9 Connected Yet Suffering

The Lived Experiences of Czech Households through Energy Service Provider Bankruptcies

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9.1 Introduction

The issue of energy poverty has been making headlines across Europe since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In the Czech Republic, however, it was already a pressing concern several months prior. In Autumn 2021, in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic and shortly after elections to the Czech Chamber of Representatives, household energy poverty became a hot topic across national media for obvious reasons. Over the course of a few autumn weeks, several alternative energy providers went out of business, led by the largest alternative energy supplier—Bohemia Energy Group (Glaserová, 2021; Lopatka & Hovet, 2021).

Over a million customer sites suddenly found themselves without their electricity and/or gas supplier and were immediately transferred to the so-called 'supplier of last instance' (SLI) regime. Thus, in practice, the law protected them from disconnection (Moravec, 2021; Veselovský, 2021). However, many customers suddenly faced much higher deposit payments than before because the SLI may not have had the opportunity to buy enough energy in advance for their new customers and thus had to purchase energy at a higher price on the wholesale market to meet the new demand. The prices charged by the SLI also mirrored expectations of household consumption for the winter period, as the alternative suppliers went bankrupt just before winter. (Kulig, 2022; Veselovský, 2021). While this represented a merely unpleasant situation for some households, for specific population groups, such as pensioners, single parents, and single-income households, the prices became practically unaffordable, leading to concerns about how to stay warm through the upcoming winter and how to quickly get out of the regime, among other issues.

In this chapter, we draw from these and other recent events to provide an updated perspective on households' perceptions and behaviour under unexpected circumstances and thereby reveal what it means to be energy vulnerable in the Czech Republic. Through semi-structured interviews with affected households, we examine the interplay among their material culture, practises, norms, and external influences. We ask the following questions: How did energy service provider bankruptcies impact these factors? Which factors prevented households from meeting the newly encountered challenges, such as high deposit payments and the need to quickly get out of the SLI regime, successfully? Our goal is to highlight the need to focus not just on energy poverty alleviation but also on its prevention. We argue that the understanding of energy vulnerability in the Czech Republic is too shallow and does not reflect underlying factors that increase the likelihood of a household falling into energy poverty.

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9.2 Examining the impact of energy supplier bankruptcies in the Czech Republic

It is not widely known that the Czech Republic experienced a first wave of alternative supplier bankruptcies well before 2021. In relation to the transposition of European liberalization packages, many alternative energy players have emerged in the country in recent decades. The modus operandi of many has relied on offering lower prices than traditional suppliers to attract customers. The new actors usually purchased energy on the wholesale market, hoping to take advantage of decreasing energy prices. However, when energy prices on the wholesale market started to rise constantly, such alternative suppliers were exposed to the risk of paying much higher amounts for energy without the benefit of stable long-term contracts. This sudden increase in energy costs posed an existential financial burden for these suppliers. Although such practises by energy companies were legal, some energy market experts criticized such actions as "gambling" (Kubátová, 2021; Moravec, 2021).

Unfortunately, such risky operations in the energy market and a lack of sufficient financing have driven some alternative players into bankruptcy, as exemplified by the collapse of Moravia Energo in 2009 (Kadlecová, 2021). The subsequent transfer of the company's customers to the SLI regime was unprecedented at the time. However, in terms of the number of consumers affected, this first wave of transfers was only a sign of things to come. At the time of its collapse in 2009, Moravia Energo was supplying about 1,000 customer sites (ČTK & Horáček, 2009). Moreover, most of the SLIs were able to provide favourable energy prices at that time in an effort to attract and keep new consumers. In autumn 2021, however, the collapse of Bohemia Energy Group was absolutely devastating, affecting some 900,000 customer sites and taking place against the backdrop of steeply rising European energy prices (OTE, 2023a, 2023b).

