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## FAILING TO CHANGE THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: LA RÉPUBLIQUE EN MARCHE IN THE PROCESS OF ITS INSTITUTIONAL ROOTING

Michael AUGUSTÍN<sup>1</sup>

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*The LREM's remarkable victory in the 2017 legislative elections led to the historic elimination of the traditional major parties, Republicans and Socialists, indicating a reversal of the 5th French Republic's party system polarity. Like any political party, LREM had to face several territorially determined electoral races between 2017 and 2021 – two senate, municipal, regional, and departmental elections. Territorial anchoring is a prerequisite for any party that seeks to permanently establish oneself in political life in France. The paper aims to analyse and assess whether the balance of political forces has also changed at the subnational level of politics. It tries to answer the question “Is the nature of party recomposition absolute?” or “Has LREM become rooted in other representative bodies at different government levels in France?” Following the overall developments, we argue that LREM currently fails to change the traditional poles and pivotal forces of the French political spectrum in the Senate as well as subnationally.*

**Key words:** Emmanuel Macron; La République en marche; Les Républicains; Parti socialiste; senate elections; municipal elections; regional elections.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The election of Emmanuel Macron as the eighth president since the founding of the 5th Republic has unprecedentedly marked the French political environment. Although the institutional rules of the 5th Republic encourage voters to group around one of two large party blocs, each representing different position on the political spectrum, Macron has managed to break through this competitive structure. Candidates from the two main party blocs did not even qualify for the second round of the presidential election. Republican candidate (*Les Républicains*, LR) François Fillon finished third with 20% of the vote and Benoît Hamon, the Socialist Party (*Parti socialiste*, PS) candidate, finished fifth with 6.3% behind the

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radical left-wing candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. For the first time since Charles de Gaulle's return to power, a candidate who was not supported by any of the well-established parties at the national level managed to get into the Elysee Palace. Moreover, Macron became the first President of France to win a re-election bid since Jacques Chirac won in 2002.

Macron's party, The Republic on the Move (*La République en marche*, LREM), disrupted the French party system on two levels. First, it is a quantitative level, as a new entity has appeared on the political scene, which has taken a dominant position in the so-called *majorité présidentielle* – the presidential majority – which implies the break-up of the former bipolar “cartel” of PS and the descendant of the Gaullist<sup>2</sup> party LR in the lower house of the legislature. In addition, the election results led to fundamentally different power distribution within the National Assembly, to the disadvantage of both central political forces, PS and LR. In the legislative elections, these parties gathered less than 50% of seats in the Assembly (a similar situation existed only in 1958–1962). In the background, the second round was marked by the absence of the traditional left-right (PS vs LR) duel (Durovic 2019). Dolez and Laurent (2018) show that the traditional PS vs LR duel decreased from 443 in 2012 to only 16 duels in 577 electoral districts. The coalition LREM–Democratic Movement (*Mouvement démocrate*, MoDem) competed with the right in 273 constituencies, with the left in 135 constituencies and the extreme right in 103 constituencies (Dolez and Laurent 2018). The overall result of LR and PS indicated the collapse of traditional political parties at the national level. However, at the beginning of the term, the Macron's Party had an absolute majority of legislature members - 309 out of 577 deputies. Thus, the election result not only brought a “political earthquake” (Rouban 2018), which dropped the parties on the left and the right. At the same time, the structural criteria of the former party system were significantly violated (Choffat 2017).

The 2022 legislative elections confirmed that the comeback of the “old world” of left-right bipolarity does not take place. Three new poles have emerged, representing three ideological families: liberal (presidential majority coalition *Ensemble*), nationalist (*Rassemblement national*, RN) and socialist (left-wing coalition *Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale*, NUPES). Still, it is not clear whether it is a new and absolute recomposition that will persist. Our paper aims to shed light on the following questions: does LREM represent a stable and enduring political force that will form a key pillar of the party system in the future? How has LREM become rooted in other representative bodies at different government levels in France? Is the Macronist party entrenched only at the level of national politics, or does it dominate at different territorial levels of French politics? We try to answer this question by analysing the territorial and institutional rooting ability of LREM in connection with a series of elections between 2017–2021.

To what extent LREM represents an established political force in French politics, like other major political parties, can be examined precisely in territorially determined elections. In the case of the senate, regional, departmental and municipal elections, the party's electoral success is primarily a matter of how the party has managed to penetrate the regions, establish itself at the local level and build functional party structures. We provide an analytical view of the election

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<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, this term refers to the largest political movement at the national level that Charles de Gaulle's party has ever been. We use the “Gaullist party” as a term expressing the continuity of specific political parties within the 5th Republic, not as a term describing a particular value orientation or political style (Gaullism).

results in the Senate elections in 2017 and 2020, the municipal elections in 2020, the regional and departmental elections in 2021. For each of these elections, we unified an approach so that, given the existence of diverse electoral systems, it enables us to assess the real political influence of individual parties, coalitions, alliance blocs or electoral lists. This paper does not examine the geographical distribution of voter support for LREM or the change in the voter support for other parties from a geographical perspective. Instead, our goal is to assess the overall LREM's power potential through the presence of LREM representatives and allied parties at the subnational level. We therefore decided to reflect on it through the number of seats occupied in the relevant representative bodies. In case of the Senate elections, it is the number of seats won according to the political groups created in the Senate. We preferred the number of seats won nationwide for the coalition blocks of individual electoral lists in the municipal elections. In the regional and departmental elections, we considered the sum of seats obtained nationally by members of the regional / departmental councils according to their political affiliation on the electoral list. When recalculating the seats, we proceeded following the official labels of electoral lists established by a circular of the Minister of the Interior, Christophe Castaner, on December 10, 2019, then, after its suspension, a new circular of February 4, 2020. In this way, we can observe the institutional entrenchment of LREM as a new political entity at various territorial levels in collective political bodies. This approach will allow us to identify the extent of the political recomposition of the party system and the change in the power potential of its pillars at various government / territorial levels.

## 2 CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Evans and Ivaldi (2018) examined a set of political conditions and parallels between Sarkozy's and Holland's terms, characterized by strong institutional and competitive inertia. Their main argument was that these variables worked similarly for both presidents, resulting in unprecedented political developments. Fougère and Barthold (2020) state that the elections in 2017 were carried out in an atmosphere of anti-elite *dégagisme*, which allowed Macron to occupy a broad space in the middle of the political spectrum, leaving behind a very specific political agenda of LR and PS. The remarkable claim "neither left nor right", which has been rather typical of anti-establishment forces as the National Front<sup>3</sup>, sounded in the campaign from Emmanuel Macron himself.

The polarity of the French party system is represented by ideologically different allied blocs of political parties. The most common interpretative framework for depicting this polarity was the spatial metaphor of the left-right continuum (Knapp 2004; Bornschier and Lachat 2009; Evans and Ivaldi 2013; Cole 2013; Gougou and Labouret 2013). Due to its dichotomous nature, this polarity still maintains an extraordinary influence in French politics (Andersen and Evans 2003). It implies the two poles of the political universe around which the pivotal political forces of the 5th Republic were concentrated: the Gaullist and Socialist pole. Various attributes have been used in recent decades to express the internal dynamics of this political polarity: *quadrille bipolaire*, bipolar multipartism or tripartition (König and Waldwogel 2021). The breakdown of this structure by Macron and LREM in 2017 has given impetus to reconsider the nature of the political spectrum in France.

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<sup>3</sup> From 2018 existing under the new name National Rally (*Rassemblement national*, RN).

The future of the Republicans and the right-centre remained uncertain after the leading figures left LR in several waves, at the earliest in 2017, Xavier Bertrand, head of the *Hauts-de-France* region, later, other personalities left after the European elections in 2019, including Valérie Pécresse, president of the *Île-de-France* region. After almost two years and a catastrophic defeat in the European elections, the extremely low popularity of the party chairman Laurent Wauquiez led to his abdication. In addition, several leading Republicans supported Macron's policies and reforms, which rather evoked the traditional centre-right agenda and, as a result, it was problematic for LR to criticize government proposals (Rispin 2021). However, the staffing crisis was not a reality only on the right. It became evident among the Socialists even before the presidential election, in which they were not able to offer any "big name". Some perceive the causes of PS's decline as a longer-term process linked to the trend set by François Hollande and linked to the party's identity problem (Treille 2019), its ideological emptiness and "rightwardization" of the party (Lefebvre 2017) or the internal division of the left movement as such (Wormser 2017). However, what affected the Socialists the most was the gradual regrouping of the traditional left-wing electorate and the emergence of new cleavages described by Piketty (2018). After the bitter failure of 2017, when many PS voters supported Macron and LREM, the rise from the ashes is highly complicated for the party, especially as the PS remains highly divided (Bréchon 2019a) and impoverished by many prominent cadres who have chosen to leave politics.

All the authors mentioned above dealt with the implications of Macron's and LREM's victory for national politics. However, they do not discuss whether a similar political earthquake occurred at the subnational level. Lefebvre (2020), Margulies (2020) and Costa (2019) analysed the preconditions for the municipal establishment LREM in terms of members' activation in building local networks and structures or criticized the verticality of the candidate selection process and "de-professionalization" of political life. Emmanuel Macron's political figure was built against PS but also with it, as, especially in the beginning, he relied on socialist networks and converted "pink" notables (Dolez, Fretel and Lefebvre 2019). 47% of the LREM's deputies elected in 2017 represented politicians who already had political experience as local politicians and 16 % others as political assistants, but 44 % were complete political newcomers (Ollion 2021). Major parties in France have long benefited from established local / regional structures which tended to create stronger relationships between voters and their representatives. Strong party personalities on a national scale were usually regional presidents or mayors of big cities. In the past, the most prominent ones from PS or LR, who had the potential to gather the most votes, were recruited to the party leadership and potentially nominated for the legislative or presidential elections. In 2012, 82 % of members of parliament and 77 % of senators held the dual mandate (Cumul des mandats 2020). However, after adopting the new law in 2014, the cumulation of a National Assembly or Senate member with a local executive mandate (mayor, president, or vice president of a department / region) is not possible anymore. This reform fundamentally changed the balance of the French political system (Dolez 2015). The new legal obstacle may have resulted in withdrawing candidates, thereby creating opportunities for other, less locally well-established candidates.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> However, the verification of this hypothesis would require additional research, since we have not found comprehensive data that would document the share of outgoing MPs with an executive local mandate who decided not to run in the legislative elections in 2017.



Formal membership in political parties with enrolled individual members who participated in the local party's life became the widely accepted political ideal of representative democracy during the second half of the twelfth century in Western European countries. Nowadays, membership-based local organisations and the subscriber-democracy party's model are challenged (Scarrow 2015). However, the current transformation of political parties is not just about the LREM case. Except for Emmanuel Macron, there was Jean-Luc Mélenchon in 2017 and, most recently Éric Zemmour in 2022, who followed the party's model as an ad hoc organisation established for their personal political ambitions (Lefebvre 2022). LREM, presented as a bottom-up project, is in fact a top-down party that has managed to implement a flexible structure allowing an engagement that corresponds to the multi-speed membership model introduced by Scarrow (2015).

The LREM's political representation at the local level had not been significant in terms of the number of elected representatives. In addition, the party enthusiasm of the fans and sympathisers who declared their affiliation with LREM in 2017 gradually subsided, and they left the movement's networks. In this respect, a recomposition similar to the national one was expected to happen at regional and local level (Bréchon 2019b). Therefore, we examined whether LREM has the necessary prerequisites to become a major political party at subnational levels of politics. Our paper offers an overview of how LREM is institutionally entrenched in democratically elected representative bodies across all levels of French politics. The objective is to analyse and assess the character of the political recomposition caused by the arrival of LREM on the scene. Does LREM have a firm position to stand compared with traditional parties at levels other than national politics?

### 3 FRENCH SENATE ELECTIONS IN 2017 AND 2020

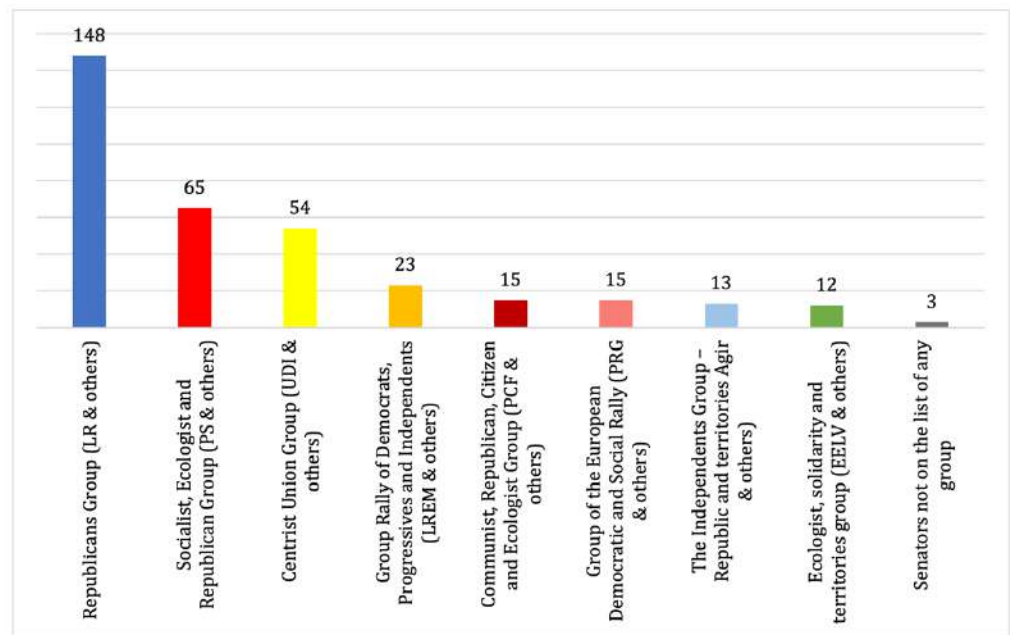
French senators are elected indirectly by the Electoral College, which is 95% made up of delegates from local politicians. A two-round majority vote applies if one or two senators (less populated departments) are elected within a constituency. A proportional representation is in place in the larger departments, where three or more senators are elected.

The Senate elections in the fall of 2017 was the first test for LREM since its unprecedented victory in the legislative elections. About half of the senators (170 seats) were renewed during this election. The existing electoral system in the Senate elections, which reflects the logic of municipal elections, does not favour new political actors considerably, as these Senate elections have revealed (Hugues 2017). It is because voters-delegates are members of local, regional and departmental councils, and during this period, LR and PS were still the main political forces at the subnational level. The problem of the LREM to anchor at the subnational level of politics proved to be a critical factor in the movement in the territorially determined elections. While LR managed to take 145 seats in the Senate and PS 78 seats, LREM had only 21 senators (Sénat: composition finale des groupes politiques... 2017). Therefore, the Senat remained the counterweight to the French legislature's lower house with an unchanged power balance.

The 2020 Senate elections highlighted this principal weakness of the presidential party. The elections confirmed the overwhelming dominance of the LR in the

Senate (148 senators), and LREM remained the fourth political power with 23 senators. However, this result did not significantly deteriorate or enhance its position in the Senate (Mazuir 2020). The Senate elections indicate the close relationship between the central state authority and politicians at the local level. It is also one of the reasons why LREM is at a disadvantage in terms of the party's institutional rooting. The LREM's failure lies in reaction to several unpopular measures taken by the government majority to save on local governments and deprive them of part of their revenues, for example, the abolition of the parliamentary reserve, from which some municipalities benefited, the abolition of the housing tax for 80% of households or the reduction of subsidized jobs (Forray 2020). Due to this dynamic, LR and PS continue to represent the main political pillars in the Senate.

FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN THE SENATE AFTER THE 2020 SENATE ELECTIONS BY A POLITICAL GROUP



Source: Customized compilation according to [senatoriales2020.senat.fr](https://senatoriales2020.senat.fr).

