, had problems proving their identity and whose health condition was a cause for concern. However, within the total number of hundreds of thousands of migrants, these were more like tens of people. In the case of unprovable identity, these persons were checked against international databases (e.g., Interpol) and fingerprinted (Interview 1).

Similarly, disinformation agents communicated the narrative that "instead of fighting and protecting their homeland, Ukrainian men are staying with their families in Czechia". In many ways, this is a problematic narrative. First, it is partly contradicted by other narratives (e.g., that nothing is actually happening in Ukraine) or, on the contrary, that Ukraine is losing the war. Second, this narrative completely ignores the fact that some of the men came to Czechia with their families legally. Conscription and mobilisation did not apply to some citizens, typically because of age or medical fitness. In addition, even within the framework of conscription there were certain exceptions, for example, men with three children under 18 could leave the country, similarly men with disabilities or men caring for a disabled child or wife (see Article 23(1)(4) of the Law on Mobilization Training and Mobilization). Thus, disinformers took advantage of the ignorance of Ukrainian law among Czech citizens.

After about a year, in the winter of 2023, the topic of migration from Ukraine seemed to be exhausted. Moreover, the topic was overshadowed by far more important issues such as inflation or rising energy prices. Czechia was preparing for the presidential elections, in which the topic of Ukraine was also significantly accentuated, although not with an emphasis on refugees (the disinformation narrative that one of the candidates – the former general Petr Pavel - would "drag" the country into a war with Russia). The topic of Ukrainian refugees appeared more generally and partially, in the context of the "Ukrainization of the country" (typically the Ukrainian flags still displayed on some public buildings as a sign of solidarity with Ukraine) or the alleged "Ukrainization of education" due to the presence of Ukrainian pupils in Czech classrooms. However, these topics did not have a significant impact anymore, as the everyday experience of the majority of the population was different.

The issue of Ukrainian refugees came to the fore again with some problems. These included mainly crimes committed by Ukrainians on the territory of Czechia. As a rule, these crimes were exaggerated and taken out of context by disinformers, and contained a certain degree of generalisation with an attempt to shift blame onto Ukrainians as a whole as part of collective guilt, with Ukrainians being presented as inadaptable rapists. This applies, for example, to the incident in June 2023, when a Ukrainian killed a

Roma man at the Brno dam. The defence claims that this was self-defence. The man was released from custody in August 2023 (iDNES.cz 2023). With the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, crime in Czechia did not increase significantly. This is due both to the structure of migration (mostly women and children), but also to the relative cultural proximity of the two nations. Cultural proximity influences, for example, the speed and success of integration within a new environment, thereby reducing frustration and tensions that can lead to criminal acts. It also facilitates acceptance and respect for the values of the destination country, which has a positive effect on legal awareness and therefore acts as a preventive factor in terms of crime. Nevertheless, the disinformation scene emphasises differences and tries to provoke xenophobic tendencies by emphasising differences. Paradoxically, it is this approach of "rejecting" and defining oneself against migrants that acts as a disincentive for their successful integration into mainstream society and pushes migrants to prefer closed diasporas, which are, however, more problematic in terms of criminality (see e.g., Prinz 2019). However, migrant integration is a very complicated and multi-layered process, which is not the subject of this short study.

Finally, it should be noted that the selected disinformation websites quite often quote each other and provide readers with links to other disinformation websites. Together, they form a relatively dense network on which the whole "disinformation ecosystem" is based (Štětka, Mazák and Vochocová 2020). This is a space in which an alternative and often completely bizarre world is created on the basis of false information. A world where the real aggressor is presented as a peacemaker, where Ukrainian cities were not destroyed but "liberated", where all the evil in Ukraine is the facist government supported by the US and, by extension, the EU, and where everything bad is associated with migrants who are presented in an exclusively negative way.

Main Findings

Although the disinformation and propaganda accompanying migration from Ukraine usually take place in a specific national context, the findings specified in the previous section are to some extent transferable, as similar communication can be expected in the context of other migration waves. Thus, several conclusions can be drawn from the previous section and some recommendations can be made. As a rule, these are recommendations of a preventive nature or those that seek to mitigate the impact of disinformation campaigns.

Firstly, although the migration concerned culturally close people, mostly women and children affected by the war, who constituted a certain proportional cross-section of all classes of Ukrainian society, the disinformation agents used similar narratives as in the case of the migration of people from culturally different backgrounds, which is distant in values (with reference to Islam, for example) from the

target country. There was an attempt to undermine the motives of migration and to label refugees as economic migrants and parasites. This trend can also be expected in future waves of migration, which may be made up of people from culturally, religiously and value distant areas. Leaving aside the setting of migration and asylum policies, including the integration of these people into society (which will always be more problematic than in the case of people from culturally close backgrounds), these processes need to be accompanied by a truthful and constructive communication aimed at preventing racism and xenophobia, and possibly also by civic education on current challenges.

Secondly, the migration wave took place as a result of the war conflict, which was also the subject of a disinformation campaign that completed the context of migration. In this case, disinformation websites and information disseminators are supporting the enemy side by adopting and sharing its propaganda in an attempt to turn public opinion against refugees. In practice, they usually oppose the official foreign policy of their state (assuming that populists who themselves fight against migration are not in power) and by supporting the enemy party, they indirectly enter the conflict on the side of the enemy. The question here is whether these people have "fallen on the field of information warfare" or whether it makes sense to try to "save" them. In this context, there is a key dilemma that cognitive psychology can help to resolve: Does it make any sense at all to try to change the attitudes of people who have succumbed to disinformation instead of, for example, investing resources and capacity in prevention? According to the author's experience, direct confrontation with migrants helps, as they are given the space to introduce themselves and then people have the space to ask them personally. As a rule, personal experience and physical contact is stronger than messages from the internet.