Regardless of previous experience, however limited in scope, the end of Bohemia Energy and other minor players revealed a certain unpreparedness of the state's decision-making and bureaucratic institutions for what might be the consequences of these bankruptcies. The state lacked practical tools that could be quickly applied to help affected households as well as a clear knowledge of who actually were the most affected consumers (Kabrhelová et al., 2021). It also became clear that there were hidden sources of energy vulnerability at play, which needed to be taken into account to successfully prevent households from falling into energy poverty. Aside from the focus on energy market rules, the cause of vulnerability was found to be the inadequately defined SLI regime. The relevant legislation protected households from being physically disconnected but not from being unable to afford energy services.

There may be two reasons for the Czech state's lack of preparedness. Firstly, energy poverty has not yet been significantly addressed in the country. There are no official definitions of energy poverty, tools for its regular monitoring, or policies specifically designed to tackle the issue. Energy poverty is only partially addressed, mostly by state social benefits and subsidy programmes (The Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2019). However, as previous research has demonstrated, these policies have not fulfilled their potential in dealing with the issue (Koďousková & Lehotský, 2021). This lack of focused attention may be caused by the relatively favourable results the Czech Republic as a whole has obtained in pan-European energy poverty assessments (Bouzarovski et al., 2020), although specific strata of the population may face energy deprivation quite extensively (Koďousková & Lehotský, 2021). Secondly, part of the problem may also be the prevailing narrow understanding of energy vulnerability in the country, which depicts energy vulnerable customers as already being in a situation of energy poverty and at the same time having specific needs that require permanent access to energy (e.g., due to a health condition or the presence of children in the household) (Vysoká škola ekonomická v Praze, 2021). Such a

definition protects the most vulnerable but excludes households that could easily and unexpectedly fall into the condition. We thus argue for a broader definition of energy vulnerability in line with how it is usually conceptualized in the academic literature (Allen, 2003; Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015; Bouzarovski & Thomson, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2013). While energy vulnerability thinking typically "highlights the factors that affect the likelihood of becoming poor" (Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015), policies in the Czech Republic only target a narrow group of people already struggling with energy poverty, making it difficult to prevent impending problems.

Applying interpretative phenomenological analysis, we offer insight into what it was like for households to experience energy service supplier bankruptcy and the SLI regime (Griffin & May, 2012). This research method derives its theoretical assumptions from exploring the lived experiences of (marginalized) groups and the situated nature of their experiences. As such, the method is inductive in nature but is often driven by a predetermined theoretical perspective. We derive our findings from 15 stories of 18 people gained through semi-structured interviews and analysed through the energy cultures framework (see Table 9.1) (Stephenson et al., 2010, 2015). The framework includes several interconnected elements, including material culture (have), practises (do), norms (think), and external influences, which together form a contextual soup of wider factors beyond a household's direct control (Sweeney et al., 2013). In our research, the framework served both as an organizational tool to structure interviews and as a guiding principle for their analysis. In practise, it helps shed light on barriers and support systems that energy-poor households encounter (Sweeney et al., 2013). Such knowledge is necessary for effective and efficient policy targeting (McKague et al., 2018).

The respondents were selected through purposive sampling. The goal was to include households considered to be energy vulnerable, as described in a study by Pye and Dobbins (2015), according to whom the term energy vulnerable customer includes not only those individuals and households at risk of energy poverty but also a broader group of consumers who may be at a disadvantage in the purchasing and use of energy in the electricity and gas retail markets (Pye & Dobbins, 2015). The interviews took place mainly in the autumn of 2022 and lasted between 30 and 95 minutes. They were conducted in person, over the phone, or online through the Whereby platform, depending on the respondent's preference (Babbie, 2016). All participants agreed with the recording. The interviews were then anonymized and transcribed by the interviewer in private. Both authors analysed the interviews inductively and independently by breaking the stories into thematic clusters and grouping them under the energy cultures framework's elements as superordinate deductively induced themes (Griffin & May, 2012) (Table 9.2).

Table 9.1 Elements of the energy cultures framework

Element	*Description*
Material factors	Physical aspects of energy use, such as the type of energy sources used and the physical characteristics of buildings
Norms	Social standards that influence how individuals and households think about and use energy
Practices	The daily routines and behaviours that shape how energy is used, such as the use of appliances, and heating and cooling practices
External influences	The contextual factors that shape energy behaviour, such as policies, regulations, social relations, and market forces that influence the availability and cost of different energy sources

Source: Stephenson et al. (2010, 2015).