#### 4 FRENCH MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN 2020

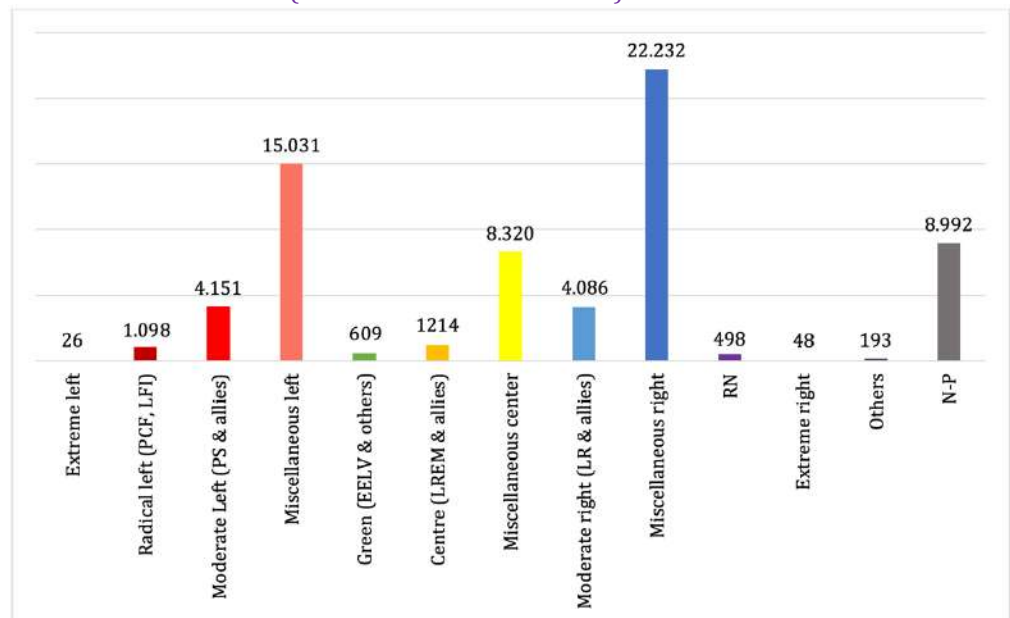
Municipal elections in France take place in two rounds. In communes with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, two-round majority-at-large voting with panachage is used. A candidate is elected if he/she obtains an absolute majority of votes and at least one-quarter of the number of individuals registered on the electoral rolls. The remaining seats are filled in the second round. There is required a simple majority for the candidate to be elected. In municipalities with more than 1,000 inhabitants, elections occur based on a two-round proportional representation system with a majority bonus. The electoral list, which obtains an absolute majority of votes in the first round, automatically wins half of the seats. The remaining seats are redistributed on a proportional logic among all the lists, which have obtained more than 5% of the votes. The second round is organised if any list did not obtain an absolute majority of votes.

The municipal elections represented a fundamental step in preparing for the upcoming senatorial race because the mayors and municipal councillors constitute the bulk of the Electoral College. The 2020 municipal elections created a completely different picture of the political map of France compared to the

widespread impression after the elections in 2017. Therefore, they also aroused discussions about whether the party system is heading back “into the old world”, signalling the end of the political recomposition that emerged after the election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017. The elections brought small gains for LREM and historical losses for RN in larger cities. On the other hand, they proved great support for the traditional right (LR) and relatively large strength of the traditional left (PS) and the Greens in the large cities, in which Macron and LREM scored above expectations in 2017. Compared to PS and LR, LREM achieved more satisfactory gains in cities with less than 30,000 inhabitants.

Nevertheless, Martial Foucault points out that the results of municipal elections are a very unreliable variable to predict the winner of a future presidential election (Caro and Le Borgne 2020). According to several opinion polls at that time, Macron and Le Pen were far ahead of other potential candidates at the national level (Le climat électoral 2020). Moreover, in terms of party identification, the three parties that failed in the municipal elections (LREM, RN and LFI) would win more than 60% of the vote in the first round of the presidential election. It has also been demonstrated that traditional political parties (LR and PS), which have operated alongside strong regional and local structures, still hold viable local candidates around which voters gather. As a result, a certain asymmetry is constructed, where, at different levels of politics, citizens support various political forces and thus create distinct structures of party influence in parallel. In other words, considerable independence between national and political life manifested in these elections.

FIGURE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN MUNICIPAL COUNCILS ACCORDING TO THE POLITICAL AFFILIATION OF THEIR MEMBERS GIVEN THE PARTY LABELS IN THE 2020 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS (WITHOUT NON-DECLARED)



Source: Customized compilation according to france-politique.fr.

LREM, a new movement that has been formed as a one-man project and it has not been built from the bottom upon the principle of strong local and regional structures, lags far behind other major political parties. Its ambition not to remain a solely national party but to establish itself in the regions and locally, as close as possible to the electorate, has not been fulfilled, despite the impressive results that Macron has been able to achieve in large cities in 2017. The achievements of the mainstream centre-left in the major cities, and the resilience

of the old mainstream parties, suggest that LREM has failed to encapsulate the urban electorate in a firm coalition (Margulies 2020).

Curiously, given the dynamics of municipal elections and the tendency to keep chances before the second round, it was not uncommon to see LR and LREM joint alliances in Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Lyon or Tours. At the same time, the Socialists and left-wing candidates formed partnerships with the Greens. Coalitions between the LREM and the left in the first and second rounds were rare and occurred in smaller cities (Bréchon 2020). RN still holds its influence over their traditional bastions, especially in Northern and Southern France.

Above all, the political dimension of municipal elections, especially in smaller cities, should not be overestimated since partisan logic in municipal elections is suppressed, while the reputation and individuality of specific candidates are the primary concern. Candidates affiliated with *Divers gauche* (Miscellaneous left), *Divers droite* (Miscellaneous right), or *Divers centre* (Miscellaneous centre) received an immense number of seats, indicating the weakening of partisan link and reluctance of candidates to identify with the party structures of major political parties (Caro and Le Borgne 2020).

## 5 REGIONAL AND DEPARTMENTAL ELECTIONS

The regional elections, initially scheduled for March 2021, were postponed by three months due to the Covid-19 pandemic and held simultaneously with the departmental elections. They took place for the second time following the adjustments resulting from the law of 2015. According to the law, the number of metropolitan regions has been reduced from 22 to 13. Seats in regional councils are occupied using proportional representation lists with a majority bonus in two rounds. The electoral list that obtains an absolute majority of votes in the first round automatically receives 25% of the regional council seats. The remaining seats are redistributed following the proportional system among all electoral lists that exceeded the quorum of 5% of the votes. If this condition is not met, a second round is organized, for each electoral list that received at least 10% of the votes in the first round (lists can be merged between the first and second round). The distribution of seats is carried out in the identical method as in the first round, whereas the simple majority is sufficient to receive the majority bonus.

The 2021 regional and departmental elections, the last ones before the upcoming struggle for the Elysée Palace, should reveal how the parties' electoral potential and the balance of power in individual regions are distributed. These elections experienced a record level of abstentionism, when roughly one-third of voters came to the polls in the first and second round. These elections were marked by the dynamics of the presidentialisation of the French regions. Xavier Bertrand and Valérie Pécresse tested their chances of being considered as potential presidential candidates. In addition, France's national security issues dominated the election campaign. In the aftermath of the assassination of Samuel Paty, the LR and RN criticized the government for failing to protect its citizens from radical Islamism. Part of the left criticized Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin for police violence against demonstrators in the streets. The government at the time was struggling with the economic and health consequences of the Covid-19 virus. On another front, Macron's administration tried to enforce the "Islamist separatism" bill and the Global Security Law, which gave police forces more autonomy and personal protection. These elections confirmed the hypothesis that voters use the regional elections as a national referendum on the ruling government and

express their opinions regarding government's performance (Fauvelle-Aymar and Lewis-Beck 2011).

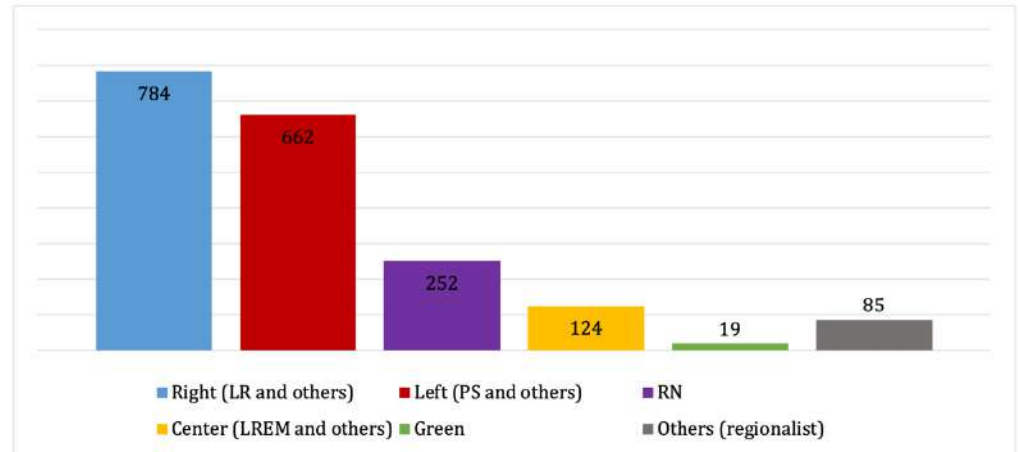
At the same time, it was the last test for LREM to demonstrate its successful regional entrenchment over the past four years. A key message of the regional elections is that the political map of the French regions will remain shining in two colours – blue and red. The incumbents have confirmed their positions in the regions. The candidates of the centre-right parties will stand at the head of the seven regional councils, where LR was the central subject of the electoral coalition. In the other five regions, left-wing coalitions led by PS triumphed. In the three overseas regions, the regional leftist forces have won. In Corsica, the ballot was dominated by *Femu a Corsica* as representative of the Corsican autonomist forces. In Guadeloupe, the electoral list of regionalist social-liberal party *Guadeloupe unie, solidaire et responsable* (GUSR) prevailed in the coalition with LREM. This party is very close and connected to LREM emphasizing the fact that Ary Chalus, President of the Guadeloupe's Regional Council, is also a member of LREM executive body. These elections were a major earthquake not only for LREM, but also for RN and Marine Le Pen. Macron's movement and its allies (*majorité présidentielle*) won 7.12% of the vote in the second round (more than 3% less than in the first round), and in three regions, their candidates did not manage to exceed the second-round threshold.

LREM and allies' candidates scored low in the second round compared to the first round. Some voters preferred to cast a "useful" vote for some of the electoral lists having the highest rank following the first-round results. The presence of larger constituencies did not favour LREM, although there were expectations that the presidential party could benefit from more evenly distributed voting preferences like the national level. The same applies to the proportional representation system, which helped LREM, for example, in the European elections in 2019. Naturally, the presidential party is sanctioned by part of its electorate. Disappointment with government policies has led to a massive absenteeism or the voters has returned to its previous political orientation (Bréchon 2021). Data from the *Ifop* survey of the first round of elections clearly document that up to 38% of respondents who supported Emmanuel Macron in the first round of the presidential election, they voted for the left and the greens in the regional elections, and 30% of Macron's former voters supported the right (*Régionales 2021 – sondage jour du vote... 2021*). In the end, LREM did not win the ballot in any metropolitan region. Moreover, LREM and its allies are the fourth largest political force in terms of the number regional councils' members.

The departmental elections to the ninety-five departmental councils are based on a two-round majority vote. The nomination in the individual constituencies, represented by the cantons, can be submitted in a man-women pair. To be elected in the first round, the couple must obtain an absolute majority of the votes and, at least, the votes of 25% registered voters. Only couples who received at least 12.5% of the votes in the first round can run in the second round, with a simple majority sufficient for election.



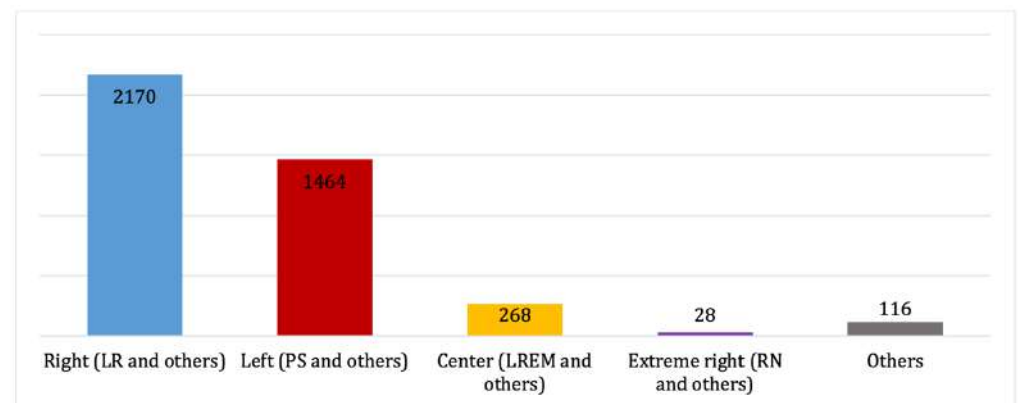
FIGURE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS OF REGIONAL COUNCILS ACCORDING TO THE POLITICAL AFFILIATION OF MEMBERS GIVEN THE PARTY LABELS IN THE 2021 REGIONAL ELECTIONS



Source: Customized compilation according to france-politique.fr.

At the departmental level, similarly, traditional political forces have won. LR gained political leadership in 45 departments, other right-wing parties in another 20 departments. PS governs in 21 departments and the other left-wing parties in five other departments. LREM achieved victory in two departments and other allied centrist forces equally in two departments. The total number of departmental councils' members by political affiliation, apart from RN, copies the trend from the regional councils. Similarly, like at the regional level, LR and the centre-right parties became the absolute winners at the departmental level. The power shares in terms of the total seats allocated to LREM and their allies are almost equivalent: in regional councils, their profit is 6.4%, in departmental councils, they occupy 6.6% of all seats.

FIGURE 4: DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS OF DEPARTMENTAL COUNCILS ACCORDING TO THE POLITICAL AFFILIATION OF MEMBERS GIVEN THE PARTY LABELS IN THE 2021 DEPARTMENTAL ELECTIONS



Source: Customized compilation according to interieur.gouv.fr.

Five years after the presidential election, which indicated a deep party recomposition and a potential break of the right-wing cleavage in Macron's favour, the regional and departmental elections can be interpreted as "old-world revenge". Last senate and municipal elections indicated that the Macronist party had failed to get into the regions in five years and establish itself locally. These elections confirmed the assumption that LREM does not yet have strong enough support in the metropolitan regions of France to stand up to the traditional major parties, which still benefit from the established regional and local structures.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This article aimed to find an answer to the question of whether the massive political recomposition we witnessed in national politics in 2017 also took place at other levels of politics in France. We sought to analyse the extent of institutional rooting at the subnational level for the presidential party LREM, which, after the electoral victory of Emmanuel Macron, performs as a new political pole in the National Assembly. We examined whether the overall power balance also changed in other representative bodies such as the Senate, municipal, regional, and departmental councils in a series of elections between 2017 and 2021.

An essential feature of the French political system is the scenario occurring after Chirac's electoral calendar reform. In line with this setting, voters in the National Assembly elections will coherently support the victorious presidential party, whose candidate was elected a month earlier in the presidential election: this happened in 2002, 2007, 2012 and 2017 (Evans and Ivaldi 2018). Political scientist Matthew Shugart even designates the period between the presidential election and the affirmative legislative elections as "honeymoon" (Shugart 2017). Evans and Ivaldi (2017) claim that the 2017 French legislative elections took place in the broader context of confirmatory legislative elections in France. LREM's victory is also a by-product of the broader institutional logic of "honeymoon" presidential races. However, the 2022 legislative elections confirmed this logic to a very limited extent since voters gave the presidential coalition of parties only a relative majority of seats in the National Assembly.

The sequence of elections that followed the elections to the legislature in 2017 does not yet indicate that large political recomposition is definitive or absolute. In fact, the 2017 legislative elections were the last and only in which LREM achieved a convincing triumph. There has been no chain of electoral victories that would lead to a complete overturning of political reality at other political levels. LREM has failed to change the traditional poles and pivotal forces of the French political spectrum in territorially determined elections in the Senate as well as subnationally. The Senate, municipal, departmental, or regional councils continue to be dominated by representatives of traditional major political parties – LR, PS and their natural right-wing or left-wing allies. We observe certain institutional inertia at the local and regional levels, where citizens prefer incumbent candidates to newcomers. In regional elections, voters have elected incumbents as presidents of regional councils in all 12 metropolitan regions. In municipal elections in 75 municipalities with at least 70,000 inhabitants, incumbent mayors won in 66.6% of cases. After the 2019 Senate elections, incumbent senators occupied more than half of all seats in the Senate. All indicators reveal that the asymmetry between national and subnational policy has increased. While the factor mobilizing voters at the national level is primarily the personality of Macron and Le Pen, at the local and regional level, the French prefer political stability, experience, and continuity. In addition, citizens evaluating the government's performance generally tend to view parties in government more critically in mid-term elections. This has led either to unprecedented electoral abstentionism in municipal and regional polls or to vote for well-established candidates, accompanied by a return to traditional major political parties.