Thirdly, disinformation campaigns appeal to primitive emotions, whether it is fear of migration (e.g. by pointing to real or invented acts of violence associated with migrants or scaremongering about disease transmission), jealousy (such as temporary material and financial benefits provided to refugees) or disappointment and anger (by pointing to their ungratefulness, inappropriate behaviour or their general "otherness"). Thus, disinformers work with a rather diverse range of emotions and feelings, which they try to mix into the message they communicate in order to provoke the desired reaction in the addressee. It aims at developing anti-immigration attitudes, directed against government policy and, in extreme cases, it can lead to violent escalation. It is therefore desirable for the target groups to be aware of these manipulative techniques. The strategy of "inoculation" is of some help here, as it exposes the target group to the "diluted" content of the disinformation campaign that is to be waged soon. As a result, the target group may recognise it and only a limited effect will be achieved.

Fourthly, as with other topics, migration is also subject to a certain wear and tear over time, even in the context of new and more important news. In other words, migration discourse is subject to a certain life cycle and the messages communicated have a certain dynamic that is influenced by time

and contextual factors. These trends should be monitored and exploited for more effective strategic communication. For example, it does not make sense, and could even be counterproductive, to start communicating on a topic that is being diluted and tends to fade from public discourse in the days ahead. On the contrary, if we expect a topic to be raised, it is advisable to start communicating this topic in advance and to take the initiative: along with the agenda set, it is advisable to direct its development within the communication, and thus gain a certain advantage over the disinformers.

Fifth, once the legal threshold has been crossed, it is possible to openly confront the operators of disinformation websites and take technical measures to mitigate the impact of disinformation websites and disinformation disseminators. Most EU countries have appropriate provisions within their criminal codes and restrictive measures to ensure state protection. Public order and security are often overridden by the ordinary civil regime. Blocking the domains of disinformation websites or agreements with Internet providers can be an interesting tool, but it is to some extent a double-edged weapon that must be handled with caution. In a liberal democracy, restricting freedom of speech should be a last resort when disinformation can threaten the very essence of democracy, cause widespread civil conflict or lead to damage to the health of large numbers of people. Finally, even this last option was considered by governments in the context of misinformation about the existence, prevention and treatment of Covid-19.

Sixth, cooperation plays a key role in the fight against disinformation. While some aspects can be handled at the level of states, state authorities and ministries (e.g., strategic communication and information campaigns, the creation of an effective legal framework, etc.), others should be left to civil society, which should be supported. This concerns, for example, the creation of networks of experts, NGOs and professional communication agencies that can help with preventive and crisis communication. As some measures require cross-border cooperation, the international nature of these networks is suggested, along with the implementation of measures adopted within the EU. Finally, the fight against disinformation and hostile propaganda is a Europe-wide problem that needs to be tackled at all levels.

Finally, the fight against disinformation has many levels, including financial or ethical. Disinformation and propaganda can cause irreversible damage that is difficult to quantify in direct terms, since the quality of democracy or information, for example, is hardly quantifiable in monetary terms. On the other hand, democracy as such is of incalculable value, and therefore business activities should also take into account the nature of the communication channels and avoid, for ethical reasons, disinformation websites which may thereby lose a source of income, e.g., from advertising, and thus weaken their influence. Here again, prevention can have many times greater benefits than dealing with the consequences of disinformation campaigns. It is therefore everyone's responsibility to combat disinformation by all available means that do not compromise democratic values.

Recommendations

- Support and protect democratic institutions that are part of the state.

- Try to communicate openly, rationally and factually with family, friends, neighbours and the public about migration.

- Do not support disinformation platforms in any way (financially, media, traffic, etc.) and stress the ethical aspect of spreading unverified and false information.

- Prevent misinformation through clear and distinct communication (pre-bunking), refute misinformation (de-bunking) in the online space and balance the effect of misinformation with real stories with a positive narrative that stimulates positive emotions.

- Promote civil society and to establish cooperation between allied organisations that are aware of the pitfalls of misinformation for the functioning and quality of a democratic society.

- Communicate narratives and themes of possible disinformation as a prevention measure and prepare citizens for disinformation campaigns by "diluting" the content that can be used in these campaigns.

- Support activities and initiatives aimed at information and media literacy, including critical thinking or the knowledge needed to navigate complex social and political issues.

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Chapter 7
Women in Czech Politics

Veronika Šprincová

Abstract: Despite being bound by several national and international documents in promoting gender equality, Czechia is still failing in many areas and has stagnated in international comparisons. One of the most prominent areas is the representation of women in public life. Czechia has long been below the European and global average in terms of women's representation in politics. The following chapter discusses the developments over the last three decades, the main current problems, and possible solutions.

Keywords: women in politics, gender equality, Czech politics.

Introduction

Over the last thirty years, Czech society has undergone significant changes which have affected the position of women and men in society. In this context, Czechia's accession to the European Union has played a positive role, leading to positive changes in the direction of promoting gender equality. Nevertheless, as has been shown by long-term international comparisons such as the one conducted by the World Economic Forum, the pace at which change is taking place is slowing down, and other countries are improving the situation faster. Looking at the field of political decision-making specifically, one finds that when the ranking was first published in 2006, Czechia ranked 20th in today's EU 27 but dropped to 24th place in 2023 (World Economic Forum 2006, 2023). Women's representation in politics is influenced by several factors, with political parties playing a central role. Voters can only choose from candidates who have been nominated by said parties on their electoral lists. As will be shown below, women are still generally absent from these lists – especially in electable positions. The following chapter focuses on the representation of women in national politics, the factors influencing it, and possible solutions to the current unfavourable situation.