Table 9.2 Summary of interviewees

Name	*Age*	*Status*	*Household composition*	*Type of housing*	*Housing size*	*Type of heating*	*Supplier bankruptcy*
Barbara Svatopluk	60-70	Married couple; pensioner and working woman	2	Own house	4+1 and 2+1 (unoccupied property)	Gas and solid fuels	Gas and electricity
Bianka	30-40	Single mother	1 and a child; flatmate	Rental housing	2+1	Gas	Gas and electricity
Bohdana	80-90	pensioner and	2; (2 and	Flat in a	2+1 (3+1	Gas	Electricity
Dušana	50-60	working daughter	daughter at university)	family house, easement	daughter with family)		
Božena	80-90	Widow	1	Own house	3+1	Gas	Gas
Dalibor	50-60	One-person household	2; (2 and 1 in other flats)	Own house	3+1 (3+1 tenants and 3+1 mother)	Wood gasifier and gas	Gas electricity in unoccupied property
Jarmila (Denisa)	80-90	Couple of pensioners (Jarmila and husband)	2 (partly also son)	Own house	4+1 + unoccupied floor, only 2+1 is heated	Gas	Gas and electricity
Jaroslav	50-60	One-person household	1	Own house	3+1	Gas	Gas and electricity
Ludvík	60-70	Retired couple with a handicapped daughter	3; (and 2 pairs in other flats)	Own house	3+1 (3+1 tenants and 1+1 tenants)	Gas	Gas and electricity
Marie	40-50	Single mother	1 and 3 children (one at university)	Own house	4+1	Gas	Gas and electricity
Martin	20-30	Student with girlfriend	2	Rental housing	1+1	Gas	Gas and electricity
Mikuláš	30-40	One-person household	1	Own house	2+1 (unoccupied floor)	Electricity and solid fuels	Electricity
Radim	50-60	Married couple	2	Own house	5+1	Gas + solid fuels	Gas and electricity
Romana	50-60	One-person household	1	Own house	5+1	Solid fuels + gas	Gas and electricity
Tamara	30-40	Couple with a child	3	Own house	4+kitchen corner	Electricity	Electricity
Theodora	30-40	Couple with three children	5	Own house	4+kitchen corner	Electricity and solid fuels	Electricity

Source: Compiled by authors.

9.3 Lived experiences of affected households: prevailing factors and lacking practices

The upcoming sections utilize the elements of the energy cultures framework to depict the real-life experiences of households that have been impacted by the Bohemia Energy bankruptcy. Our analysis tracks the shifts in their material conditions, examines the norms and practises they share, and highlights the practises that they lack, which could impact their ability to deal with this unforeseen event. Moreover, we concentrate on external influences and scrutinize the barriers and support systems that were either present or absent for energy-deprived households (McKague et al., 2018).

Material culture played a role in the situation of virtually all affected households. Even before the energy supplier's bankruptcy and transfer to the SLI regime, most households had been experiencing heat leakages and difficulties maintaining an adequate temperature at affordable prices. They also faced problems with dampness and mould, aggravated by insufficiently heated spaces. Low-income households, mainly pensioners, paid a higher percentage of their income on energy due to inadequately insulated dwellings.

The SLI regime made the interconnectedness of inadequate material conditions (low energy efficiency) and low incomes/high energy expenses more visible. The event brought additional financial burdens, as indicated by the fact that 14 out of 15 households have fallen into energy poverty, as per the traditional 10% indicator (Fizaine & Kahouli, 2019). For example, Božena spent 60% of her income on energy bills, Jarmila and her husband over 50%, and Jaroslav around 35%. Only one household among our respondents did not exceed the threshold, though the more favourable situation was not enough to avoid concerns about future developments. Although during interviews households demonstrated awareness of the possibility of refurbishments or solar panel installations to reduce their energy bills, most were unable to afford such measures and thus did not consider them realistic options. Most households did not believe that the state could be of any help in this situation. They expressed doubts about the accessibility of state subsidy programmes in view of the needed co-financing, the various conditions that had to be fulfilled, and the fact that reimbursement came only after investment completion (see below). Similarly, students and young adults living in rented apartments faced inadequate housing conditions. However, their options for improving energy efficiency were limited by financial constraints and the need to secure the landlord's agreement.