Lefebvre (2022) assumes that it is not a political priority for LREM to build and maintain a membership base that is territorially established. Scarrow (2015) captures the essence of LREM's existence by claiming that party membership is currently a commodity that can be obtained online from a national party, it can no longer be obtained by connecting with a local party branch. *Raison d'être* of LREM is to dominate national political life so that the president has a comfortable majority in the legislature. All that remains to LREM's political novices is to be a committed and obedient component of the presidential majority: they can owe their political success to the president and not to their local anchoring (Lefebvre 2019) or the enormous political effort they would perform at the local level. As a party, LREM intentionally devotes most of its political energy, apart from presidential elections, to recruiting candidates for legislative elections, functioning much more effectively in the role of an "elevator" to the highest political positions than in putting down roots locally. In this way, it is very similar to the national organisations of Republicans and Democrats in the U. S., which are mobilised primarily at the time of jointly held presidential and congressional elections. LREM has served as an excellent career accelerator for its candidates, and many managed to bypass classic party pipelines: LREM deputies elected in 2017 spent an average of 5.7 years in politics before being elected, compared to 19 years for LR deputies and 20 years for deputies of PS (Ollion 2021).

As Evans (2020) and Mongrain (2022) argued, it is too preliminary to conclude that the new political recomposition represents a longer-lived realignment. Moreover, it does not appear to be absolute because it does not take place at all levels of politics in France. LREM as a party has not been built from the bottom on a dense network of party structures at the local level. It has been designed primarily as a formation around the personality of Emmanuel Macron. As a result, LREM has failed in elections that are territorially determined and depend on firm local or regional structures. Institutional entrenchment of LREM at subnational level is apparently a long road with an uncertain outcome.

To conclude, we remain stuck between different poles of normativity. There is a set of expectations largely prevailing in political theory, and LREM is, naturally, confronted with them. For instance, the political parties cannot exist only as a laboratory of ideas or as an elevator to the highest functions at the national level (LREM: "Il y a un problème d'identité..." 2020), or that they are supposed to be built from the bottom up, playing their role by acting at the local level, keeping in touch with citizens and thus having knowledge of the region and the capacity to affect local events. However, it seems the "old-school" partisan model does not belong to the visions that Macronism aspire to follow.

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## NEUSPEH SPREMEMBE POLITIČNE KRAJINE: LA RÉPUBLIQUE EN MARCHE V PROCESU INSTITUCIONALNEGA UKORENINJENJA

*Izjemna zmaga LREM na francoskih parlamentarnih volitvah leta 2017 je privedla do zgodovinske izločitve tradicionalnih strank, republikancev in socialistov, kar kaže na preobrat polarnosti strankarskega sistema pete francoske republike. Kot vsaka politična stranka se je morala tudi LREM med letoma 2017 in 2021 soočiti z več teritorialno določenimi volilnimi tekmami – z dvema senatnima, občinskimi, regionalnimi in departmajskimi volitvami. Teritorialna zasidranost je predpogoj za vsako stranko, ki se želi trajno uveljaviti v francoskem političnem življenju. Prispevek želi analizirati in oceniti, ali se je razmerje političnih sil spremenilo tudi na subnacionalni ravni politike. Poskuša odgovoriti na vprašanje »Ali je narava strankarske rekonpozicije absolutna?« ali »Ali se je LREM uveljavil v drugih predstavniških telesih na različnih ravneh francoske oblasti?« Glede na splošni razvoj dogodkov trdimo, da LREM trenutno ne uspe spremeniti tradicionalnih polov in osrednjih sil francoskega političnega spektra v senatu in na subnacionalni ravni.*

**Ključne besede:** Emmanuel Macron; La République en marche; Les Républicains; Parti socialiste; volitve v senat; občinske volitve; regionalne volitve.

# CENTRAL EUROPEAN LEADERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE MIGRATION AND THE MIGRATION CRISIS

Peter CSANYI and Rudolf KUCHARČÍK<sup>1</sup>

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*With the number of migrants and refugees knocking on Europe's doors relatively stable, there is now a sense of relief at the EU political level. The EU leaders confirmed a shift in their focus from internal and structural to external and security dimensions of the migration challenge. However, the policy shift in the EU's strategy on migration has not been fully accepted by the Visegrad Group countries (V4). This article examines the national policy discourse and government policies on migration in these four respective countries, focused primarily on the period from mid-2015 to the end of 2018. The authors argue that the problem here lies in the different approaches towards migration held by EU member states. Different migratory traditions are one of the key issues related to the misunderstanding among the states. Their approaches are determined by their geographical locations and migration histories. The main aim of this article is to analyze, compare, and to give some clarity to the positions held by the V4 countries and their political leaders. Even though apparently, they hold opposite positions towards migration, the article finds that they share some common features such as a denial of being an asylum country and the absence of a related public policy.*

**Key words:** migration; political leaders; Visegrad Group, European Union; refugees.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The increased inflow of asylum seekers over the last years instigated fierce debates among European policy makers about the appropriate way to handle this new "crisis" (Hercowitz-Amir et al. 2017). As member states failed to agree on which rules to implement, a joint European reaction remained absent, and the

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limits of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) became apparent (Niemann and Zaun 2018). Some countries, such as Germany, advocated for relocation schemes and a pragmatic response. Yet others, including the Visegrad Group countries, opposed the introduction of quota and the idea of burden-sharing (Castells 2018). This lack of effective cooperation and the inability to develop harmonized asylum policies have intensified cleavages between states that pursue more restrictive policies, and nations that are more open and welcoming toward newcomers (Bakker et al. 2016).

These opposing political reactions coincide with two broader conflicting perspectives on the desired design of asylum policies and the approach in handling the renewed inflow of asylum seekers (Triandafyllidou 2018). On the one hand, the humanitarian perspective emphasizes the importance of open policies, a welcoming and solidary culture, and compassion with refugees and asylum seekers. On the other hand, the exclusionary perspective advocates for the restricted admission of asylum seekers and understands the inflow of asylum seekers as European crisis that is above all damaging to the well-being of the native population (De Cleen et al. 2017). This perspective has mainly been advocated by populist radical right-wing parties across Europe.

While there is growing scholarly attention for these deepening political cleavages and their implications for the European integration project (Zaun 2018), there is far less insight into whether this context has also instigated polarization between European populations in terms of attitudes toward humanitarian vs. exclusionary asylum policies. In the light of the current political divides, the question remains how arguments used on either side of the humanitarian-exclusionary spectrum are echoed in public opinion. Understanding popular attitudes toward asylum policy is crucial to grasp the dynamics of policy-making as well as the intergroup climates wherein asylum seekers must be embedded. To remedy this knowledge gap, this study uncovers the preferences of European citizens for asylum policies that are aimed at either curbing the inflow or giving access to larger numbers of asylum seekers.

Most of the public does not oppose allowing refugees to stay in a given country (especially in Western European countries), but the current political context warrants deeper understanding of European citizens' attitudes toward asylum policies. The current situation differs profoundly in terms of the inflow rate of asylum seekers as well as in the cultural background of most applicants (arguments of Central and Eastern European countries).

The aim of this article is to try to uncover how Central European political parties' and political leaders' attitudes toward asylum policy and migration take shape within the current social-economic context and how they are dependent of the various national contexts across Europe (Bachman 2016). To achieve the given aim, we decided to use as our primary sources of analysis data from The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and GLOBSEC.

As Europe struggles to receive and integrate the massive influx of asylum seekers and migrants that began in mid-2015, the continent seems to once again be divided between West and East. The countries of Central Europe argued vehemently against plans to relocate asylum seekers across the European Union (EU) (a proposal that was backed by Germany and other Western European countries). In September 2015, the Visegrad Group (composed of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) released a joint statement saying any EU proposal leading to the introduction of mandatory and permanent quota for

solidarity measures would be unacceptable for them (Van Hootehem et al. 2020). The four Visegrad Group countries have taken a strong stand against mandatory EU quotas for refugees. This reflects both concerns about the cultural integration of migrants and a sense that the European Commission's proposals are too great an infringement of national sovereignty. Hungary has experienced the largest influx of refugees and has responded in a particularly confrontational tone. However, anti-migrant rhetoric has also been used by prominent figures in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, and public opinion is very negative across the region. All four countries are now under significant pressure from the EU and Western Europe to revise their opposition to the quotas, but domestic political considerations mean that a meaningful compromise on the issue is unlikely. Even nowadays the tensions between the Visegrad Group countries and the EU continue.

## 2 “MIGRATION CRISIS” IN VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES AND MIGRATION ATTITUDES OF NATIONAL PARLIAMENTARY ELITES

Central European countries not only are geographically close, but also share similar history, culture and economy. All of them experienced communism and since their collapse have been developing democratic institutions based on the rule of law. All of them now, and Hungary and Poland in particular, are experiencing populist ideology, the questioning of human rights frameworks and an anti-EU discourse - all of which are formally supported or even promoted by their respective governments. Another element they have in common is the quite homogeneous composition of each society and a rather low level of immigration - the highest in the Czech Republic but still not exceeding 5% of the general population. Although only Hungary was directly affected by the so-called migration crisis in 2015, the EU-wide debate on asylum seekers and refugees and the policy towards them strongly influenced all the societies' perceptions and resulted in anti-immigrant attitudes towards refugees (presented as 'bogus refugees' or 'purely economic migrants').

The opinion poll conducted in October 2015 in all Visegrad Group countries demonstrated very negative attitudes of respondents towards immigrants. More than three fourths of all respondents in each country (except Poland) claimed that immigrants' presence will lead to a deterioration of the way of life and that immigrants are responsible for spreading atypical diseases. For more than two thirds of respondents (again except for Poland), immigration to their countries was perceived as out of control and immigrants were seen as individuals contributing to the increase of criminality (CBOS 2015). In this poll, the Polish society was the most welcoming compared to other V4 societies, but negative attitudes towards immigrants in Poland developed in the next few months, so we can say that the situation in all countries is quite similar. In research conducted in January– February 2017 among young people (15–24 years old) in Central European countries (covering V4), immigration and so-called Islamic terrorism were considered, respectively, as the most and second-most important issue that the EU is dealing with at the moment – 75–83% respondents from V4 ranked it that way. Between 60 and 70% of respondents agreed with the statement that immigrants are a threat to the public safety, and more than 70% were against accepting refugees fleeing from their country of origin. (Kucharczyk and Łada 2017).

The refugee crisis in Europe has fuelled nationalist and xenophobic attitudes among citizens of the European Union. The politics of phobias unwrapped the dynamics of ethnocentric and discriminatory campaigns against immigrants. It emboldened right-wing populist parties to unleash a new wave of xenophobic mobilization against “the enemy from abroad” (Pelinka 2013) by creating fear of the consequences of immigration (Wodak 2015). Public opinion translated into voting behaviour and political decisions became a source of strength for nationalist anti-immigrant movements and parties across Europe. Central Europe is no exception, although the region has not experienced a long-term, massive inflow of these refugees thus far. However, the issue of immigrants coming to Europe from the Middle East and Africa has left a deep mark on political discourse and for now has brought about specific political consequences. A new political narrative has exploited deeply rooted resentments, complexes, and fears, which has led to the politicization and securitization of the migration and refugee issues. Central Europe is one of the arenas of the public discourse on immigration and the international protection of refugees. The political arena has been stigmatized by ethno-nationalist narratives, projected onto societies by governments and some nationalist and populist political parties.

Why was the radical policy response to the Europe-wide refugee crisis started in Central Europe in the mid-2010s? The growing resentment against immigrants accompanied the exceptional inflow of “strangers” from Asian and African countries. Regardless of the unprecedented scale of the migration crisis, popular preferences for fending off foreigners and preserving national integrity were nothing unusual; they had occurred on various occasions in Europe prior to the developments of the mid-2010s. Ethnocentric, xenophobic and racist attitudes have been intensified in times of emergency caused by internal cleavages, integration challenges, and external pressures (Levy 2010).

There are three reasons in the case of Visegrad Group. Firstly, the governments of the Visegrad Group countries adopted an uncompromising stance against refugees and coordinated their policies on the regional level. Secondly, they deliberately disavowed the rights of refugees by considering them a sub-category of voluntary migrants. Accordingly, they expunged the term “refugee” from the official discourse of migration. Thirdly, the semantic eradication of refugees was a deliberate ploy for deflecting criticism of intolerance towards exiles and the delegitimization of asylum seekers (Gruszczak 2021).

Since the end of the World War II migration to Europe unfolded in several waves. A wider geopolitical event such as 2003 Iraq conflict or Arab Spring in 2011 triggered waves distinct in immigrant populations. The most recent arrivals after Syrian crisis in 2015 and 2020 were the most diversified in terms of country of origin, migration motives and structure of migrant populations (Van Mol and de Valk 2016). Historical migratory waves document that immigration is not an unusual or insurmountable challenge for host societies. However, large numbers of Muslim immigrants along the European Union (EU’s) border in summer 2015 and in spring 2020 clearly show that immigration may become a potent socioeconomic and political challenge for host countries where prompt and adequate government reactions are called for. In summer 2015, Germany welcomed over a million of Middle Eastern immigrants, while Hungary built a fence on its borders with Serbia and Croatia to contain illegal immigration (Simonovits 2020).



Absent harmonized EU immigration policy these contrasting approaches to immigration by EU members call for greater attention to immigration attitudes of national elites. Immigration attitudes are commonly studied at citizen level while elite attitudes across Europe are widely neglected (Davidov et al., 2020). To fill this gap, let us look at the immigration attitudes among national parliamentary elite (MPs) across Western, but especially in Central EU member states (Visegrad Group). MPs should be top-ranking politicians with legislative expertise, the ability to influence policy-making and wide powers to control the government (Yamamoto 2007). As experts, they may influence positions of their parties on immigration and participate in various EU immigration focus groups (Oliveira et al. 2014). The study of immigration attitudes is an important complement to better-established manifesto-based research because analysing individual MPs can account for heterogeneity of immigration preferences within a single party. It also has important implications for political representation, policy-making and political polarization. Different considerations MPs take in the account when thinking about immigration might affect the agenda of political competition or intensify polarization where it was previously low or moderate. Also, the way MPs see immigration may influence citizens' opinion, thus forming and/or strengthening political representation (Magnani 2012).

Comparing the two regions (Western Europe and Central Europe) is warranted, because countries within these regions share similar socioeconomic characteristics, but are still profoundly different from one another. While Western EU countries are established democracies with robust economies and high levels of immigration, Central EU countries share a communist past, weaker degree of economic development and low levels of immigration.

It looks like that social identity (religiosity) and political ideology (positions on general left–right scale) rather than economic prospects influence immigration attitudes of national MPs. Central European MPs positioned further to the right of the ideological scale are not more anti-immigrant than Western European MPs. On the other hand, economic left in Central Europe tends to be more anti-immigrant than economic left in Western Europe (Kocijan and Kukec 2022).

In Western Europe, and, to a weaker extent, in the arrival countries of Southern Europe, the attitudes towards immigrants of left-wing and right-wing citizens became more polarized during the refugee crisis, especially if a country experienced many asylum applications. In Central Europe, no significant differences exist between the attitudes towards immigration of left-wing and right-wing citizens to start with. In these countries the refugee crisis (as reflected in the number of applications across Europe as a whole) was accompanied by a slight, but not significant, increase in anti-immigration attitudes among citizens at both sides of the ideological spectrum. In all parts of Europe, attachment to the national identity seemed to have been hardly affected, apart from the countries affected the most by large numbers of refugees arriving (Greece, Italy, and Spain).

How do we explain the differences between the various regions of Europe as well as the differences between the two dependent variables? In general, we find it plausible that the distinct patterns are the result of how the political debate on the refugee crisis developed in these countries. We believe that left-leaning actors in Western and Southern Europe were more likely to speak out favourably about refugees than in Central Europe. This is to be expected, because expert survey data show that many Central-Eastern Europe left-wing parties tend to take substantially more critical stands on immigration than left-wing parties in Western Europe (Marks et al. 2006). So, if left-wing actors in Western and

Southern Europe responded differently to the refugee crisis than left-wing actors in Central-Eastern Europe, diverging patterns would be expected (Van der Brug and Harteveld 2021).

The reactions of the Central European political leaders were mostly unanimous regarding the migration crisis and the EU's plan to solve the crisis (regulations, quotas, etc.). The greatest burden of receiving Syria's refugees fell on Syria's neighbours: Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. In 2015 the number of refugees raised up and their destination changed to Europe. The refugees decided to emigrate to countries such as Germany, Austria or Norway looking for a better life. It was not until refugees appeared in the streets of Europe that European leaders realized that they could no longer ignore the problem. Besides, flows of migrants and asylum seekers were used by terrorist organizations such as ISIS to infiltrate terrorists to European countries. Facing this humanitarian crisis, European Union ministers approved a plan in September 2015 to share the burden of relocating up to 120,000 people from the so called "Frontline States" of Greece, Italy and Hungary to elsewhere within the EU. The plan assigned each member state quotas: several people to receive based on its economic strength, population and unemployment. Nevertheless, the quotas were rejected by a group of Central European countries also known as the Visegrad Group that share many interests and try to reach common agreements.