None of the Czech parliamentary parties have systematically addressed gender balance, which is reflected in the data on gender representation in Czech politics. The proportion of nominated and elected women appears to be random in the long term (Forum 50% 2020, 32–38). A positive trend can only be observed in the case of the Czech Pirate Party (*Česká pirátská strana*, ČPS). The observable data in this case span, however, a relatively short period, and it is therefore too early to draw any definite

conclusions. Furthermore, none of the parties currently represented in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of Czechia use positive measures in the form of quotas for the representation of women and men on the electoral lists.

Without Women, Democracy Lags Behind

When discussing the imbalance of political processes, a question often arises. Why is the focus mainly on women and less on other groups which are also under-represented in politics? The answer is simple. Unlike the other disadvantaged groups, women are not a minority. They make up roughly half of the population and are represented to some extent across all social classes (Šprincová 2009, 11–14). One needs to keep in mind, however, that women (just like men) are not a homogenous group. On the one hand, a particular woman may indeed have easier access to political decision-making than a particular man. On the other hand, women have historically been excluded from political decision-making and therefore the political environment has been created with the needs of privileged men in mind.

It is crucial for the quality of a representative democracy that it be open, accessible to the widest possible part of society, and that it reflects a range of life experiences as diverse as possible. A society which recognises this focuses first and foremost on women – precisely because they make up half of it. The effort does not usually end there, however, and it is important to look at other possible disadvantages for entering politics – such as physical disability or economic disadvantage. Even in these cases, the needs of women and men may differ. Therefore, in order to take good and effective measures, gender always needs to be considered.

Not All Politics Are the Same

As shown in Table 1, there are differences between particular levels of political decision-making. While women's representation in the upper house of the Parliament has long been low (as Figure 3 shows, the highest proportion of women senators to date was just under 20% after the 2016 elections), at the municipal level, the proportion of women has been increasing, reaching 29% in 2022.

Table 1: Representation of Women at Different Levels of Decision-Making in Czechia (20 January 2024)

	Proportion of Women in Total
Government	13 %
Chamber of Deputies	26 %
Senate	18,5 %
Regions	22 %
Statutory Cities and Prague	24 %
Cities and Municipalities	29 %

Data source: Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ), Government of the Czech Republic

Czech Government

The representation of women in Czech governments varies considerably and, given that ministers are often replaced during the term of office, it is difficult to compare individual cabinets with each other. The most accurate indicator is therefore the average percentage of women over the entire term of office.

Fig. 1: Representation of Women in the Czech Government (1992-2024).
Average for the Whole Term in Office.
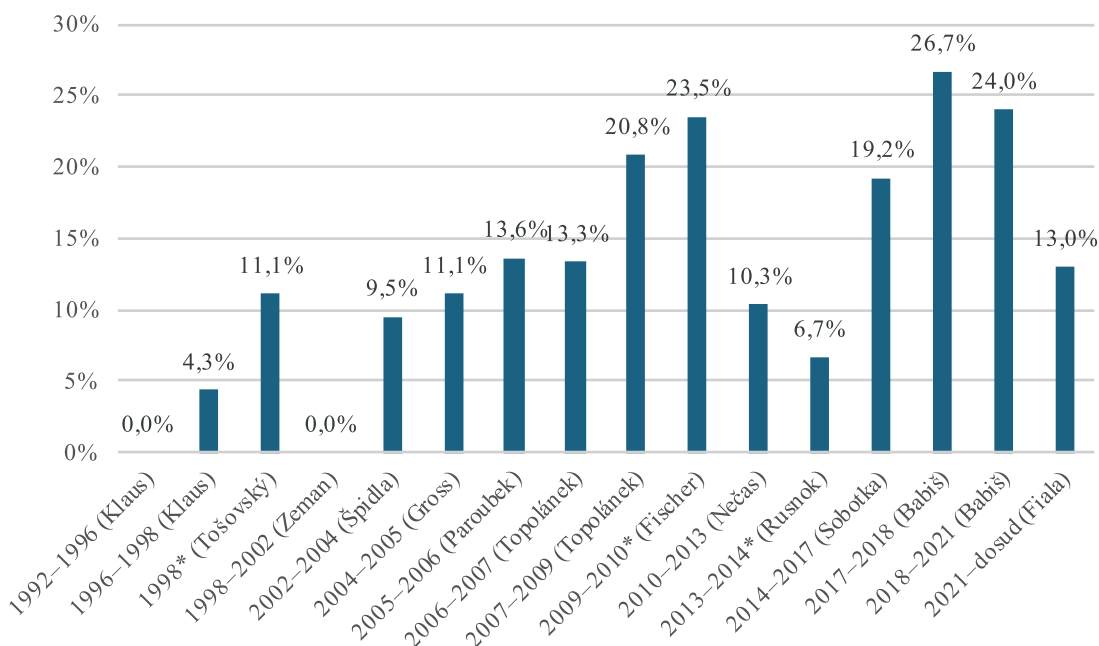
*caretaker government

Data source: Government of the Czech Republic

Fig. 1 shows that no long-term trend can be traced in the development of women's representation in government positions. In fact, the development is so random that it can only be explained as a coincidence and demonstrates that Hana Havelková's (2006) comparison of politics to a lottery might have more merit than one would like. Additionally, it is apparent that neither the division between the right and the left side of the political spectrum nor the division between political and caretaker governments play a role. The chart further shows that only the two governments of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš stand out significantly. This may be due to the ideological indecisiveness of the party, its populist efforts to attract voters by placing women in key positions, the confidence of Andrej Babiš in the managerial and political abilities of the women in his entourage (see e.g., Pšenička 2017), or likely a combination of all these factors. As far as possible solutions go, there is no need for the improvement of the current situation to be all that difficult. Having two people – a man and a woman – pre-chosen for each ministry would allow for more flexibility when reacting to the allocation of

ministries to individual government parties and political movements when forming a government. This would then positively influence the overall representation of women in the government.