The source of heating and hot water is undoubtedly another essential factor in the material culture of all households. In households that had more than one type of heating at their disposal, the event led to a shift towards higher usage of traditional heating sources (mainly fuelwood) (Stojilovska et al., 2023). The more well-off households began to pursue the acquisition of new energy technologies (such as heat pumps or solar panels with energy storage facilities). Overall, the event created a strong sense of insecurity and forced households to seek security by strengthening their own self-sufficiency, depending on the material conditions at their disposal.

Romana: *I have decided to use those subsidies to get a solar panel and backup battery storage. I want to be as independent as possible (...).*

Mikuláš: In principle, I thought about how energy-dependent we are. And if the price were to increase threefold now, there's nothing we can do against it. I can stop heating and walk around in warm clothes, but I cannot turn off the fridge. Okay, I can light a candle, but I just… I need to do laundry, heat water… So that's why I decided to be more self-sufficient and get that wood-fired boiler. I for sure want to cut off the electricity and the gas as much as possible.

Regarding household practises and norms, we first observed a strong role for emotions at play among our respondents. Suddenly losing their energy services supplier and finding themselves under the SLI regime, the respondents mentioned feelings of shock, fear, and anxiety (Longhurst & Hargreaves, 2019; Martiskainen & Sovacool, 2021; Petrova & Simcock, 2021). They mostly expressed concerns about future developments, shared an impression of unpredictability, and feared high or unmanageable energy prices, unexpected payments, and debts. New deposit payments were seen as a major burden, or at least as a source of negative impact on household well-being. No matter what the primary heating system was in the household, respondents also feared both the unaffordability and physical unavailability of fuelwood, gas, and/or electricity.

Božena: *It was terrible for the psyche. I was completely out of it. I cried a lot, but the kids told me not to cry and that I couldn't do anything about it (…).*

In a few instances the event had serious mental health effects (Liddell & Morris, 2010), contributing to vicious circles already present at the household level or creating new ones that further reduced the household's ability to cope with the situation and led to additional financial exigencies. Typically, such a household had to seek therapeutic treatment or face the negative consequences of an unfavourable energy contract concluded under pressure. Many households referred to the dubious practises of some energy market actors who tried to exploit households' uncertainty and coerce them into new contracts (see below).

Bianka: *I was regularly depressed. I was depressed for six months, then I got on medication that helped me. I had anxiety, I cried, and I didn't know how to deal with it. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to pay for it. When the bill came through, I didn't know where I would get the money. It hit me hard. I also had to go to therapy and spend a lot of money on different therapy sessions.*

Enhanced reliance on energy savings was another shared norm among our respondents. Especially those households already "trapped" in unsatisfactory material conditions and facing higher energy costs considered further savings as a solution to their situation. This belief was strongly reflected in households' everyday practises. Typically, households adopted new thermal standards and reduced indoor temperatures. In extreme cases, they even self-deprived for fear of additional energy expenses. We observed households trying to warm themselves, for example, by putting on additional layers of clothing and blankets, sipping hot drinks, being physically active, or working outside the house rather than raising the temperature in the room. We also witnessed so-called spatial shrink (Feenstra et al., 2021)—i.e., a reduction in the heating space—and a strong preference for cheaper heating and lighting sources. Some households learned to switch daily tasks to nighttime or changed their previous cooking habits and laundry practises (e.g., avoiding the dryer). Although some of these practises may not necessarily have negative impacts, many reduce the quality of life of the respondents and have negative health consequences.

Interviewer: *How do you cope with a low temperature at home?*
Bianka: A combination of everything. We heat a bit, sweaters, blankets. Sometimes we take clothes on, sometimes we heat up, it depends.
Svatopluk: For example, when I'm alone in the house, I don't heat, I do something all the time, there's always work around the house, I'm not in the house all day basically.