The tensions between the Visegrad Group and the EU started in 2015, immediately when the EU approved the quotas of relocation of the refugees only after the dissenting votes of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia were overruled. In asking the court to annul the deal, Hungary and Slovakia argued at the Court of Justice that there were procedural mistakes, and that quotas were not a suitable response to the crisis. Besides, the political leaders said the problem was not their making, and the policy exposed them to a risk of Islamist terrorism that represented a threat to their homogenous societies. Their case was supported by Polish right-wing government of the party Law and Justice, which came to power in 2015 and claimed that the quotes were not comprehensive.

Regarding Poland's rejection to the quotas, it should be considered that is a country of 38 million people and already home to an exponential number of Ukrainian immigrants. Most of them decided to emigrate after military conflict erupted in eastern Ukraine in 2014. This could be a reason why after having received all these immigration from Ukraine, the Polish government believed that they were not ready to take any more refugees, and in that case from a different culture. They also claimed that the relocation methods would only attract more waves of immigration to Europe (López-Dóriga 2018).

More than one million migrants and refugees crossed Central Europe in 2015. The mismanagement of this influx of people caused emotions to run high. While some countries in the region opened their borders, others walled themselves in. EU mandatory quotas were discussed, determined and dismissed. The Dublin and Schengen agreements, as well as European solidarity, were under heavy pressure. With cross-border accusations among Central European capitals the political rhetoric of some leaders hardened and even slid towards xenophobia (Góbl et al. 2016).

The attitude of Central European leaders did not change even during the upcoming years (although we must mention that there were some slight changes thanks to various elections in these countries). We can give a few examples. The prime ministers of four Visegrad Group countries reiterated their opposition to migration in January 2018, with Hungary's leader saying Europe needs a "new blueprint" to be successful. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán argued that the countries of Central Europe were making increasingly strong contributions to the EU economy, which needs to be more competitive. This idea was supported by then-prime ministers of V4 - Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, acting Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico.

The country leaders claimed that these countries were a self-conscious community, which gives to the European Union at least as much as the EU gives them and the blueprint would return Europe to the technological forefront, include a joint defence force and the goal of a "work-based society — meaning a clause relating to total employment." There was an agreement among the Visegrad Group that it was in their interests for Europe to be strong while preserving the independence of individual countries instead of creating a "United States of Europe." Besides, the Visegrad Group leaders are pro-European politicians with a goal to make Europe stronger (Gorondi 2018).

The same rhetoric was followed by Visegrad Group leaders also after a new package of proposals was introduced by the European Commission in September 2020. Under this plan the EU would introduce a "solidarity and responsibility" mechanism allowing member countries that do not want to accept asylum applicants to instead take over responsibility for the return of people who are denied asylum in other EU states. The new package also included proposals to foster faster procedures at the bloc's external borders and aimed to overcome long-standing policy differences across the continent. However, it did not bring a breakthrough either, because the Central European leaders were not convinced by the European Commission's new migration plan. The V4 political leaders indicated they were not convinced that the idea of mandatory schemes to redistribute asylum seekers across the bloc was off the table. According to them relocation and quota, is still relocation and quota, so to change the name is not enough. They argued that the basic approach was still unchanged because the EU would like to manage the migration and not to stop the migrants.

The proposal of Visegrad Group leaders was to create "hotspots" outside the EU to handle asylum seekers. They would guarantee that nobody could step on the ground of the European Union without having a permission to do so, because their request for asylum is accepted. Besides, the EU should negotiate with North African countries and prepare a long-term strategy on Syria and on Libya. The Visegrad Group countries have a much-unified position on migration, calling for a rigorous and effective policy of border controls and help in areas where potential migrants could migrate to Europe (Bayer 2020).

### 3 VISEGRAD GROUP'S MIGRATION DISCOURSE AND POLICY

#### 3.1 The Czech Republic

During the humanitarian crisis of 2015, the country's position in the quota debate was slightly different from the other V4 members, such as Hungary and Poland, which refused the European Commission proposal of voluntary quotas straight away. The main complaint made by the Czech authorities was related to the

procedure of voting at the June EU Council meeting. The decision on voluntary or compulsory quotas was not made by consensus, but by a qualified majority, and the result was perceived by the Czech authorities as mandatory and was read as an attack on the Czech Republic's sovereignty. Since then, not many differences can be seen between the Czech position and those of the other Visegrad Group countries. They all defended a position in which the numbers of accepted refugees depend only on the will of each individual state and argued that the EU cannot make them accept any quota in a clear denunciation of the legality of the decision taking in the EU Council. Under the EU relocation quotas, the Czech Republic had to take in 4,300 people, around 410 refugees per one million people in the country. The Czech authorities have accepted only 12 refugees so far. The former Czech Prime Minister, Bohuslav Sobotka, showed then that the political line of the Czech government would be a security-based one. This narrative was followed and reinforced by the subsequent Andrej Babiš government.

When looking at Czech politics in relation to the refugee crisis both the role of political parties and of the president should be discussed. Each of them plays an important role in shaping the debate about refugees since, given the presence of the mentioned 12 refugees in the country, there is very little interpersonal contact between Czech citizens and refugees, possibly one of the most important ways to increase intercultural understanding (Dražanová 2018). Because these interpersonal contacts do not exist in the Czech Republic citizens are dependent on the political debate and the media to form their opinion.

Political parties in the Czech Republic were and still are united in their refusal of refugees and immigration. Of the top six parties elected in the national parliament in 2017 only one, the Czech Pirate Party, officially declared a pro migrant position (Hinshaw and Heijmans 2017). The other five parties range from utterly against any form of migration, the position of the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party, to against the forced refugee relocation scheme as in the case of the Czech Social Democratic Party. Since almost every major party in the Czech Republic is opposed to refugees it should not come as a surprise that the cues taken from the political debate depict the refugee crisis in a genuine negative way.

One notable characteristic of the Czech political landscape is the significant fragmentation of extremist forces. While the Muslim population and Islam as such have been politically expedient as key mobilizing topics for large parts of the society in the past years, attempts for the transformation of the non-formal platform "We don't want Islam in the Czech Republic" into a relevant political force became futile. To a large extent, that is but a result of internal power squabbles among the hard-line Islamophobic leaders, undermining the credibility of what may have become a movement of sorts.

As it appears, the half-Japanese Czech populist politician Tomio Okamura who is one of the country's leading Islamophobes, was struggling to repeat his party's (initially called Dawn-Úsvit before fragmenting while the Okamura wing established an offshoot named SPD) election result from 2013 (6.9 %) and thus secure at least some seats in the 2017 parliament. No other openly anti-migrant, xenophobic party appears very likely to follow suit (though Petr Robejšek's ambitions, contacts and capabilities should not be underrated). The other part of the story, however, is that much of the xenophobic parlance as much as policy proposals themselves was readily incorporated by mainstream political parties. Even if they do not fare particularly well in the election, the so-called "phobes" have already managed to radicalize the public and poison the discourse for years to come (Frelak 2017).

Although the president has only a ceremonial role, the office traditionally has a strong role in influencing the public debate. The incumbent president, Miloš Zeman, is obviously against refugees and his actions are contributing to “an increasingly xenophobic public discourse” in the Czech Republic (Nielsen 2015). As elsewhere in Europe, where anti-immigration movements have gained a new toehold, the Czech Republic in recent years has witnessed rising polarization of politics and society around migration issues. In the face of the prevailing public ambivalence, politicians who support more open migration policies have been reluctant to advance their views and less numerous than the opposing side. As a result, recently proposed and adopted policies are based on a security paradigm that is focused on migration control and greater selectivity of immigrants. With Czech Republic there are just four more countries, which voted against the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration in December 2018 (Drbohlav and Janurová 2019). Once again, the Czech Republic is aligned with Hungary, Poland and Slovakia in an anti-migration crusade, thus feeding populist and xenophobic discourses around Europe.

### 3.2 Slovakia

Like its Visegrad Group counterparts, Slovakia has pursued extremely restrictive immigration policies and employed anti-migrant rhetoric since the onset of the “refugee crisis” in 2015. Even though Muslims make up only 0.1 percent of the population, Slovakia has witnessed a surge in Islamophobic discourse and hate crimes.

We can say that the socio-political factors are the most important factors influencing the current situation concerning attitudes towards immigrants in Slovakia. Before the outbreak of the current migration and refugee crisis, it was only a marginal topic for Slovak politicians and public, but with the crisis the situation has changed significantly, especially because the migration policy became a part of electoral programs of the main Slovak political parties before the parliamentary elections in 2016. With a few exceptions, the most of the political party leaders used the migration actively (and negatively) in the campaign, including the former Prime Minister and leader of Smer-SD, Robert Fico, the leader of opposition liberal party SaS, Richard Sulík, the leader of the nationalist party SNS, Andrej Danko or the extremist ĽSNS leader, Marian Kotleba.

The rather acrimonious debates about migration in the run-up to the Parliamentary elections in Slovakia in March 2016 left Slovak society divided. Three nationalist and populist conservative parties with an anti-migration agenda won seats, including the far-right People’s Party – Our Slovakia (Kotleba - Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko, ĽSNS), and one of them – the Slovak National Party (SNS) – was part of the governing coalition. Even with the cooling effect of the EU Presidency, the divisions that were fostered during the purposefully spiteful election campaigns and the open anti-migration position of some of the parties in the Parliament made it close to impossible for the country to return to business as usual after the elections. The rising extremist, nationalist, populist and anti-EU rhetoric was sweeping the region. Slovakia itself did not manage to survive entirely unscathed from these ongoing debates. Still an outsider of the European mainstream, Slovakia, however, has quietly distanced itself from its more outspoken members – Hungary and Poland (Frelak 2017). With the emerging of refugee crisis in 2015, another threat hit the Slovak society. The pro-Kremlin propaganda has created a new set of anti-European arguments. Migration became a serious issue dividing not only politicians, but public, too. It

resulted in the fact that 54% of Slovaks perceived migration as a problem, what was highly above the European average (Ižak 2019).

In the view of the Slovak government, due to different historical and societal circumstances, Slovakia was not positioned to permanently host large numbers of refugees, particularly those who come from different societies and cultures (Muslims and people from Africa). Consequently, the government, supported by public opinion, was not willing to take political risks and experiment with bringing in foreigners. As a result, most of the effort was oriented towards contributing to external solutions or aiding not involving the acceptance a fixed number of people.

Although Slovakia offered spots for relocation, only 16 of these spots have been filled so far. Slovak uneasiness with relocations is not only conditioned by the simple reluctance of the government to take political risks. Slovakia is not an attractive destination country for asylum seekers. It does not have developed expat networks that can function to smoothen the cultural integration of newcomers and provide additional employment options. Sufficient state support to refugees is also lacking in Slovakia. The country's complicated, often incoherent legal system makes it even harder for asylum seekers to receive legal status, appeal decisions, or understand their education, labour, health care and other rights and obligations.

Furthermore, asylum seekers lack information about Slovakia and the European asylum system in general while residing in Greece or Italy. This leads to their unwillingness to seek asylum in a country, where they see no future or to a traumatic mismatch of their expectations and reality on the ground. The lack of interest and knowledge of Slovakia among asylum seekers is a rather convenient situation: it helps reduce the responsibility for introducing domestic changes that would involve political risks and long-term commitment (Frelak 2017).

What's more, the predominantly Christian country of Slovakia passed a law in November 2016 that effectively bans Islam as an officially recognized religion, which also blocks Islam from receiving any state subsidies for its schools. According to the new law, a religion must have at least 50,000 members to qualify for state recognition; the previous threshold was 20,000 members. According to Slovakia's latest census, there are 2,000 Muslims and there are no recognized mosques. The former Prime Minister, Robert Fico, led the campaign for the 2016 March election under the slogan "We protect Slovakia", calling migrants "a danger". However, an unintended result of Fico's harsh and undemocratic rhetoric towards the migrants was that the far-right People's Party - Our Slovakia entered parliament with over 8% of the vote. Surprisingly, also many young people in Slovakia have been against the idea of accepting the migrants to Slovak society (Galanova 2016). The protests come as a surprise since the country has accepted only a few of the migrants fleeing to European continent. Since its independence, only about 60,000 people have sought asylum in Slovakia and a little over 800 have been successful. Less than 700 others have received subsidiary protection, which means a status for people who do not qualify as refugees. "Still, many Slovaks argue that refugees and migrants are one of the most serious challenges for this Central European country. For many Slovaks the refugees are one the biggest problem facing the country. They have been worried about migration while most think refugees and migrants would increase crime and the risk of terrorist attacks. It is obvious that most of Slovaks, who oppose settlement of migrants in their country, have such a stance due to security and economic concerns. However, their fears due to cultural and ideological concerns should not be neglected as well (Brljavac 2017).



### 3.3 Poland

The migration crisis rumbled on for the last few years since it had developed as a major issue in Polish politics dividing the main parties in the run up to October 2015 parliamentary election. Along with the three other Visegrad Group countries, the previous government, led by the centrist Civic Platform (PO) grouping, initially opposed the European Commission's proposal for mandatory re-distribution quotas for Middle Eastern and North African migrants located in Greece and Italy.

However, concerned that the country was coming across as one of the least sympathetic to the migrants' plight, the Polish government changed its approach following the summer 2015 migration wave. Civic Platform's EU strategy was based on trying to locate Poland within the so-called 'European mainstream' by presenting itself as a reliable and stable member state adopting a positive and constructive approach towards the main EU powers, so it was anxious to appear to be playing a positive role in helping alleviate the crisis. In the event, at the September 2015 EU summit Poland broke with its Central European allies and signed up to a burden-sharing plan which involved the country admitting 6,200 migrants as part of an EU-wide scheme to relocate 160,000 people in total by September 2017.

On the other hand, the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party, at the time the main opposition grouping, bitterly opposed the EU plan arguing that Poland should resist pressure to take in migrants. The party warned that there was a danger of making the same mistakes as many Western European states with large Muslim communities, which could lead to admitting migrants who did not respect Polish laws and customs and tried to impose their way of life on the country. While it always supported Polish EU membership in principle, Law and Justice was a broadly anti-federalist (verging on Eurosceptic) party committed to defending Polish sovereignty, especially in the moral-cultural sphere where it rejected what it saw as a hegemonic EU liberal-left consensus that undermined Poland's traditional values and national identity. It viewed the migrant relocation scheme as part of this wider clash of cultures, which also threatened the country's national security. Not surprisingly, therefore, Law and Justice accused the outgoing Civic Platform government of betraying its Central European allies by taking decisions under EU pressure that undermined Polish culture and security. It argued that the figure of a few thousand migrants was unrealistic, because family members would be able to join initial arrivals and that the quota would be used as a precedent to force Poland to take in additional migrants in the future.

The 2015 elections empowered the extreme fringe groups on the right. This was seen through the several anti-refugee and anti-Muslim demonstrations held across Poland, attracting large crowds of Poles whose attitudes have grown increasingly hostile to refugees in general and Muslims in particular. As the government and the Church have facilitated spaces for the strengthening and legitimization of the far-right movement, this provoked a strong response from other elements within civil society to resist this shift resulting in increased levels of solidarity politics across difference. The more the Polish borders shrank to ensure no "Others" slip through, the more civil society activism mushroomed across Poland unveiling divisions within and between key public institutions that ran deeper than disagreement over whether to welcome refugees.

Following its October 2015 election victory, the new Law and Justice government agreed initially to implement the scheme approved by its predecessor and, as a start, accept 100 migrants. However, in April 2016 it suspended the process arguing that the verification procedures for the vetting of migrants were insufficient to guarantee Polish national security. Since then, Poland (along with Hungary) has not accepted any migrants under the EU scheme (Szczerbiak 2017).

The political change resulting from the elections in 2015 has put the discussions on the Polish integration policy on hold. It should also be underlined that the low priority given to the issue of integration is manifested not only by the suspension of work on integration policy but also the reduction of funding for the NGO sector in these areas.

The Law and Justice government expressed the following priorities in the field of migration policy: internal security (including border protection), facilitation of channels for economic migration, and further easing of the inflow of people of Polish origin. It is therefore safe to assume that integration policy was not treated as an important element of this new strategy. The securitization of migration and the perception of migrants as potential threats could be seen not only in the political discourse, but also in the actions that have already been taken. In June 2016, the government adopted a so-called antiterrorist law, in accordance with which every foreigner in Poland can be put under surveillance without a court order, for essentially an indefinite period. It also grants the Internal Security Agency, the police and the Border Guard the right to take fingerprints, facial images and even biological material (DNA) from foreigners in the case that there are doubts concerning their identity. The NGO sector has criticized the new regulations for potentially leading to discrimination and stigmatization (Frelak 2017).

The Law and Justice government's opposition to the relocation of Syrians to Poland has harmed the country. It has been criticized many times by EU countries and institutions, including the European Parliament. Poland has lost the reputation of a country that can take responsibility for the community and solve European problems. By refusing to show solidarity with the migration crisis, the country has lost the right to demand solidarity from others (Csanyi 2020).