Chamber of Deputies

The fluctuations are not as pronounced for the Chamber of Deputies. As Fig. 2 shows, the representation of women has been gradually increasing following the last three elections. Even in this case, however, it is not the result of a systematic effort to equalise the representation of women in politics but essentially a coincidence. One therefore cannot rely on this trend repeating itself after the next parliamentary elections. The development of the trend will depend on which parties are elected to the Chamber of Deputies, how many seats they win, how many women they nominate and in which positions on the electoral lists, and to what extent voters use their preferential votes. Furthermore, the question as to whether parties stand alone or in coalitions also plays a role.

As was already mentioned in the introduction, Czech political parties are not very consistent in terms of their willingness to nominate women for elections – especially not at the top positions of their electoral lists. The ANO 2011 movement, which has thus far run three times for the Chamber of Deputies, has seen, for example, a positive trend of increasing the proportion of women among those nominated and elected, while at other levels of political decision-making (e.g. in the Senate) the proportion fluctuates (Forum 50 % 2020, 32n). It cannot be said with certainty, however, that ANO 2011, one of the most prominent political players, will continue this positive trend, especially in a situation where the representation of women on electoral lists is not formally determined.

The only political subject elected to the Chamber of Deputies in every election since 1996 is the Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS). In its case, the proportion of women nominees has alternately increased and decreased, and the proportion of women in its parliamentary group has also fluctuated over time. A similar trend can be seen for the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (*Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová*, KDU-ČSL) (Forum 50 % 2020, 35, Forum 2021, 4n).

Fig. 2: Proportion of Women Nominees and Women Deputies in the Chamber of Deputies (1996-2021)
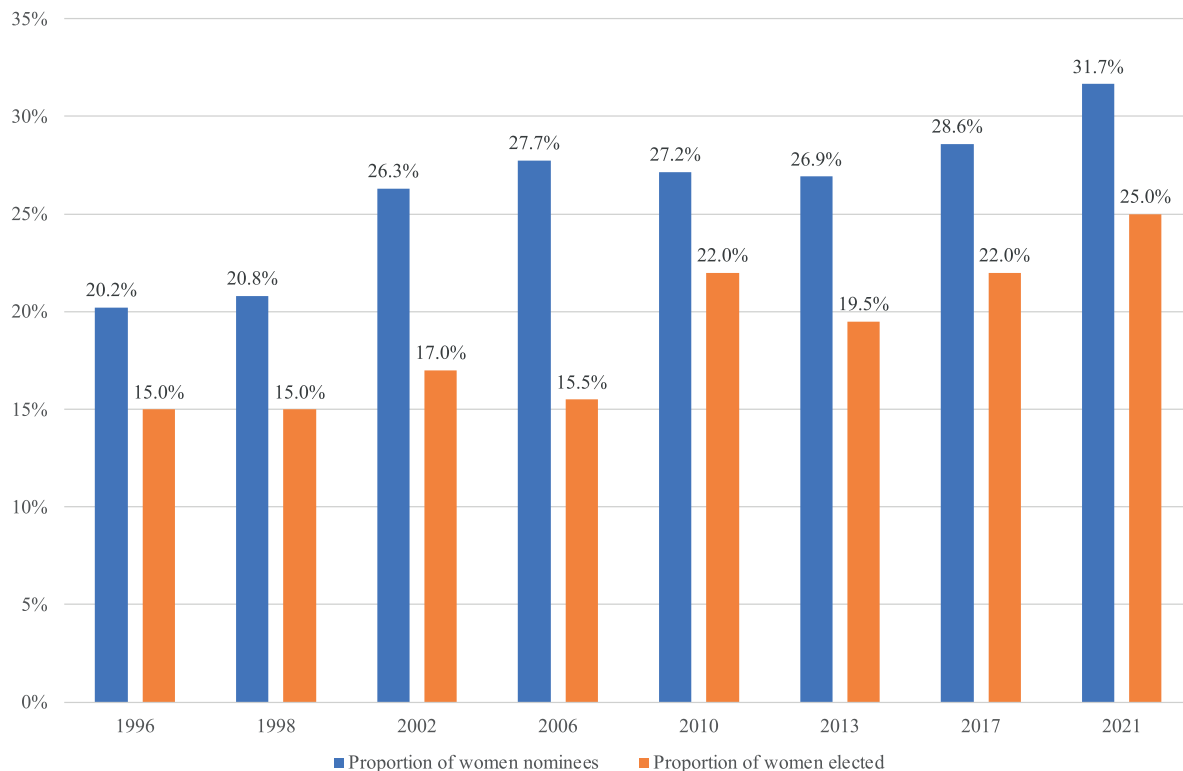
Data source: ČSÚ

The overall proportion of women nominees has been higher than their proportion among elected deputies (both man and women) in all elections to date. Rather than the overall proportion of women nominees, however, it is their position on the electoral lists that is crucial. It can be seen in Table 2 that, as the position on the electoral list increases, the proportion of women generally decreases. The only exception was the 2006 elections when the Equal Opportunities Party (*Strana Rovnost Šancí*, SRŠ)[29] nominated only women candidates.