In the given situation of energy supplier bankruptcies, we believe it is also important to examine what was missing or lacking in practices. Firstly, we came across households that lacked knowledge on how to better maintain their appliances and heating systems to improve their performance and efficiency and thereby reduce energy spending. Others faced difficulties with metre readings or even could not access the metres for their (rented) apartments. In particular, senior households lacked the ability to use the Internet to find and choose an energy supplier and conclude an online contract. They had to rely on personal appointments at branches that were often crowded with long queues. Several households even reported difficulties reaching their prospective energy supplier (see below). Finally, households were mostly not used to asking for state social benefits and had difficulties navigating through the system (e.g., obtaining and filling in the needed paperwork). In these cases, feelings of shame often played a role as a barrier to asking for help.

Interviewer: *Haven't you considered asking for some social benefit?*
Jaroslav: Which one? No, I indeed haven't tried that. I don't have the right profile for that.
Interviewer: *Profile?*
Jaroslav: In which universe does a guy who lives alone get a social benefit? The most I can get is jail if I don't pay alimony for my daughter. But the state helping me? I've never asked the state for anything, and that won't change. I'm not some kind of a leech.

Relatives or friends who were willing and able to help substantially reduced the energy vulnerability of households lacking the abovementioned practises. We have observed both a norm (households' belief that they would get help from their relatives if needed) and a practise of addressing family members in difficult situations. Especially pensioners often asked their (grand)sons and (grand)daughters for assistance in securing a new supplier and/or social benefits. Internet-savvy households, on the other hand, were better equipped to find an adequate solution, i.e., to quickly switch to a new supplier, get out of the SLI regime, and/or familiarize themselves with state social benefits and subsidy programmes (if available), without the need for any assistance.

Božena: *I was left with only 1,600 CZK (approx. 67 €) for living expenses for the entire month. So, my kids had to ask for a housing allowance. But that brought its problems, with the paperwork I didn't understand. My daughter-in-law and daughter had to do it instead of me.*

This brings us to our last point—the role of external factors. It is already clear from the above that external influences were closely intertwined with both material factors and household norms/practices. Regarding material factors, interviews with households indicate state subsidy programmes for energy efficiency measures are inaccessible for many households. As one of the latest studies demonstrates, subsidies in their current form have not effectively reached energy-poor households in the Czech Republic. Instead, households that are more economically secure and have the means to invest in energy-efficient refurbishments (even without any assistance) have benefited (Frantál & Dvořák, 2022). Unfortunately, subsidy programmes designed and implemented this way have a negligible chance of positively influencing the situation of energy poverty in the country.

External factors also influenced households' norms and practises. For example, some of the respondents experienced unfair practises from prospective energy suppliers. They were contacted via phone by various companies, even though they had never shared their contact details. In other

cases, the billing by the former energy supplier did not match the households' real energy consumption. Only if the household was prescient and took pictures of their energy metres immediately after their supplier ceased its activities would they able to seek a remedy. For example, despite the increased monthly payments for electricity, the SLI demanded an additional 12,000 CZK (approx. 500 €) from Dalibor's household. Since he had everything documented and was willing to defend himself in court, the SLI even had to refund him after a fair accounting. Unfortunately, not all households were vigilant against such practises by suppliers. One household even faced the dubious practises of energy hustlers. Another encountered a lack of transparency in billing from his landlord. This can undermine household confidence in market mechanisms.

Božena: *In September, a door-to-door salesman came by and wanted me to sign a contract amendment. I told him that it was in small print and that I couldn't read it and asked him to give me time to read it and sign it. He urged that he lived far away, had too many clients, and that it was not worth it. He insisted that it was nothing more than an amendment that they were my energy supplier. I signed it under duress, and by doing so, I made a huge mistake. Then, when I wanted to leave, I found out I couldn't and would have to pay tens of thousands to switch my supplier.*

Martin: Although we signed the contract with the energy company, the landlord did not want to show us the energy meters and charged us more every month. I demanded it several times, but he always said he would not show it to us and that we could move out if we had something against that.