### 3.4 Hungary

The government's attitude towards the migration crisis was obvious. At the beginning of 2015, the Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance government ran an anti-immigrant campaign, a 'National Consultation on Immigration'. Later in July 2015, the Hungarian parliament passed amendments to the Asylum Act. The UNHCR raised concerns about the amendment, which might lead to denying assistance to asylum-seekers, their deportation and prolonged detention.

The Hungarian government stood in opposition to the quota system voting against it along with other three Member States. While Fidesz ran an anti-immigrant campaign, many Hungarians protested it and the governmental campaign was criticized by advocacy organizations and researchers. The public's response was different from the government's expectations and anti-immigrant protests took place in the country as well as demonstrations against border fence raising.

However, the inflammatory way that officials and the national media in Hungary have described the influx of refugees created confusion, hostility, and fear among

the citizens. This discourse has only exacerbated the xenophobia deeply entrenched in a part of the Hungarian population and made the efforts of ordinary citizens and organizations working with asylum seekers and migrants more difficult (Pardavi and Gyulai 2015). Due to the government's anti-migration campaign and 'zero refugee' strategy, the public opinion has changed a lot in Hungary.

Hungary was the second European Union country in 2015, behind Greece, to apprehend irregular migrants at its external borders. However, the construction of the fences at the two Southern borders with Serbia and Croatia put Hungary outside the Western Balkan migratory route. A series of amendments to asylum legislation caused many changes in the arrival procedures and overall treatment of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in Hungary. In August and September 2015, together with the completion of the fence, Hungary designated Serbia as a safe third country, allowed for expedited asylum determination, and limited procedural safeguards. Additionally, climbing through the border fence or damaging it became a criminal offence punishable with imprisonment.

In 2016, a new amendment to asylum law prescribed police to push migrants who had "illegally" entered the territory and were apprehended within 8 km from the border, back to the other side of the border fence. More amendments have been subsequently adopted to decrease or suppress the different support mechanisms to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. In March 2017, new revisions to asylum law were enacted that decreed all irregular migrants be pushed back to the Southern border. The above asylum policies have been highly criticized based on international and EU law as many international actors have argued that effective access to protection and the principle of non-refoulement are not upheld. Due to reception conditions in Hungary, several EU member states have chosen to stop transfers to Hungary under the Dublin III mechanism (IOM 2018).

The Viktor Orbán-led governing party's political strategy was to polarize society along political fault lines. The main principle of this strategy is that the governing Fidesz party divides the political field into "national" and "anti-national" camps and contextualizes every political topic according to this division. If someone contests Fidesz's viewpoint, they are almost automatically put into the "anti-national" group regardless of their arguments, because in the view of Fidesz, the Orbán-government is the only voice of Hungarian national interest. The conflict between the protection of minorities and minority opinion, the unconditional acknowledgement of human rights and the politically constructed will of the majority – on a national, ethnical or cultural basis – has systemic importance. In the name of the government's capability to act it can refer to the democratic will of the public and some sort of "special state" to relegate human rights and procedural norms considered to be the foundations of liberal democracies to secondary roles. Therefore, the Hungarian government uses the migration issue consciously to transform the political system.

The politics of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán are built on the logic of perpetuating conflicts rather than creating some kind of constructive national consensus. This strategy is applied to both the domestic and EU levels to set the political agenda and consolidate domestic political support (Frelak 2017).

It is obvious that in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, refugees are unwelcome. Orbán won a third successive term in office in 2018 (and a fourth successive term in office in 2022), campaigning on a strong anti-immigrant platform. He refused to take part

in the European Union's resettlement program for refugees in 2015. Later, Hungary approved a package of legislation called the "Stop Soros" law, which criminalized providing aid to undocumented immigrants and asylum-seekers. It declares that any group or individual helping undocumented immigrants claim asylum could be liable for a jail term. The move has unsettled NGOs and made Hungarians nervous about volunteering to help (Barry 2019). Another channel through which the anti-Fidesz enemies propagating illegal immigration operated in Hungary, at least according to the state propaganda, were the media. Viktor Orbán's government forced hundreds of private media owners to donate their outlets under the control of a single, state-friendly entity led by a former lawmaker from Fidesz (Szabó 2020).

In 2015 the European Commission initiated an infringement procedure against Hungary concerning its asylum legislation. After several steps taken by the Commission in January 2018 the European Court of Justice revealed that it would hear the case against Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland regarding the infringement procedure for their refusal to abide by the decision on EU refugee quotas (Csanyi 2020).

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Considering the current context, characterized by increased inflows of asylum seekers as well as deepening European cleavages in perspectives on appropriate political responses, this article set out to gain deeper insight into political elites' attitudes toward open vs. restrictive asylum policies within and between European societies (especially between Central European societies). Although the current situation differs profoundly from the context at the beginning of the century in terms of diversity and pace of the inflow of asylum seekers (OECD 2015). Nevertheless, we did find strong regional variations in attitudes toward asylum policy as well as growing polarizations within European countries. In line with the growing divergence in terms of political responses to the crisis as well as in discourses being adopted (Castells 2018), public opinions on the European continent tend to become more divided. While in the Western European countries the public and political leaders seem to favour open policies that admit larger quantities of asylum seekers, attitudes in Central European countries are far more restrictive.

On the individual level, discourses appeared to be relevant, as we found a strong impact of several individual factors that are closely related to dominant discourses on asylum. In accordance with frames or discourses that portray refugees as economically burdensome and as culturally deviant (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017), economic and cultural threat perceptions fostered restrictive attitudes. Socio-tropic concerns about the impact of the inflow of immigrants on the economy and cultural life appeared to be of great importance in shaping attitudes. Apart from threat perceptions, the two human values universalism and conformity-tradition had a considerable impact. Universalism, which coincides with a humanitarian frame, led to weaker concerns about the impact of migration and to more support for open policies. Equivalent to concerns for the preservation of the Western liberal core values in political debates (Lucassen 2018), conformity-tradition fuelled economic and cultural fears, and opposition to open migration policies.

The absence of effects of the migratory and economic context suggests that other factors might be more relevant to understand diverging attitudes toward asylum

policy across European countries. The public opinion mirrors dividing lines in dominant political perspectives and discourses. The rather restrictive opinion climate of the Central European countries, for instance, resembles the strong resistance of policy makers in these countries (including the Visegrad Group) against open policies and the adoption of quota.

The seemingly higher relevance of political mobilizations and media discourses in understanding attitudes compared to the actual cross-national circumstances also has other implications. The diverging national contexts across EU member states do not seem to negate the development of a common public response to the challenges that the increased inflow of asylum seekers introduces. Contrarily to what is often believed and argued, the differential national contexts as such do not seem to make wide public support for a strong common European asylum system impossible. Instead, populist governmental mobilizations and vast differences in adopted discourses might complicate wide public support for shared and open solutions across Europe (Zaun 2018). As the cases of Hungary and Poland clearly indicate, aggressive mobilizations and strong anti-immigrant rhetoric might instigate drastic increases in anti-migrant sentiments and, as a result, erode the social basis for open and common migration policies (Van Hootegeem et al. 2020).

The exclusionary, deterrent approach to immigrants and refugees arriving in Europe from the beginning of 2015 was one of the most remarkable features of European politics at that time. The anti-immigrant narrative became a permanent part of everyday communication and public discourse. Though not particularly unique when compared to earlier immigration waves in Europe or to some EU member states, the Visegrad Group deserves a critical assessment regarding the outburst of aversion and hostility towards migrants coinciding with the denial of refugees as migrants deserving protection based on international humanitarian law. This may be partly explained by ideological factors. The liberal model was challenged by, and (in the case of Hungary and Poland) substituted with a specific illiberal project entailing the restoration of traditionalist patterns of parochial communities mobilized by the top-down, persuasive transmission of a strange blend of nationalist, xenophobic, anti-cosmopolitan, anti-elitist, and conspiratorial views. That project also underlaid the ideological construction of immigration policy and influenced attitudes towards migrants and refugees.

Concurrently, it must be pointed out that the values and norms of European Union politics, especially those concerning the freedom of movement of persons, were used selectively to justify and legitimize the Visegrad Group's ethnocentric postures via integrationist policies and mechanisms which accentuated protective measures and security imperatives (Gruszczak 2021). The parochial realms cultivated in the Visegrad Group were intimately tied to their territories, enhancing therefore the deterrent and repulsive functions of border, immigration, and asylum policies.

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## ODNOS SREDNJEVROPSKIH VODITELJEV DO MIGRACIJ IN MIGRACIJSKE KRIZE

*Ker je število migrantov in beguncev, ki trkajo na vrata Evrope, relativno stabilno, je zdaj na politični ravni EU čutiti olajšanje. Voditelji Evropske unije so potrdili premik fokusa z notranjih in strukturnih na zunanje in varnostne razsežnosti migracijskega izziva. Vendar države višegrajske skupine (V4) niso v celoti sprejele političnega premika v migracijski strategiji EU. Članek preučuje nacionalni politični diskurz in vladne politike o migracijah v omenjenih štirih državah, ki se osredotočajo predvsem na obdobje od sredine leta 2015 do konca leta 2018. Avtorji trdijo, da je problem v različnih pristopih držav članic EU do migracij. Različne migracijske tradicije so eno ključnih vprašanj povezanih z nerazumevanji med državami. Njihove pristope določajo njihove geografske lege in migracijske zgodovine. Glavni cilj tega članka je analizirati, primerjati in razjasniti stališča držav V4 in njihovih političnih voditeljev. Čeprav imajo očitno nasprotna stališča do migracij, članek ugotavlja, da imajo nekaj skupnih značilnosti, kot sta zanikanje statusa azilne države in odsotnost s tem povezane javne politike.*

**Ključne besede:** migracije; politični voditelji; Višegrajska skupina; Evropska unija; begunci.

# CROSS-BORDER ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE IN THE EU: A GENEALOGICAL ANALYSIS OF REGULATORY ASPECTS

Barbara TOPLAK PEROVIČ and Luka Martin TOMAŽIČ<sup>1</sup>

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*The question of cross-border access to healthcare in the European Union has long surpassed the idea of merely encouraging the movement of workers across borders. Nevertheless, remnants of the nation-state-based discourses have retained their grip on certain member states, making access to cross-border healthcare less effective. This article will perform a genealogical analysis of the regulatory aspects of cross-border access to healthcare. On the one hand, an ethical need for increasing inclusivity will be emphasized. To retain the quality of public healthcare, this has to be balanced with realist considerations, taking into account economic and other social factors.*

**Key words:** Cross-border healthcare; Genealogy; Regulation; Inclusivity; Public health.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The right to curative medical treatment and preventive healthcare is an interesting area of public health research in the European Union, especially in terms of its genealogy. The European Court of Justice has played a crucial role in the formation of the current regulatory environment, especially with groundbreaking judgements in the cases such as the so-called Geraets Smits/Peerbooms (European Court of Justice 2001, Case C-157/99), Kohll (European Court of Justice 1998, Case C-120/95) and Decker (European Court of Justice 1998, Case C-158/96). Nevertheless, the power of the European Union in enacting public policies in this regard had been limited for a long time, primarily due to the principle of subsidiarity, where the EU member states retained a high margin of appreciation in terms of the regulatory solutions to enact the right to cross-border access to healthcare (Brooks 2012, 33–37). Public policy and regulatory solutions were largely based on the discourses and the ideological concept of the nation-state.

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With the enactment of the directive 2011/24/EU and its implementation in individual member states (Peralta-Santos and Perelman 2018, 879–884), it can be argued that a shift has occurred toward a more inclusive, EU-level access to healthcare. Nevertheless, remnants of the traditional, nation-state-based discourses have retained their grip on certain institutions in certain member states, making access to health-care access in other member states more difficult and less effective. This paper will attempt to perform a largely Foucaultian analysis of the current state of regulatory and public policy aspects of cross-border access to healthcare in the EU, which will draw heavily on the idea of the archaeology of knowledge. On the one hand, a need for inclusivity will be emphasized. On the other, an abstract limit will attempt to be placed on the proposed concepts to prevent an over-inclusive approach, which might have negative consequences on the quality of services rendered. General stepping-stones towards more inclusivity in this regard will be proposed.

In methodological terms, the approach employed will be heavily qualitative and abstract. Critical analysis will be used to evaluate the merits and demerits of the current situation and how the positive regulatory solutions in combination with dominant societal modes of discourse might influence the provision of cross-border healthcare in the EU. Derrida's phallogocentrism (Kingston 2019) will be rejected for a more traditional approach, employing the toolbox of informal logic and dialectic to substantiate the proposed claims. A dogmatic approach will be used to reflect on the theory itself. This is important since when implementing public policy, especially through enacting regulatory rules, the traditional order of epistemology and ontology is turned on its head (Hage 2008). Foucaultian archaeology-of-knowledge-inspired approach will be combined with elements of Nietzschean genealogy to further delve into the main characteristics of dominant discourses on the existing regulatory framework and their past, as well as potential future ramifications. The analysis in this paper will be limited to the right to access to public healthcare. Non-public healthcare will be addressed only to the degree that it serves to deepen the understanding of the genealogy of contemporary public-health care.

The structure of the paper will follow the path from the abstract to the particular. After this introduction, the relationship between belief and law will be examined. This discussion will entail the role of ontology and epistemology in the formation of legal frameworks, their connection to knowledge/power and the ideological hegemonic bloc, as well as more in-depth methodological musings about the Nietzschean genealogical approach and the Foucaultian architecture of belief, both in relation of the problematic at hand. The third part of the paper will focus on historical analysis and the genealogy of the dominant discourses that brought us to the present ideological landscape. In the fourth part, the general regulatory acts of the European Union and the decisions of the European Court of Justice, which constitute the basis for the contemporary EU-wide net of regulatory frameworks, will be analysed. In the fifth part, the potential for broadening the right of cross-border access at some point in the future, to include non-EU citizens, will be explored. This exploration will be performed mainly considering this idea's humanist ramifications. The potential need for limitation through Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative will be discussed, and a broad route of steppingstones towards greater inclusivity will be proposed.

## 2 ON BELIEF AND REGULATION

Public policy and regulation through enacting solutions are specific to the degree that the standard order of ontology and epistemology is turned upside down. Namely, there are observable phenomena in natural sciences, which then become the subject of theorizing. On the other hand, the regulation itself is a particular type of a codified theory of reality, which influences reality through the collective beliefs and through (when necessary) the mobilization of the repressive apparatus of the state (Hage 2008). The regulatory frameworks are at least in part codified belief systems, which render the relationship between themselves and belief one that is also best characterized as a feedback loop. Changes in belief influence the public policy system, and changes in the public policy, in regulatory frameworks and court decisions in a particular society influence the beliefs that the societal members hold in a particular society. An analogy could be drawn in a Gramscian sense, where regulation and public policy are understood as base and belief as superstructure (Sotiris 2018, 94–119).

In the Aristotelian framework, the activity of individuals engaged in the social practice of setting public policy and enacting regulation can be termed *phronetic*. Aristotle namely differentiates among other things between *techne*, *episteme* and *phronesis*. The first two, *episteme* and *techne*, can roughly be equated with scientific knowledge and craft. On the other hand, *phronesis* is to be understood as practical wisdom, as an argumentative activity with an ethical goal (Xanthaki 2010, 111–128). Such a definition corresponds very well with the practice of public policy and regulation. When interpreting and co-creating a particular state's political and regulatory traditions, the individuals engage in this sort of rational activity with ethical considerations from an internal point of view (Westerink 2020, 246–259).

In doing so, they are using their knowledge and creating additional knowledge, both in the exercise of power. The degree to which such promulgation of public policy knowledge is intertwined with power rests on a spectrum between the possibility of being solely about power and the abstract alternative of being solely about knowledge. The Foucaultian definition of power conceptualizes it as a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or those that may arise in the present or the future (Foucault 1982, 789). There is a fundamental connection of the power-knowledge, of the *pouvoir-savoir*, with the process of temporal subjectivation, through which the subjects of policy and regulation become the principles of their subjection through internalization, habitualization and ritualization of temporal norms (Foucault 1995, 203; Portschy 2020, 392–419).

To understand the degree to which such temporal subjectivation shapes the policies and regulatory frameworks in cross-border access to health care within the European Union, a genealogical understanding of the formation of the contemporary positive legal norms on cross-border healthcare, is necessary. This is even more true since ethical considerations such as *parrhesia* the desire to tell the truth (Westerink 2020, 246–259) are essential in connection with attempting to penetrate the deeper layers of the socio-legal permutations that constitute the regulation of the studied field (Xanthaki 2014, 66–80). In this regard, especially the Nietzschean genealogical approach and the Foucaultian archaeology of knowledge seem especially useful.

According to Nietzsche's writings, the former is connected to a historical spirit and a demand for truth-seeking. In Nietzsche's work *On the genealogy of morals*, he namely criticizes the lack of historical spirit in specific authors that had been performing genealogical research before him (Nietzsche 2017, 11). In the spirit of Ranke, he seems to emphasize empathy for the *spirit of the hour* to really understand the history and especially the history of ideas as it was (Greenberg 2020, 143–146).