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29   In 2005, an all-woman party called the Equal Opportunities Party (*Strana Rovnost Šancí*, SRŠ) was established. According to Rakušanová (2006, 38), the initiators of its creation were women from the cultural sphere (the journalist Zdeňka Ulmannová and documentary film-maker Olga Sommerová). In the spring of 2006, SRŠ decided to run for the Chamber of Deputies and invited women to join. According to data from the Czech Statistical Office published on www.volby.cz, the party ran candidates in all the Czech regions and nominated a total of 77 women for the elections. It received a total of 10,879 votes, which meant an electoral gain of 0.2% of all valid votes. The broader context of the phenomenon of "women" parties and the programmatic focus of the SRŠ were discussed in the weekly magazine *A2* by Iva Baslarová and Blanka Nyklová (2007). In January 2008, Czech Television reported that the party had been suspended by the court (ČT24 2008).

Table 2: Proportion of Women Nominees to the Chamber of Deputies (1996-2021), by Position on the Candidate List

	1996	1998	2002	2006	2010	2013	2017	2021
% of women leading the candidate lists	14.7%	14.3%	15.4%	20.8%	10.7%	15.2%	20.5%	28.3%
% of women nominees up to the fifth place	19.2%	18.7%	22.2%	28.0%	22.7%	22.0%	25.5%	29.7%
% of women nominees up to the tenth place	17.9%	19.0%	24.7%	28.2%	25.3%	24.7%	27.5%	31.0%
% of women nominees in total	20.2%	20.8%	26.3%	27.7%	27.2%	26.9%	28.6%	31.7%

Data source: ČSÚ

The two historic highs in the proportion of women in the Chamber of Deputies in 2010 and 2021 were achieved largely thanks to preferential votes. Preferential voting has undergone several changes, the most recent of which has led to the strengthening of its influence (Šprincová and Adamusová 2013, 17n). According to the current legal regulation, voters can grant preferential votes to up to four candidates for the party or movement of their choice. If a candidate receives at least 5% of all votes cast for the proposing party or coalition, they move to the first position. If more than one candidate exceeds this threshold, they are then ranked in order of the absolute number of votes received and are allocated seats in that same order.

The ongoing campaign or campaigns in support of women candidates in both above-mentioned elections have been linked to a broader social demand for political change. Thus, in 2010, voters "circled" their preferred candidates mainly due to dissatisfaction with the current political situation and the fact that the top positions on the electoral lists were occupied by figures considered controversial by many (Navrátil 2013a, Navrátil 2013b). It was the "circling out" of leaders and the filling of seats by candidates running from lower, originally unelectable positions, that positively influenced the representation of women in the newly elected Chamber of Deputies (Šprincová 2010). Eleven years later, the awarding of preferential votes reflected the disinformation campaign of the ANO 2011 movement against the Czech Pirate Party (Tvrdoň 2021) as well as the familiarity of local personalities (Boček, Kočí and Zákopčanová 2021). Thanks to preferential votes, nine more women won seats than were nominated in electable positions on the electoral lists. This contributed significantly to achieving the highest ever representation of women in the lower house of the Parliament at 25% (Šprincová 2021).

In the case of the other entities which won seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the preferential votes did not fundamentally shuffle the order and did not significantly affect the representation of women and men. The case of the PirSTAN coalition – consisting of two parties, Czech Pirate Party (ČPS) and the Mayors and Independents (*Starostové a nezávislí*, STAN) – is, however, a different story. A total of 22 candidates, ten of whom were women, were elected from originally unelectable positions (Boček, Kočí, Zákopčanová 2021). Furthermore, all of them were nominated by the STAN movement. Data from the Czech Statistical Office published on www.volby.cz, showing the allocation of preferential votes to specific PirSTAN candidates, display the clear strategy of the voters of this coalition: to support STAN at the expense of their coalition partner. As was already mentioned, the active anti-campaign waged against the Pirate Party – especially by the ANO 2011 movement – may have played a role in this. With only a few exceptions, seats were allocated preferentially (*i.e.*, based on preferential votes) to STAN nominees, despite the fact that in several regions the movement went into the elections as the "weaker" party and thus received fewer positions on the electoral list than the other half of the coalition.

One example of this is the capital city of Prague, where the coalition won six parliamentary seats. The first six places on the electoral list were occupied by five nominees of the Pirate Party (both male and female) and one STAN candidate. Apart from ČPS leader Olga Richterová, the voters "circled" the first four STAN candidates, which meant the third, seventh, eleventh and sixteenth positions on the electoral list, in other words, the usually completely unelectable positions for which parties are more willing to nominate women candidates. A similar pattern can also be seen in all the other electoral regions. Although the Pirate Party ranked first on coalition lists in ten of the 14 electoral districts, in eight of the regions not even their nominated leaders won a seat. Apart from Olga Richterová in Prague, the only other elected Pirate Party "number one" was its chairman Ivan Bartoš in the Ústí nad Labem region. In some regions, one can also see slightly more support for women nominated by STAN. This factor did not play a major role, however, and only changed the order in which the STAN candidates were allocated seats.

The Senate

The representation of women in the Senate has been extremely problematic for a long period of time. One of the contributing factors is the fact that the voting system used for elections is the two-round system, which is less favourable to women. In majority electoral systems, where only one candidate wins in a given constituency, parties are less willing to nominate women because they fear defeat by a male rival candidate. In proportional systems, it is the other way around – parties nominate women candidates in order to balance the electoral list and expand the ranks of their electorate (Kittilson 2006, 4n.).