Regarding more distant social relations, disappointment with the state apparatus was evident among most of our respondents. On one hand, the households believed the state underestimated the situation and failed to provide its institutions (i.e., Energy Regulatory Office—ERO) enough competencies to monitor and control the developments and provide early warnings to the customers of what might happen in the energy markets. On the other hand, already in the situation of energy supplier bankruptcy and under the SLI regime, the respondents considered the state's help insufficient or inaccessible, including absent or delayed information campaigns.

Radim: *The people who are elected don't care about ordinary people. That's the way I look at it. […] If anyone cared, it couldn't happen that way. […] The state has failed to set up the system.*

Marie: *I knew that the biggest supplier would take us over if the bankruptcy came. But no one ever told us what the prices would be. It never crossed my mind that when we have ERO, its jurisdiction is not to check if these companies are selling commodities they have secured. And they want me to do that? I'm a nurse. I didn't know what a spot price was.*

9.4 Discussion and conclusion

In conclusion, the empirical findings demonstrate the necessity for a broader understanding of energy vulnerability. The current approach used as a basis for future legislation sees energy vulnerability as a subset of energy poverty (see above). However, the collapse of energy service providers and subsequent customer transfers to the SLI regime emerged as a crucial external factor that increased households' susceptibility. Interviews with affected households highlighted the significant burden brought by the SLI pricing mechanism. The weak role of the state in

carefully drafting legislation for the SLI regime and formulating instruments to help households cope better with unexpected developments worsened the situation.

The lack of communication from the state, especially to those without internet access, seriously undermined trust in the state and its institutions (Grossmann et al., 2021). The study also revealed a new norm of loss of confidence in smaller alternative suppliers among affected households, which could have serious implications for the functioning of liberalized energy markets if confirmed on a larger scale. The majority of our respondents firmly rejected the possibility of changing their energy supplier to a lesser-known company in the future. They mostly preferred large national energy providers, with whom they eventually entered into a contract. Among our respondents, only a few households kept weighing the credibility of the supplier against the price offered.

The energy cultures framework used in this study offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the internal and external factors that can lead to households slipping into energy poverty, as well as the conditions that can help them move out of it. Furthermore, it helps identify categories of energy-poor households that require specific policy interventions (McKague et al., 2018).

Specifically, there were differences in vulnerability factors (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015) related to both material conditions and subjective norms and practises, with better socio-economic households being less affected. Many households lacked flexibility in the application of energy efficiency measures (Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015). In terms of policy implications, the state must reconsider whether its subsidy programmes align with the EU's just transition objectives as energy-poor households currently lack the financial capital to avail themselves of the subsidy programmes aimed at improving energy efficiency and transitioning to low-carbon energy sources. Though some measures to help the most vulnerable are underway, such as the New Green Savings Light programme (The Ministry of the Environment, 2023), the state must continue to work on solutions to address this issue.

"Lacking practices" also played a role in household vulnerability. While many households attempted to address this issue by emphasizing their energy-conscious behaviour, avoiding the high and sometimes unaffordable deposit payments of the SLI regime required a swift exit from this system and enrolment in a more favourable energy supply contract. Unfortunately, our survey revealed significant disparities in the respondents' ability to navigate the offers of potential suppliers, use the internet, and enter into new contracts online. Those without this experience were at a disadvantage compared to those who possessed it. Moreover, in situations of energy poverty, we observed that households often lacked the practise of applying for state social benefits, primarily due to the fear of stigmatization and shame. However, more (internet) savvy family members were critical in helping overcome these challenges. Therefore, the state must undertake targeted information campaigns and public awareness initiatives to raise awareness about energy poverty and dispel the shame and fear that prevent households from seeking assistance.

Finally, the collapse of energy suppliers, the poorly defined SLI regime, and the unpreparedness of the state are not unique to the Czech Republic. We hope this study will contribute to a better understanding of energy poverty and vulnerability in ongoing efforts to define and address this issue not only in the Czech Republic but across the EU.

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