To perform genealogical research thus means to delve deep into history, with a critical eye, attempting to cast aside any contemporary prejudices, concentrated squarely on the pursuit of the truth. Although Nietzsche himself and many who have sailed in his wake have been deeply subversive, the above definition shows that such a genealogical method is by its nature not necessarily such. The desire for truth grounds it firmly in the light of the regulative ideal of truth itself and enables the potential even for the vindication of any analysed positive normative system, as long as such a viewpoint is indeed per the truth and not the consequence of any prejudice in intellectual pursuit (Queloz 2017, 727–749). This type of research is to be done within and outside of any monotonous finality. It can be sought even in unpromising places, such as in conscience and in other sentiments on a particular contemporary social arrangement that is the subject of the study (Ibid.).

Foucault builds upon the described Nietzschean methodological framework but differs regarding at least three crucial points. He thus emphasizes the piecemeal fashion of alien forms that characterizes a lack of any essential and timeless secret behind things (Foucault 1978, 140–141). He posits the idea, which is at the core of his archaeology of knowledge, that discursive formations or *epistemes* are subject to an operation of rules that transcend the consciousness of individual subjects and define the conceptual possibilities and boundaries of thought at a certain point in time, in each domain (Gutting and Oksala 2021). Because such an approach says nothing about the intertemporal transitions between ways of thinking, it must by necessity be supplemented by a more 'traditional' Nietzschean genealogical approach (Ibid.).

When it comes to the issue of cross-border healthcare, a combination of both approaches might prove especially illuminating in terms of the understanding of the current socio-legal environment. The different approaches to truth between Nietzsche and Foucault might, in this regard, not be as incompatible as they seem at first sight. In terms of understanding a particular epoch and its normative systems pertaining to the selected domain, both emphasize the need for understanding the past without the unnecessary burdens of the present. At the same time, both seem to find value in mining the past to gain crucial insights about the present societal situation, which we intend to do in our analysis of regulatory of the cross-border access to healthcare in the European Union.

### 3 GENEALOGY OF CROSS-BORDER HEALTH CARE IN LIGHT OF THE CONCEPT OF BORDERS

People seeking medical treatment outside of their place of residence, in other cities or countries, has existed since ancient times. In antiquity, it was primarily the sacred sites that attracted patients' attention, often for pseudo-medical purposes and prayer, related to a desire to be healed by the power of the gods (Rai 2019). Another form of medical tourism emerged in the Middle Ages, with



wealthy individuals visiting thermal baths for healing across Europe and the Middle East (Tonga et al 2021, 227–232).

What characterized the access to healthcare and health-related services in geographical locations, other than the sick person's place of residence, was the requirement of sufficient funds to fund any medical care available at the time. Access to healthcare across geographical distinctions was thus class-related to some degree. This became especially true in the Early Modern Era, after the first hospitals, vaguely resembling the contemporary use of the word, were created in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy and then across entire Europe (Borisov 2009, 376).

Preventive public health campaigns have existed for many centuries in different countries but began to develop into a more far-reaching and serious discipline with the extensive use of indicators of health-related outcomes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Klazinga et al 2001, 433–438). Nothing resembling cross-border public healthcare existed at the time since even public provision of health care, in general, was more of a progressive idea than a societal reality.

Organized public provision of curative healthcare is thus a relatively new phenomenon. It had been facilitated on the one hand by the rise of the prominence of science and knowledge, especially regarding the possibility of large-scale disease control and on the other, by the shift in public's perception of disease control as both a possibility and responsibility of the society (US Institute of Medicine 1988). In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, it began to be formalized and given structure by the establishment and later proliferation of general hospitals for people suffering from different mental and physical ailments (Ibid.). This process was furthered in many countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by establishing a secondary apparatus, entailing state agencies such as boards of health, health departments, and local health departments (Hanlon and Pickett 1984).

Access to services of such institutions was and to a certain degree remains intimately connected to the idea of borders. These are essential societal constructs that separate those on the inside from those outside. In this manner, borders, on the one hand, potentially enable a more predictable and conservative functioning of societal organizational units on the inside while depriving those on the outside of perceived benefits (Zorn 2021, 93). Borders thus always exist based on an antecedent relation to another and are accepted in terms of this relationality, in a generalized condition of precariousness (Butler 2009, 48). As such, they can be seen as an attempt to protect our vulnerable bodies and the discussion of them as a concept and a construct of social reality can draw attention to their protective and exclusionary function (Starr and Most 1976, 17). Only those, whom the society, through public-political activities, deems to be on the inside, thus have access to public healthcare, while those on the outside are not allowed to be beneficiaries of the same standard of care.

In the traditional international order, borders can be seen as intimately connected to the idea of a nation-state and are a part of structural characteristics that affect the interaction and opportunities of states and with that also of the individuals belonging to those nation states through the enactment of the concepts of citizenship and statehood (Bamji 2019, 441–464). The line between those that are allowed access to healthcare and those that are not on a particular territory has throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century been drawn primarily based on citizenship and statehood.

That however, such drawing of borders as societal constructs is not static but is subject to a dominant paradigm of the time, can be seen in the example of the passes, that as a form of ephemeral print, enabled bearers to travel from city to city in the times of plague, when borders were in reality not enacted on the level of nation-states, but on the level of cities (Ibid.).

In such subversion of the idea of borders as it relates to access to cross-border healthcare, there lies a possibility to surpass the understanding of borders as a necessary protective barrier and to supplant this idea with the notion of an, in Der Derian's terms, inherently connective liminal space (Der Derian 2001, xix). Such an ethical foreboding is at least to some degree in line with actual contemporary occurrences in the field of law. Namely, in the European Union, in the field of cross-border access to healthcare, the traditional idea of borders is in the process of being deconstructed to a certain degree, and a move was made towards EU-wide access to cross-border public health-services in some instances. The unit of analysis and the subject of legal provisions in these cases is thus not a citizen of an individual nation-state but a citizen of the European Union.

#### 4 CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Regarding regulation and proliferation of cross-border access to healthcare within the European Union, the public policy is primarily based on a regulatory framework, established by relevant European Union legal acts and ensuing court practice. The two main elements of European Union public policy in the field of cross-border access to healthcare are provision of information on available healthcare in other countries of the European Union and ensuring appropriate access to healthcare options or specialized treatment abroad (European Commission 2022).

In this manner Directive 2011/24/EU entailed a monumental leap forward. Most importantly, its main idea was to establish a right to medical care in a member state, other than that of patient's residence, in certain situations and to be reimbursed according to the tariffs of the country of residence (The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union 2011). Such a right was not established out of the blue but because of decades of societal and public policy development, both on the level of European Union legislation and its practical ramifications and the level of decisions of the European Court of Justice.

Its origins within the Community can be traced back at least to Regulation No 1408/71 of the Council of 14 June 1971 on applying social security schemes to employed persons and their families moving within the Community. Its primary focus was the enactment of the necessity of social benefits for laborers and for family members of laborers, whose state of employment is not the same as their state of residence, if both of those states were members of the Council of the European Communities (Council of the European Union 1971, Article 13).

Decades of standstill in the realms of normative and ideational development, relevant to access to cross-border health care, ensued. The European Court of Justice moved the normative development forward at the turn of the millennia. The most important in this regard were Kohll (European Court of Justice 1998, Case C-120/95), Decker (European Court of Justice 1998, Case C-158/96) and Geraets Smits/Peerbooms (European Court of Justice 2001, Case C-157/99) cases.

In the *Geraets Smits/Peerbooms* case, the European Court of Justice held that a medical service, which the patient pays for and is provided in a member state different from the one in which the costs are reimbursed, remains within the scope of the freedom to provide services (European Court of Justice 2001, Case C-157/99, § 55). At the same time, the Court deemed a prior authorization regarding the assumption of costs under a national social security system to be a potentially necessary and reasonable measure (*Ibid.*, § 80). Discretionary decisions by national authorities should not be contradictory to the Community law, especially regarding fundamental freedoms (*Ibid.*, § 90).

It was held in the *Kohl* case that national rules should not act as a deterrent, so that insured individuals would not utilize medical services established in another Member State, and as such should not form a barrier to the principle of freedom to provide services, which is of paramount importance to the Community (European Court of Justice 1998, Case C-120/95, § 35). In this regard, doctors and dentists must be afforded the same rights guaranteed to doctors and dentists established on the territory of the individual Member State (*Ibid.*, § 48).

The *Decker* case entails another crucially important decision of the European Court of Justice about accessing cross-border health care within the Community. In that case, a national regulation was put under scrutiny and it was found that national rules should not act as barriers that discourage the free movement of goods in the sense that insured individuals would be incentivized to purchase medical products in the territory of their Member State, instead of purchasing them in the territory of another Member State (European Court of Justice 1998, Case C-158/96, § 36).

The above case-law can be claimed to entail a normative and ideational basis that inspired the public-political adoption of the Directive 2011/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2011 on applying patients' rights in cross-border healthcare. The above directive is the one currently in force and has codified among else the responsibilities of Member States regarding treatment (Article 4), the right and the legal framework regarding the reimbursement of costs (Article 7), as well as mutual assistance and cooperation (Article 10) and the recognition of prescriptions, issued in another Member State (Article 11). In such a manner, a regulative framework was formed, governing and more precisely delineating the right to access to cross-border healthcare within the European Union.

The above regulatory development, in connection with the decisions of the European Court of Justice, can be claimed to reflect a shift in the socio-political environment and the ideational framework of the European Union and its member states. A step was made from the world where the public provision of healthcare is generally confined within national borders to a more inclusive world, where EU-wide access is ensured under certain conditions.

The relevancy of cross-border aspects regarding healthcare has been further emphasized by the Regulation 2021/522 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Program for the Union's action in the field of health ('EU4Health Programme') for the period 2021-2027, which deals with cross-border matters in healthcare in relation to the pandemic (2021, Article 2).

Such developments notwithstanding, remnants of the nation-based, protectionist understanding public of healthcare are still present in the normative environments of the certain Member States and the legal culture entrenched within national regulatory frameworks. Some member states have, namely, transposed the directive's requirements in the most restrictive way allowed to them, which Vasev (2017, 271–286) has appropriately termed as the 'world of dead letters', borrowing the terminology from Falkner and Treib (2008). The most notable examples include Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, and Poland (Kowalska-Bobko et al 2016; Vasev 2017).

Such an approach to implementation can be criticized within the Fullerian framework of understanding the rule of law (Cormacain 2017, 115–135). The moral requirements and one of Fuller's eight *desiderata* for a functional regulatory system require that regulations in books be congruent with their application in practice (1964). The need is accentuated by the fact that health-care crises can quickly escalate into political crises (Kukovič 2022, 10).

Taking this into account, the situation regarding the access to cross-border public healthcare within the European Union is not ideal. In this small segment, it may even entail a contradiction to the general requirements of the theoretical notion of the rule of law and the inner morality of the legal system of the European Union, based among other things on the ideas of European citizenship and solidarity (Paju 2017).

## 5 POTENTIAL FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

As the analysis of the genealogy of the right to cross-border access to public healthcare in Europe, and the assessment of the current state of regulatory affairs show, there seems to be a movement from a national-state-based conception towards a more inclusive one. Such a relatively novel conception of cross-border access to health-care spans across the entire territory of the European Union. This paradigm shift entails a redistribution of power between the states and the supranational European Union that might be driven by economics, politics, and even technological developments in the fields of medicine and healthcare (McGrew 2011, 295). The critical question seems to be how far such a process should go and its broader ramifications.

Let us call upon the understanding of regulation and public policymaking as a phronetic practices. It seems that the potential delimitation of the broadening and deterritorialization is fundamentally an ethical question. The arguments for adopting a potential regulatory solution that broadens the sphere of cross-border access to healthcare should be carefully weighed before such a policy is enacted. In this regard, at least three distinct but interconnected issues should be considered.

The first are the benefits for the existing holders of the right to access to public healthcare, both within national territories and across the borders of Member States. Further broadening of the right to cross-border healthcare might lower health-care standards for existing right-holders.

The second are the benefits for the potential new holders of rights or broadening of existing rights to cross-border health care. Deprivation of the broadening of rights might, namely, retain a *status quo* and by regulative inaction negatively

impact the lives of individuals who would benefit from a more inclusive approach to cross-border public healthcare.

The third is the rights of medical and health-care professionals, especially concerning the free movement of goods and services across the territories of the Member States of the European Union. They are essential stakeholders whose interests should be considered, both from an economic and an ethical standpoint.

The issue of future policy developments in access to cross-border health care in the European Union is thus clearly a complex one. Before making further regulatory interventions, the European Union should stabilize the existing framework by ensuring that the Member States comply with the requirements of the Community law regarding this issue. This would ensure a higher standard of compliance with the rule of law and the broader moral demands since regulation and public policies are effective and of benefit to the populace only if they are enacted in practice.

Regarding the further broadening of rights, the ethical issues of both the existing and potential right holders and the interest of medical and health-care professionals should be considered. A potential tool for analysis could be Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative. Its potential usefulness stems from the nature of the theory, which considers humanity in such terms, that individuals are viewed as moral, and that nature is viewed as a functional whole (Gillroy 1998, 131–155).

The categorical imperative in its first formulation requires individuals to act as if the maxims of their actions were to become, through their will, a universal law of nature (Kant 1993, 30). In the present context, the policymaker thus asks themselves how society would function if access to cross-border public healthcare was given to an in-advance determined and more inclusive broader circle of right-holders. In this regard, potential stepping-stones towards greater inclusivity in cross-border access to healthcare within the European Union can be identified.

After the amelioration of the discrepancy between the normative environment and its enactment in social practice, by bringing the Member States from the 'world of dead letters' on board with the current regulatory framework in the field of access to cross-border healthcare within the European Union, a potential further step towards greater inclusivity is deterritorialization of healthcare within the European Union. This will have to be assessed in terms of the categorical imperative and the phronetic nature of normative activity in enacting cross-border healthcare public policies.

A further, more far-reaching step would be ensuring that even individuals, who are not citizens of the European Union, have full access to public healthcare within the European Union (Ekmekci 2017, 432–444). Either way, such a broadening of access would require careful weighing of economic and other factors to ensure retaining the standard of care of existing right-holders.

Nevertheless, and perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, state-of-the-art of research evidence that restricting the access of asylum seekers and refugees to healthcare is costlier than granting them full access, on equal footing with the citizens of the European Union and individual member states (Legido-Quigley et al 2019; Bozorgmehr and Razum 2015, 1994–2013). Furthermore, it has been

shown that by enacting such inclusive policies regarding access to healthcare, considerable savings in medical and indirect non-medical costs related to public health can be achieved (Trummer et al 2018). That such viewpoints go against the common political talking agendas stems from the fact that migrants have long been subjects of deep-rooted prejudices and stigmatization processes (Spada 2021, 145–146; Milharčič-Hladnik 2016, 85).

A more inclusive approach could potentially even have positive ramifications for the soft power of the European Union, as the world sees its inclusive approach and enactment of humanist values, which are at the center of its formation and existence (Grazia 2021, 19–59; Eylemer and Söylemez 2020, 315–342).

In responding to the various challenges that cross-border access to healthcare presents, there is, as in addressing other transnational issues, a pressing need to master the paradoxes and competing demands, reconciling the many contradictory and co-existing oppositions (Malešič 2021, 77).

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Greater inclusivity in healthcare is generally positive from a humanist standpoint. It must be carefully weighed in terms of its impact for all individuals, including present right-holders so that an adequate standard of care is retained and ensured. The European Union has made great strides in broadening cross-border access to public health care and enacting a normative paradigm shift, which is beginning to substitute the nation-state with the European Community as the adequate level of analysis in questions of the cross-border access to healthcare. As certain implementation issues persist, achieving congruence between law in books and law in practice should be a priority from the policy standpoint.

Potential future normative developments could entail a move toward even greater inclusivity regarding access to healthcare, by making nation-level provision of healthcare, based on citizenship less relevant. In this regard, state-of-the-art research seems to indicate that there can be a potential for savings and even lessening of costs by enacting more inclusive policies regarding cross-border access to healthcare within the European Union. A stepping-stones approach, considering the generalized consequences of granting access, in terms of the categorical imperative, might be in order.

This article has delineated the genealogy of the current regulatory environment regarding access to cross-border public health care within the European Union. At the same time, the present regulatory framework was analysed and situated in the lingering potential of future developments. In this manner, it highlights critical potential areas of further research. In this regard, what would be very welcome is further confirmation of the economic, cost-related potential of ensuring broader access to public health care across national borders, including additional right-holders. The question of the influence of such an approach on the soft power of the European Union and its Member States could be addressed in detail by scholars in the field of international relations.