As Rakušanová and Václavíková Helšová (2006, 44) point out, however, the effect of the electoral system is not direct; its influence is mediated by the mechanism of candidate selection within individual parties – the nomination of women is determined by the level of transaction costs. Transaction costs are closely related to the electoral system, specifically to the size of the constituency (the number of seats that can be won in a given constituency) and to the size of the constituency in terms of each political party (the number of seats that each individual party can win in a given constituency). The situation is further complicated by the fact that only a third of the seats are up for election every two years, therefore a one-time success of women nominees does not have such a large impact on the overall representation of women in the upper house of the Parliament.

Fig. 3: Proportion of Women Nominees and Women Senators (1996 to 2022)
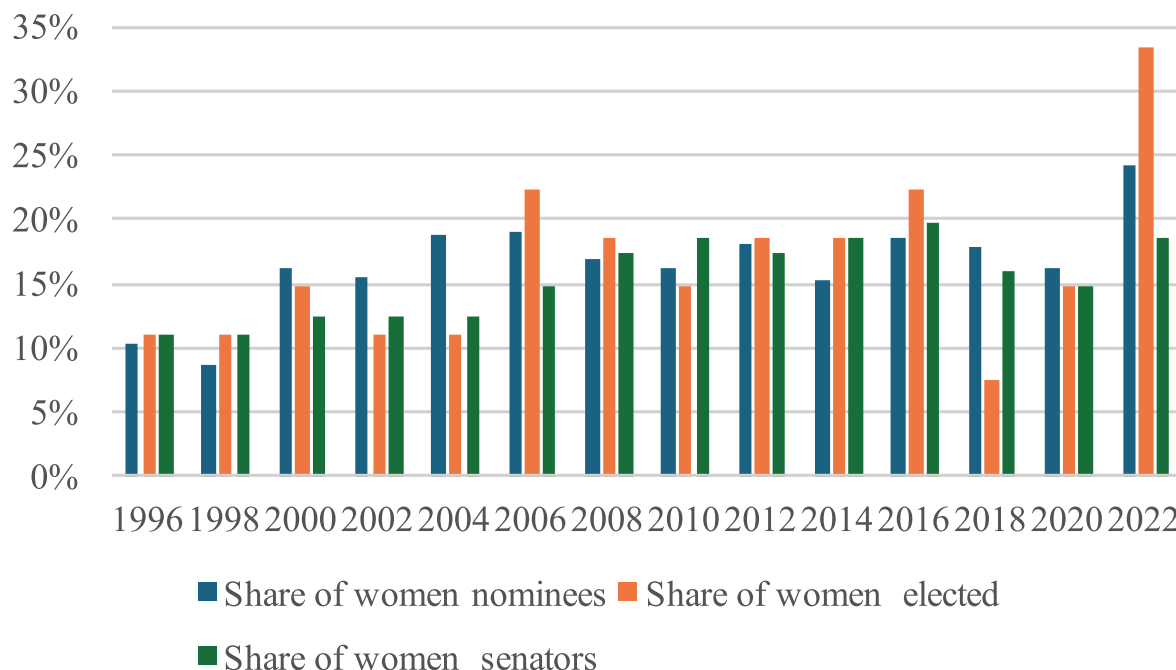
Data source: ČSÚ

It is apparent from Fig. 3 that the proportion of women nominees varies from election to election – sometimes increasing, sometimes decreasing – and that the final proportion of newly elected women senators also fluctuates. This is further reflected in the overall representation of women in the Senate.

Women Politicians Are Competing in a Different Discipline

As mentioned in the introduction, Czechia's accession to the European Union brought with it several positive changes, especially in the areas of non-discrimination, the position of women on the labour market, and the prevention and combatting of domestic violence (Sokačová 2009, Volejníčková 2015, 4). Political decision-making has not been affected by these changes, however, and no measures have been taken at the national level to address the long-standing gender imbalance in politics. In the debate addressing gender imbalance in politics, upon rejecting positive measures such as gender quotas, there appears to be a belief in improvement through "natural development" or equal starting conditions for all, regardless of gender.

In this context, Drude Dahlerup (1998) points out the need to distinguish between two notions of equality. According to her, the above-mentioned approach is based on the classical liberal call for equal opportunities or *competitive equality*. As part of this concept, it is sufficient to remove the formal barriers restricting access to political participation (e.g., by granting the voting right), and further development is then up to the individual and their abilities. The second approach demands *equality of result*, which is based on the assumption that true equality is not reached even after the removal of formal barriers. Discrimination is seen as a set of hidden barriers which prevent women from influencing politics. Where these barriers exist, compensatory measures have to be put in place which ultimately enable true equality to be achieved.

As observed in other countries (European countries with the highest representation of women in politics use or have used some type of measures, see e.g., Šprincová and Mottlová 2015), none of these strategies lead to the long-term solution of the problem. Figuratively speaking, while men sprint, women hurdle. Women have to overcome a variety of barriers, which can be divided into three types – individual, societal and institutional – but which are interrelated and mutually reinforcing (Rakušanová 2006). Each type of barrier requires different measures to remove it. Ideally, these measures should join forces and, through pressure from different directions, help to break down these often-invisible barriers.