Access to cross-border health care remains an important area of regulation and public policymaking within the European Union. It is expected to remain such in the foreseeable future. Further developments in this area will be symptomatic of the trends regarding greater inclusivity or reterritorialization based on the



concept of individual nation-states. It remains to be seen whether the humanist trend of the broadening of access will be the one that continues. Considering the categorical imperative, the stepping-stone approach towards greater inclusivity seems to be the appropriate way to assess and decide on future policies in the field of cross border access to public healthcare within the European Union and beyond.

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## ČEZMEJNI DOSTOP DO ZDRAVSTVENEGA VARSTVA V EU: GENEALOŠKA ANALIZA REGULATORNIH VIDIKOV

*Vprašanje čezmejnega dostopa do zdravstvenega varstva v Evropski uniji že dolgo presega zamisel o zgolj spodbujanju gibanja delavcev prek meja. Kljub temu so ostanki diskurzov, ki temeljijo na nacionalni državi, ohranili nadzor nad nekaterimi državami članicami, zaradi česar je dostop do čezmejnega zdravstvenega varstva manj učinkovit. Članek se osredotoča na genealoško analizo regulativnih vidikov čezmejnega dostopa do zdravstvenega varstva. Po eni strani je poudarjena etična potreba po vse večji inkluzivnosti. Za ohranitev kakovosti javnega zdravstva je treba to uravnotežiti z realnimi premisleki, ob upoštevanju ekonomskih in drugih družbenih dejavnikov.*

**Ključne besede:** čezmejno zdravstveno varstvo; genealogija; regulacija; vključenost; javno zdravje.

## REVIVING TRAUMAS AND GRIEVANCES: GEOPOLITICAL CODES AND POLITICAL CULTURE IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Petr JUST and Nuno MORGADO<sup>1</sup>

*Historical traumas and grievances greatly influence political culture and discourse, electoral runs, attitudes of society and voters' behaviour several years, decades, sometimes even centuries later. Such attitudes, reflected both in domestic political culture and discourse as well as on the international level, are not the exclusive domain of nationalistic, xenophobic or populist parties. They become, therefore, relevant mainstream issues. The aim of this paper is to analyse the role and intensity of selected events of the past in today's political culture and discourse, in chosen cases of Central European countries, i.e., the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. This region is rich in historical events of changing in size and shape of countries, or its geopolitical code, that seeded roots for further use of this 'heritage' in political movements. During the communist period, some of these historical traumas and grievances were artificially suppressed. However, after the 1980s they were free to emerge and become influential factors in electoral competition and political positions.*

**Key words:** neoclassical geopolitics; trauma; foreign policy; electoral behaviour.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Historical traumas and grievances have always been an integral part of each country's political culture and discourse several years, decades or even centuries later (Maňák 2019). Wounds of the past often hurt today. Traumatizing events from the countries' past have influenced attitudes of society and voters, and thus have become part of not only scientific research, but also political culture and

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discourse, talks among friends and of course electoral campaigns. Recently, these attitudes towards historical grievances have been gaining a higher level of intensity and importance and have become one of the key sources of political phenomena such as Euroscepticism and national populism. However, it is certain that attitudes influenced and motivated by historical traumas and grievances are not the exclusive domain of extreme, nationalistic, xenophobic, antisystem and populist parties. Although the use of such tools in political marketing is often linked to new political parties challenging current office holders, traditional parties can also include topics related to a country's traumatic past in their appeals for voter support.

This paper intends to assess the role and intensity of selected events of the past, concerning geographical and geopolitical changes, in today's political culture and discourse. As noted by Ušiak (2018), policy making – either foreign or domestic – is shaped by the state's security environment. The state's security environment is, itself, largely formed by the specific type of the political culture that dwells in each country. Hence studying political culture and geopolitical codes helps in understanding state's policy and people's political options. The research goal is to be able to explain why certain political culture assumes certain contours, why the selected nations tend to vote in certain parties, and ultimately why they have their specific geopolitical codes. In this paper, the universe of cases includes the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. The exclusion of Poland from this research piece – from the V4 viewpoint – is justified by the existence of literature already covering the topic (Zarycki and Warczok 2020).

In this way, the structure of the paper starts with an initial Section covering theoretical and methodological choices, roofed by the umbrella of the geohistorical approach and complemented by controlled comparison and narrative analysis, operationalizing a real intercross between domestic factors and systemic constraints. We work with three easily identifiable variables – systemic constraints as independent variable, and the people's perception of space, and the geopolitical agent's perception of space, as intervening variables. This is followed by Section 2 devoted to describing the 'sentiment of betrayal' by the great powers in the mentioned countries. Section 3 covers the Czech case, shedding light on the Munich Agreement and the project for a U.S. radar, whereas Section 4 covers the Hungarian grievances concerning the Trianon Treaty, which extend until today. Finally, in Section 5 the sorrows of the Slovaks over the non-existence of a democratic Slovak state throughout the centuries is brought up, linking them with recent efforts in political discourse to connect the Great Moravia with modern Slovakia.

## 2 THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

This research piece is eminently based on the geohistorical approach. As Vives asserted (1972, 72–76), the geohistorical approach largely corresponds to the observation of a determined geographical space throughout history, to trace cores of historical foreign policy. In this way, the paper focus on the space of the three mentioned Central European countries (Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia), and bounces between the end of World War I and the present. Comparative politics, by using a controlled comparison between the universe of the case studies, and narrative analysis conducted to assess the interpretation of traumas and grievances in political culture and discourse are complementary methods used to operationalize a real intercross between domestic factors (*e.g.*, public

opinion) and systemic constraints (*e.g.*, threats and power constraints in the establishment of borders).

In these circumstances, the analysis includes three sets of variables, applying the structure of the model of neoclassical geopolitics (Morgado 2020, 151). Our observations depart from the independent variable of the constraints of the international system (*e.g.*, international treaties, military threats, political restrictiveness). In other words, assessing not only the distribution of capabilities in the international system – what Rose (1998, 146) designated as “the place of the state in the international system” –, but also making several notes about the state potential of each selected countries in determined periods of history. In this way, we accept the basic premise that international politics is branded by a never-ending struggle for power and influence (Ripsman *et al.* 2016, 43) and that, although the international system certainly imposes constraints on states – as Waltz discussed (1979) – those constraints do not dictate exactly how the state is going to react or to behave. Some other complementary variables are then necessary.

For that reason, the mentioned observations run through the intervening variable of the perception of space of two determined groups: (1) the people’s perception of space, which constitutes part of Flint’s concept of ‘popular culture’ (Flint 2006, 102), and (2) the geopolitical agent’s perception of space, as developed by one of us (Morgado 2020, 147). As mentioned, the research goal is to be able to explain why certain political culture assumes certain contours, why the selected nations tend to vote in certain parties, and ultimately why they have their specific geopolitical codes. The characterization of the geopolitical agents – and that will be extended to popular culture – involves (a) an analysis of strategic culture through the study of perceptions of geographical space, and (b) an exploration of the intentions of the geopolitical agents and nations by identifying their ambitions. The (a) analysis of strategic culture involves scrutinizing the nations and geopolitical agents’ sense, or perception, of geographical space. This means studying what kind of perceptions the nation and the geopolitical agents have about the implications of the incentives of the geographical setting in geostrategic formulation, the creation of geopolitical design, and foreign policy conduct. The (b) exploration of the intentions of the geopolitical agents (Chauprade and Thual 1998, 496) is accomplished by identifying their ambitions (and these are supposed to be, at the same time, the interpretation of the national aspirations). Rose (1998, 152) asserted that relative material state potential, being the foundation of foreign policy, impacts the ambitions of geopolitical agents in terms of their shaping of the external environment.

As for key concepts, geopolitical code is one of the most important. We accept Flint’s definition of a geopolitical code as ‘the manner in which a country orientates itself toward the world...’. The geopolitical code is a product of the calculation of the allies, enemies, how to maintain the former and counter the latter, and finally how to justify policy options to the domestic public opinion and in international relations (Flint 2006, 55–56). The geopolitical agents (Morgado 2019) – or the foreign policy executive (Ripsman *et al.* 2016) – is yet another concept applied in this research by identifying and characterising political agents with international influence (*e.g.* Klvaňa, Orbán, Fico). The relative material state potential, which designates “the capabilities or resources... with which states can influence each other” (Wohlforth 1993, 4); strategic culture, which corresponds to “...a set of inter-related beliefs, norms, and assumptions...” that establish “...what are acceptable and unacceptable strategic choices...” (Ripsman *et al.* 2016,

67); and the geopolitical design, which means both a list of state objectives (national objectives) and its hierarchy (Chauprade and Thual 1998, 486–487) and further operational concepts of the paper.

Trauma, grievance, betrayal, or abandonment have been sentiments taken as research topic in recent literature (Ilg 2021). On the other hand, geopolitical codes have also deserved the attention of several scholars (Dijkink 1998; Fard 2019). This paper is included in this line of research.

### 3 CENTRAL EUROPE: INTRODUCING THE SENTIMENT OF “BETRAYAL”

The re-emergence of historical grievances and their use in political discourse is especially intensive and visible in the region of post-Communist Central Europe. There are two major reasons for this.

First, many historical traumas were artificially suppressed or tabooed during Communist rule (Woods 2020). This applies mainly to the traumas concerning bilateral relations between countries that were part of the Eastern bloc during the Cold War. These were mainly caused by the mutual relations between countries and nations from the pre-World War I period as well as the interwar period. Looking back to the history of Central Europe before 1939 one can observe several border and territorial disputes, as well as majority vs. minority conflicts within multinational and multi-ethnic states, which created grounds for sensitive and problematic mutual relations. Any past disagreements between countries belonging to the Eastern bloc during the Cold War were considered a possible source of instability in the entire Communist area and either remained hidden or did not reach a high level of intensity.

The second reason for the re-emergence of historical grievances in post-1989 Central Europe is that during the non-democratic Communist period after World War II not only ‘old’ grievances were tabooed, but also some ‘new’ ones appeared. These ‘new’ ones were usually related to Soviet or Communist activities in satellite countries, mainly limits of sovereignty of Central European countries executed by Soviet military interventionism into internal affairs (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968) or threats of the interventionism (Poland 1981). The Communist period and serf status of Central European satellites of the Soviet Union have also been examined among both political elites and broad society of newly democratised countries after 1989. Democratisation processes at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s reopened these previously artificially suppressed wounds and brought them back to the agenda of political parties as well as society.

### 4 CZECH REPUBLIC: FROM MUNICH TO THE U.S. RADAR

Czech traumas and grievances in general are closely connected with the distrust in any foreign powers and/or international actors. These grievances reflect several events from the Czech (Czechoslovak) past that can be characterised by the feeling of ‘being abandoned and betrayed by allies’.

This refers to the most significant betrayal in modern Czech (Czechoslovak) history, the ‘Agreement concluded at Munich, September 29, 1938, between



Germany, Great Britain, France and Italy' hereinafter the Munich Agreement of 1938. Signatories of the treaty agreed to the transfer of the Sudeten German territory (part of Czechoslovakia inhabited mainly by Germans) to Germany (Munich Agreement 1938). While Great Britain and France believed this step would satisfy Adolf Hitler's territorial expansion ambitions, Germany took it as the first step in its gradual attempt to break up Czechoslovakia. This breakup was eventually confirmed six months later, when the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia seceded and declared independence (14 March 1939), while the rest of Czechoslovakia was subsequently invaded and occupied by Germany (15 March 1939) and fully integrated into the Third Reich as its Protectorate (16 March 1939).

Since Czechoslovakia was excluded from the negotiations and was just informed about the outcome of the Munich conference, the term 'about us, without us' immediately came in handy for this event. Moreover, the bitterness of this event was strengthened by the fact that one of the signatories was a strategic ally of Czechoslovakia during the interwar period. The alliance with France was one of the main pillars of the interwar foreign policy of Czechoslovakia. That's why its participation at the Munich conference and agreement with the German takeover of parts of Czechoslovakia was labelled as the 'Munich betrayal'.

The events related to the 1938 Munich conference and its consequences have since then been the main source of historical grievances in Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic. The impact of the conference and the position of West-European powers, namely the feeling of being abandoned and betrayed by France, influenced the thinking of both political elites and society after World War II. As Czechoslovakia was looking for another strategic partner after World War II, the position of former (interwar) allies was very much discredited by their participation at the 1938 Munich Conference and their signature under the Munich Agreement. Then President Edvard Beneš, who as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1918–1935 had been a strong advocate for Czechoslovak–French cooperation during the interwar period, took the 1938 French position towards Hitler's demands very personally. The Soviet Union benefited from this atmosphere and made it easier for Joseph Stalin to get Czechoslovakia under the Soviet sphere of influence.

As discussed earlier, the 1938 Munich conference's impact on Czechoslovak and Czech society can be seen in a general distrust towards any foreign powers and/or international actors, not even towards those pretending to be the Czech Republic's allies. It is considered one of the sources of the very intense Euroscepticism in the Czech Republic. Critics of the European Union (EU) and Czech membership argue that the entire European integration process is managed by two West-European powers – Germany and France – and thus cannot be trusted, referring to the involvement of these two countries in the 1938 Munich Conference.

A reference to the 1938 Munich Agreement was used when the Czech Republic was negotiating with the United States of America about the possible construction of an American radar base (as part of the United States' missile defence system) in Czech territory. The Czech government's plan to offer the military grounds in Brdy (in the Central Bohemia region) for the construction of the United States' radar base drew intense criticism and opposition not only from some political parties, but also from several civic initiatives. Critics of the plan considered it a loss of sovereignty comparable to the 1938 Munich Agreement.

The anti-radar 'Munich' narrative was chosen to influence public opinion and thus gain support for their position of radar opponents. 'Radar is the new Munich!' was one of the arguments presented by an anti-radar activist during public discussion with Tomáš Klvaňa's government plenipotentiary responsible for running the pro-radar campaign (SKG 2008, 12). Banners brought by anti-radar activists to several protest assemblies read signs 'Say NO to radar! 1938 Hitler, 1968 Brezhnev, 2008 Bush!' (Lidovky 2008), again referring to similarities between the 2008 negotiations about the radar construction and the 1938 Munich conference.

The above-mentioned banner inscription not only included reference to the 1938 Munich Conference and related subsequent events, but also to another milestone in 20<sup>th</sup> century Czechoslovak history, the 1968 intervention of five Warsaw Pact countries: the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Eastern Germany (German Democratic Republic), Hungary and Poland. This is another example of an historical grievance that has influenced Czechoslovak and Czech society, again falling into the category of acts caused by a foreign power (or powers) and acts showing the betrayal of a close ally (Czechoslovakia was part of the Soviet bloc and a member country of the Warsaw Pact as well). The intervention of five Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968, followed by 23 years of military presence, and the de facto occupation, of the Soviet army of Czechoslovak territory (1968–1991) was a reaction to the attempt to reform the Czechoslovak regime during the so-called Prague Spring in 1968. Although the reform leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) did not have any intentions of leaving the Eastern bloc, exclusion from the Soviet sphere of influence and/or withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact or Council for Mutual Economic Cooperation (COMECON), Moscow leadership did not want to jeopardise and gamble its control over the strategically located satellite country. The Soviets were also afraid of a possible domino effect, which means a chain reaction, if other Soviet satellites followed Czechoslovakia.

Despite both events – the 1938 Munich Agreement and the 1968 Warsaw Pact intervention – having different geopolitical roots, they both comply with the Czech national trauma and feeling of being betrayed by a close (foreign) ally and treated as an inferior subject. Therefore, using parallels between these historical events on one side and any contemporary events on the other side increases the chances of catching public attention and influencing public opinion, no matter whether the comparison has any relevant grounds or not.

Back to the radar base issue. By using comparison with the traumatic events of 1938 and 1968, the anti-radar activists aimed at influencing public opinion to reject the proposal, which eventually later proved effective. Data collected by the Center for the Public Opinion Research (CVVM) based at the Sociological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences had shown continuous opposition to the radar base. The CVVM had been including this issue in its public opinion surveys conducted between 2006 and 2009, e.g., in the relevant period when the issue had been on the political agenda both on a domestic level in the Czech Republic and on a bilateral level during Czech–U.S. negotiations. The support of the Czech public had never surpassed 30% of respondents, while the opposition had never dropped below 60% of respondents (CVVM 2009). Similar data were presented by public opinion surveys conducted by other institutions and organisations (see STEM 2008), as well as the media. Although the exact shares of supports vs. opponents differed, the general results proved that the project was favoured only by a minority of citizens.