Individual barriers concern women themselves (but also men, who decide, for example, who will be on the electoral list and in which position) and are based on societal expectations and conventions. These include, for example, women's disproportionately greater burden of caring for the household and dependents, but also their lower motivation to find interest or become actively involved in politics, their statistically lower self-esteem, and their reluctance to work in a male-dominated environment. Societal barriers are influenced by the roles society has historically considered appropriate for women and men. An example of this is the double standard for assessing the political performance of each

gender. Unlike men, women have to not only defend their abilities and achievements but prove that they belong in politics in the first place. The individual failure of a particular woman politician is then often a reason for the public to criticise the political performance of women as a whole. Prejudices about women and men, that still persist in society, are related to this.

Institutional barriers include the overall functioning of politics, the electoral system and its parameters, the nomination system, the transparency of nomination processes, and the lack of measures to support women. Unlike the previous two types of barriers, institutional barriers can be removed relatively quickly and easily by revising the existing system and processes and reconfiguring them to be as open as possible. Additionally, new measures can also be taken to redress the historical imbalance. A crucial prerequisite for this is the political determination to address the issue and the willingness to adopt supportive measures – for example in the form of quotas for women and men on the electoral lists.

As already mentioned, the most reliable strategy for balancing gender representation in politics is to introduce some type of quotas. Quotas can be introduced voluntarily at the party level (a model typical for Nordic countries) or enshrined in legislation (either in the constitution or in law). Intra-party quotas have the advantage of allowing parties to set them according to their current needs and capabilities. The parties often see, however, the implementation of such quotas as a complication and a competitive disadvantage compared to the parties which do not adopt any measures.

Currently, legislative quotas are in place in 12 countries of the EU-27: in Belgium, France, Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Greece, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain. Denmark is a specific example, which had set quotas only temporarily (Šprincová and Mottlová 2015, 3). According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, all of these countries, with the exception of Greece and Ireland (where the 40% quota was not met in the last elections in 2020), have a higher representation of women in the (lower house of) the parliament than Czechia.

Based on the knowledge that quotas are a proven systemic solution to the long-standing imbalance of gender representation in politics, similar proposals have been made in Czechia before. As summarised in the analytical material of the Office of the Government of Czechia (2022), the first proposal was put forward in 2010, demanding an overall quota of 30% for each gender, as well as the representation of both genders in the first two positions on the electoral list. The second proposal in 2014 already envisaged a 40% representation for both genders, specifying that there should be one person of the opposite gender in the top three. Both amendments therefore took into account that it was essential to consider, not only the overall proportion of women and men, but also their ranking on the electoral list. As mentioned earlier, the position on the electoral list is crucial for the allocation of seats.

Additional important aspects for consideration are enforcement and penalties for non-compliance with the rule. The most severe sanction is the refusal to register an electoral list until it complies with the regulations. A more lenient form is the reduction of the financial contribution, or conversely a financial bonus for balanced nominations (Šprincová and Mottlová 2015, 17).

In contrast to institutional barriers, societal barriers are difficult and slow to remove, as they are related to the overall societal disposition and persisting views of the "appropriate" role of women and men in society. Thus, efforts to remove individual barriers can help, for example, through "soft" measures which often accompany "hard" ones in the form of quotas (Government Office 2022, 18). The political parties and movements, actively implementing these measures, are aware that this is the only effective and sustainable way to meet numerical quotas, and that it cannot be successful if they are met only mechanically. A key aspect is motivating women to enter politics (e.g., by means of targeted recruitment campaigns) and supporting them in their political activities, which can take many forms. It is therefore appropriate to offer women a range of different forms of support.

Parties and political movements can thus offer women training in different areas according to current needs. An example of this is the Women's Electoral Academy, organised by the KDU-ČSL party for its women members and supporters (Šprincová 2022, 21). Mentoring is also a popular form of support as it facilitates the transfer of experience among senior and novice women politicians. Creating a safe space for sharing experiences is also important. This is most often done by organizing networking meetings (see Šprincová and Mottlová 2015 for details). Specific measures, based on Czech and foreign experience, are summarised, for example, in the manual *15 Tips on How to Support Women Within Political Parties and Movements* (Šprincová 2022). It is also crucial that someone be responsible for supporting the promotion of gender balance within political parties and, by extension, also within representative and executive bodies. Women's platforms or associations, which provide support for women and participate in the formulation of specific policies, therefore play a key role.

In conclusion, despite the many changes that the Czech political scene has undergone in recent decades, the issue of women's representation remains relevant. Data and analyses show that the position of women and men in politics is still unequal. The main problem is the persistence of barriers which make it difficult for women to enter and participate in politics. Alongside efforts to remove these barriers, however, it is also important to emphasise that women's representation in politics is a crucial aspect of a healthy democracy. Political parties and other institutions have a major task ahead of them in creating more open and fair political culture and processes. The representation of women in politics should not depend on chance or current trends. Instead, it should be the result of systematic efforts to equalise the status of women and men. Only in this way can true equality and democratic representation at all levels of political decision-making be achieved.

Recommendations

Short-term

- Amend the Electoral Act ensuring equal representation of women and men on electoral lists. For this amendment to be effective, it is important to: 1) determine the order of women/men at the top positions of electoral lists, 2) set effective sanctions for non-compliance with the rule.

- Approve and enforce quotas within political parties.

- Support the formation and functioning of women's organisations and platforms within political parties.

Medium to long-term

- Introduce consistent systematic monitoring of women's representation in politics (both quantitative and qualitative) across all levels of decision-making. Proposing appropriate measures and updating them according to current developments is connected to this.

- Introduce supportive measures within political parties, taking into account the specific situation.

- Develop cross-party cooperation between women's organisations and platforms.

- Fund activities in this area and promote cooperation between the state, political parties and the professional community (academia and the civil sector).

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Honouring Excellence - The Karel Schwarzenberg Prize

Political institute TOPAZ, which promotes civic education and fosters dialogue on civic responsibilities, annually awards the Karel Schwarzenberg Prize. This prestigious award is named after Karel Schwarzenberg, founder of the institute and a prominent politician, known for his lifelong dedication to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The award aims to encourage young scholars to engage with political sciences and related fields, giving a voice to a new generation of thinkers and leaders inspired by Schwarzenberg's example. The selection process for the prize is rigorous, involving a panel of experts in social sciences, law and humanities. TOPAZ Academic Council evaluates submissions based on their originality, depth of research, and potential impact on the field. Winning papers are recognised not only with a monetary award but also with publication opportunities and invitations to participate in TOPAZ Institute's events. These platforms offer young researchers a valuable exposure to the academic community and policy makers.

2024 Awarded Papers

1st place

Michal Frank
Failure or Intentional Passing of the Baton? The Mayor's Position in the 2014 and 2018 Local Elections

Abstract: The paper deals with mayoral turnovers in the 2014 and 2018 local elections. The author analysed the possible causes through interviews with former and current mayors and political representatives in five municipalities in the Pardubice Region and five municipalities in the South Moravian Region. The interviews revealed the causes while considering the characteristics of the council, the degree of electoral competitiveness, post-election negotiations, the functioning of the municipality and mayoral typology.

2nd place

Miriama Sokoláková
The Impact of European Funding on Learning Outcomes of Pupils in Slovakia

Abstract: As a member of the European Union, Slovakia has access to various funding programs aimed at improving education and fostering economic development. This paper examines the effectiveness of these funds in enhancing educational achievement in all relevant Slovakian primary and secondary schools. To assess the impact of European funds, the thesis employs fixed effects, between effects, and a difference-in-difference approach. We combine data collected from the National Institute of Education and Youth with socio-economic data. The analysis covers the period from 2007 to 2013, encompassing one funding cycle and allowing for a comprehensive evaluation of the long-term effects on educational achievement. The results do not reveal a correlation between European funds and the test scores of schools. However, a negative correlation was found between schools located in economically disadvantaged areas and with pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The study also identifies several challenges and areas for future research for more efficient fund allocation.

3rd place

Ondřej Pospíšil
The Future of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy: Scenario Analysis

Abstract: The paper analyses the possible future scenarios of the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that might dramatically influence this specific area of European policy. This topic is especially relevant in the context of the ongoing Europe-wide discussion about the future of the CFSP, especially in the debate about the use of qualified majority voting in foreign and security policy. Each scenario is accompanied by a SWOT analysis, which enables us to determine specific advantages, disadvantages, threats and opportunities that come with each analysed option.

Honourable mention

Ondřej Neuschl
Innovation Diplomacy - Perspectives for Further Development

Abstract: With the growing importance of innovation in economies, a new concept of innovation diplomacy is emerging. This paper examines innovation diplomacy in the Czech context and explores how Czechia should approach innovation diplomacy. It analyses and compares innovation-diplomacy systems of Denmark and Switzerland with Czechia. The conclusions suggest the need to improve coordination at the government level, promote a bottom-up approach, and create further innovation centres abroad. Prioritising innovation efforts and increasing the internationalisation of innovation diplomacy are key to success. A comprehensive approach and long-term planning are essential for the effectiveness of innovation diplomacy. The paper highlights the Czech potential to strengthen its position in the global innovation environment through the effective implementation of innovation diplomacy.

Tomáš Pelc
Media Literacy in EFL

Abstract: The paper deals with teaching media literacy in English as a foreign language teaching (EFT). The aim of the thesis is to test existing foreign language materials in Czech schools using an action research design. The paper explains media education, provides an overview of existing materials and teacher training opportunities, and limitations of current knowledge, accompanied by suggestions for further research. The outcomes of the empirical part suggest the incorporation of existing materials into EFL lessons, the identification of abilities necessary for the teachers, and advice on the incorporation of Civic Online Reasoning into school curricula.
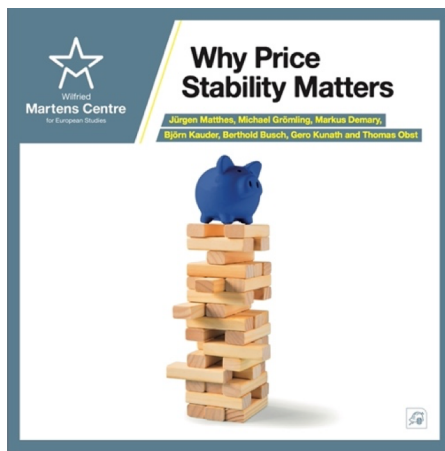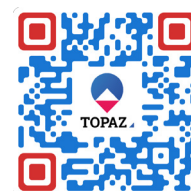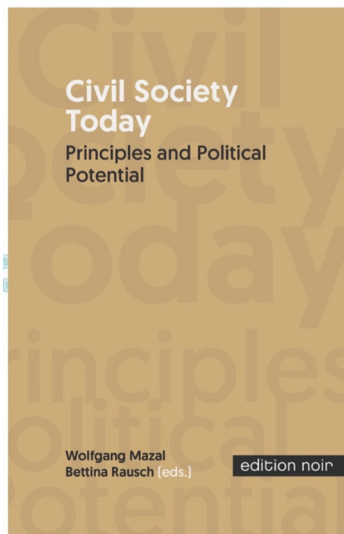
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