The construction of the United States' radar base in the Czech Republic had majority support only among voters of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the leading coalition party in 2006–2009. Data showed that 54% of ODS voters favoured this project, while 40% opposed it, with 6% having no opinion. Support for the radar base among voters of the other two coalition parties, Christian and Democratic Union – the Czechoslovak Peoples' Party (KDU-ČSL) and the Green Party (SZ) – was significantly weaker than in case of ODS. The project was supported by only one third of KDU-ČSL and SZ voters (CVVM 2009). The issue caused internal conflicts in both junior coalition parties. Most both parties' voter bases rejected the project, while both parties' top representatives in the coalition government were among the biggest advocates for it (then Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg who represented SZ and then Minister of Défense Vlasta Parkanová who represented KDU-ČSL).

Supporters of both opposition parliamentary parties in the 2006-2009 period, the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), strongly opposed the project. Up to 80% of ČSSD voters and 90% of KSČM voters rejected the plans (CVVM 2009). The latter one was logically the strongest and most vocal opponent among political parties. Today's Communist Party itself builds on the pre-1989 Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC) from the non-democratic era and its perception of international politics is based on the Cold War conflict between East and West with the United States still as the 'evil' Western power in the eyes of the KSČM. In the case of ČSSD, it was rather a political approach, as the first talks about the United States' radar base installation took place before the 2006 election when ČSSD was the leading coalition party. Once the social democrats became the opposition party following the 2006 parliamentary elections, their approach changed from support to opposition.

## 5 HUNGARY: FROM TRIANON TO SOFT IRREDENTISM

Almost 20 years before Czechoslovak society was traumatised by the 'Munich betrayal', a *de facto* prelude to World War II, the winning powers of World War I discussed the fate of the countries that had caused the war and lost it. In addition to the more well-known Treaty of Versailles that dealt with Germany, there were other treaties dealing with other losing countries. Among them there is one that evokes emotions to this day – the Trianon Treaty adopted on 4 June 1920. As a result of this treaty, Hungary lost two thirds of its pre-World War I territory and about one third of the Hungarian population remained behind the newly established Hungarian borders. Although Hungary achieved a partial revision of the Trianon Treaty by the two Vienna Arbitration Awards in 1938 and 1940, respectively (with the help of Germany and Italy), the borders returned to their pre-1938 state after World War II, when Hungary was again part of the alliance that lost the war (Hungary joined Axis powers Germany, Italy and Japan in 1940).

What 'Munich' is for Czechoslovakia, 'Trianon' is for Hungary. The Trianon Treaty and its consequences have since then been considered by Hungarians 'a national tragedy, even the greatest', while 'for Slovaks, Romanians, Serbs, etc. a great national victory, perhaps the greatest' (Gál 2020). The 'Trianon betrayal' has resonated in Hungarian politics and society even more than the 'Munich' betrayal has among Czechs. The issue has driven attention and emotions the entire period after 1989 and was brought into the public debates mainly (but only) by the national conservative party Alliance of Young Democrats – the Hungarian Civic

Alliance (FIDESZ-MPSZ) led by Viktor Orbán. Their rhetoric regarding the Trianon Treaty strengthened especially after their 2002 and 2006 electoral defeats (Szabó 2020, 31), and substantially reached its peak after the 2010 parliamentary elections and the major victory of the FIDESZ-MPSZ. Orbán's national-conservative government "cultivated anew the 'tragedy' of the Trianon Peace Treaty of 1920, which had been a dominant storyline of Horthy's interwar Hungary" (Walsch 2018, 185).

However, in 1998, shortly before winning his first elections and becoming the Hungarian prime minister for the first time, Viktor Orbán had already 'interpreted twentieth-century history as a series of tragedies for the Hungarian nation' (Benazzo 2017, 202), referring not only to the above-mentioned Trianon Treaty, but also to the Communist takeover after World War II and the events related to the Hungarian uprising in 1956. After becoming the prime minister in 1998, Orbán called for 'some serious changes for the politics of memory' (ibid.). This political approach also includes praise and glorification of the regime of Miklós Horthy (1920–1944).

It was during Horthy's term as a regent<sup>2</sup> when the continuous attempt to revise the Trianon Treaty became one of the pillars of Hungarian foreign policy (Hetényi 2008, 13; Klimek and Kubů 1995, 39). This foreign policy goal was eventually partly successful during Horthy's term. This was possible due to Hungary's alliance with Germany (Hopkins 2020) and followed the successful German attempt to revise the Treaty of Versailles's borders during the Munich Conference at the end of September 1938, as mentioned in the previous section. Following the same argumentation used by Germans regarding German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia, Hungary claimed possession of the Hungarian-speaking territories of Czechoslovakia (southern Slovakia and southern Carpathian Ruthenia) during the Vienna Arbitration in November 1938. The First Vienna Arbitration Award from 2 November 1938 was the first step in Hungary's partial revision of its post-World War I border. It was later followed by the occupation of the rest of Carpathian Ruthenia in March 1939 and finally by the Second Vienna Arbitration Award in August 1940 that affected the region of northern Transylvania (then part of Romania) (United Nations 2007). Following World War II and the 1947 Treaty of Paris, the Hungarian borders returned to their pre-1938 settlement, except for three villages Horvathjarfalu, Oroszvar and Dunacsun, which were moved to then Czechoslovakia, now Slovakia (Treaty 1947, article 1, section 4c).

The 1920 Trianon Treaty led to the loss of approximately two thirds of Hungarian territory with more than three million Hungarians inhabiting these seceded territories (Woods 2019). Since the post-World War II context made Hungary return to pre-1938 borders and nullified both Vienna Arbitration Awards, as well as other Hungarian gains made in 1938–1941 (see Treaty 1947, article 1, sections 1-4), the bitterness over Trianon injustice remained deeply rooted in Hungarian society. However, during the Communist rule the issue was a taboo (Woods 2020), therefore it was not until transition to democracy and following development that the issue again became part of political culture, discourse and agenda. It is no surprise that Trianon-related public opinion surveys have shown

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<sup>2</sup> The monarchy was restored in Hungary in 1920. However, the throne was denied to Charles I, the last Emperor of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and also the last Hungarian King before 1918. Instead, Miklós Horthy became regent, a position he held until he was forced by Germans to resign in 1944. The office of regent is characterized as 'a person who governs a kingdom during the minority or absence or incapacity of a king' (Rees 1819).

that most Hungarians, regardless of their political preferences, describe the treaty as an act of injustice (MTI 2020). A poll conducted at the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Trianon Treaty showed that up to 85% of Hungarians consider the treaty as 'biggest national tragedy', and 77% say the country has 'never really recovered from the loss' (Latal et al 2020).

It is natural that any historical topic of significant importance becomes part of political discourse even many years after. In 2010, on the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Trianon Treaty, the newly elected Hungarian parliament declared 4 June as 'National Cohesion Day'. It is understood as a day of unity with Hungarians living abroad, namely in pre-Trianon areas of Greater Hungary. The issue of unity was reflected in the new Fundamental Law (Constitution), adopted in the following year. The Preamble of the 2011 Fundamental Law pledges to 'preserve the intellectual and spiritual unity of our nation, torn apart by the storms of the past century' and honours 'the achievements of our historical Constitution and the Holy Crown, which embodies the constitutional continuity of Hungary and the unity of the nation' (Constitutional Court of Hungary 2011).

While it can be assumed that none of the key political actors believe in the real possibility of revising the Trianon Treaty today, because it does not apply anymore and also because it was replaced by the Treaty of Paris signed in 1947, many Hungarians believe the wide-spread myth that the Trianon Treaty had been signed for 100 years and that 'in 2020 all lost territories will suddenly return' (Woods 2019). As Slovak-Hungarian political scientist Zsolt Gál points out, among Hungarians there is 'still a significant group of people who hope that the "torn-off territories will eventually return", while on the other hand, among Slovaks, Romanians, etc. many still share fears that they will lose "their" territories. On both sides, these are minorities, but perhaps not so negligible' (Gál 2020).

According to Gál (ibid.), one of the main problems is that ethnic majorities in different countries often do not understand the other minority ethnic groups. 'They know woefully little about real historical events; they perceive almost everything only through their narrow national prism and the wider international (Central European) context goes completely aside'. To support his argument, he pointed out that while most Hungarians regret the dissolution of Hungary after World War I, most Slovaks or Romanians interpret the same act as gaining freedom from Hungarian oppression.

In this way, the Trianon Treaty is not remembered only in Hungary. In May 2020, the Romanian Parliament passed a bill declaring 4 June as Trianon Treaty Day and making it a public holiday. During this day, several events promoting the significance of the treaty are held. Some analysts consider this motion 'a response to Hungary's decision of declaring June 4 the "Day of National Cohesion"' (Hungary Today 2020). The motion to declare 4 June Trianon Treaty Day further fuelled tensions between Hungarians and Romanians not only on the level of interstate relations, but also within Romania.

While there is no Trianon Treaty Day marked in the Slovak calendar, we can find some memorials marking this event in Slovakia. On the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of signing the treaty on 4 June 2010, a memorial plaque was placed on the building of the Slovak Post Office on Slovak National Uprising Square in the downtown of the Slovak capital Bratislava. The memorial plaque, whose installation was initiated by the Slovak National Party, reads the following: 'The Slovak Republic

expresses thanks to the allied powers for concluding the Trianon Peace Treaty with Hungary on the day of June 4, 1920, at the Grand Trianon Chateau in Versailles near Paris, which sealed the dissolution of Hungary, situated Czechoslovakia and other countries in its relevant borders and gave Europe its new face. Grateful Slovaks' (Just 2019; Veverka 2011). The plaque also includes a quotation of Štefan Osuský, inter-war career diplomat and envoy who signed the treaty on behalf of Czechoslovakia: 'When I signed my name at the bottom of the treaty bearing name Trianon at three-quarters to five on June 4, 1920, I knew that I was signing the settlement of the Slovak nation with the former Hungary, settlement of accounts signed from the top to the bottom with the blood, suffering and misery of my nation. And such a settlement is eternal' (Just 2019; Veverka 2011).

## 6 GREAT MORAVIAN EMPIRE: THE FIRST SLOVAK STATE?

The research already put forth arguments about the Czech and Hungarian grievances and traumas related to the territorial losses as decided by the great powers in the past. Unlike the Czech Republic, Hungary or Poland, Slovakia has never had its own independent state before 1918, which can be understood as one of the sources of (not only) contemporary grievances and traumas. Slovak territorial identity had been suppressed in the past by the fact that Slovak nationality 'was formed in the conditions of a subordinate community, living in an asymbiotic relationship with the ethnically distant nationality of the Hungarians, while the Czechs lived in their own state unit' (Nikischer 2013, 15).

The absence of independent Slovak statehood in the past was a driving force behind two 20<sup>th</sup> century events that eventually ended with the declaration of independence. The first such event occurred in 1939, when the Slovak state was declared, although not because of the struggle for independence, but rather because of the pressure from Germany's leader Adolf Hitler and his attempt to break up Czechoslovakia. Secession of Slovakia thus became one of many steps in Hitler's plan to break up Czechoslovakia. A step which was preceded by the Munich Treaty in September 1938 and the Vienna Arbitration Award in November 1938 as mentioned above. The events in both Munich and Vienna led to the revision of the post-World War I treaties from the Versailles and Trianon, and the transfer of the Czechoslovak territories inhabited by Germans, resp. Hungarians to Germany, resp. Hungary. Slovak independence, declared on 14 March 1939, was followed the next day by entry of German forces into the territory of the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, and finally its declaration as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia on 16 March 1939. The Czech part of former Czechoslovakia thus became an integral part of the German Third Reich (Klimek and Kubů 1995, 94).

From the international law perspective, Slovakia was in a different situation. It was officially an independent country. However, Slovak independence in 1939–1945 was quite limited. There were several official, legal limits as well as some unofficial limits to Slovak sovereignty. Among the legal limits we can name the German-Slovak bilateral 'Treaty on the Protective Relations between the German Empire and the Slovak State' (*Deutsch-Slowakischen Schutzvertrag*), signed on 23 March 1939. The treaty additionally legitimised the entry of German troops into the territory of Slovakia and guaranteed Germany's control over the protection zone along the border with the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. According to the treaty, Slovakia subordinated its foreign policy, defence, but also economic (industrial, agricultural, transport) policies and economy to the interests of

Germany. A secret amendment to the treaty ('Confidential Protocol on Economic and Financial Cooperation') also gave Germany preferential rights to the use of minerals extracted in Slovakia. In accordance with the treaty, Slovakia became part of Hitler's alliance and alongside Germany (and the Soviet Union as well) participated in the invasion of Poland in September 1939, an act considered as the starting point of World War II (Klimek and Kubů 1995, 94). Thanks to the involvement in the German and Soviet attack on Poland, Slovakia gained some Polish territories. Later Slovakia participated in the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941.

Another limit of Slovak sovereignty was represented by the presence of German advisors at the Slovak ministries and other administrative offices. These advisors served more as controllers, who oversaw the implementation of German policies by the Slovak government. In accordance with the limits of sovereignty, Slovakia was in fact a puppet state or satellite of Germany. Contemporary perception of the 1939–1945 Slovak War State shows that there is still substantial support for the acts of the Slovak administration during World War II. According to a 2013 survey, 29% of respondents think that Slovak wartime President Jozef Tiso saved the lives of 'many Jews', the same share of respondents also think that it is 'time to stop commemorating the deportations and murders of Jews' (Blaščák et al 2013, 6). The same survey also showed that the awareness of the main events related to the 1939–1945 period is very low. Only 22.3% of respondents are aware what the term 'aryanisation' means and only 15.3% know the approximate number of Jews that were deported to concentration camps (ibid., 5)

The desire for independence, this time already in democratic conditions, appeared again after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989 with the rapid pro-independence movement that ended in the disintegration of Czechoslovakia and the formation of two independent successor countries in 1993, one of them being Slovakia. This time, modern Slovak independence came because of a non-violent, peaceful and democratic process and the state began to operate under democratic conditions (unlike the previous case of 1939–1945 statehood). Although an independent country since then, the issue of territoriality has remained vivid. The Czech-Slovak dimension was, however, replaced by the Slovak-Hungarian dimension with the Slovak approach towards the Hungarian minority living in the southern belt of Slovakia alongside the border with Hungary being one of the sources of the clashes, and Hungarian soft irredentism, as mentioned, being the other one.

Any reminder of the Trianon Treaty has naturally provoked reactions from countries that feel threatened by possible Hungarian irredentism, and Slovakia can serve as a great example. While in the Czech and Hungarian cases mentioned above the core of the historical injustice is the loss of territory or sovereignty, in the Slovak case everything revolves around the previous non-existence of independent Slovak statehood (Nikischer 2013) and the efforts to establish it or achieve it as soon as possible so that Slovaks could be – finally – masters of their own territory, of their own country.

After the foundation of independent Slovakia, however, an interesting phenomenon can be observed – the effort to find proof that there was Slovak statehood sometime in history. This approach has reversed the generally perceived interpretation of Slovaks living 'in the conditions of a subordinate community' (Nikischer 2013, 15), either in the territory dominated by Hungarians or Czechs. This phenomenon has been represented by the well-



known statement of former Prime Minister Robert Fico, who on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of Slovakia in January 2008 stated that 'Svatopluk was the first King of Old Slovaks' and claimed that historians agree that 'we can use the term of Old Slovaks' (Kern 2008). Fico was referring to the 9<sup>th</sup> century Great Moravian Empire, generally considered to be state of 'Old Slavs' (not 'Old Slovaks').

## 7 CONCLUSION

The paper has contributed to a broad understanding of the region of Central Europe by analysing the role and intensity of grievances and traumas of past events, such as the Munich Agreement and the project for a U.S. radar in the Czech case, the Trianon Treaty in the Hungarian one, and the non-existence of a democratic state in the Slovak case, on these nations' political culture and discourse, as well as their political agents. From a comparative point of view, we can conclude that while in the cases of the Czech Republic and Hungary the grievances are built related to the loss of once-owned territory and harmful foreign influence (international constraints), the Slovak grievance is mainly because that nation never had the chance to have their independent territory until very recently. As it was problematised in the paper, such traumas and grievances do have a significant role in clarifying the nature of national political cultures and discourses. Therefore, traumas and grievances have explanatory power over the reasons why large portions of Czechs, Hungarians and Slovaks sustain, support, and vote for certain parties (not even necessarily nationalist or xenophobic ones). This seems to be a result of a successful management in effectively using these memories, traumas, and grievances for political gains. Cumulatively in time, this political culture and discourse determines the geopolitical code of the state and, therefore, ends up influencing the international system throughout the decades. Apart from this, the paper also has the innovative aspect of applying the new theoretic-methodological model of neoclassical realism to study the topic, operationalising it in the intercross of domestic and international variables, opening the path for other similar exercises, examining recent political facts in the light of these traumas and grievances.

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## APPENDIX

### List of abbreviations

COMECON	Council for Mutual Economic Cooperation
CVVM	Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění [Center for the Public Opinion Research]
ČSSD	Česká strana sociálně demokratická [Czech Social Democratic Party]
EU	European Union
FIDESZ-MPSZ	Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége – Magyar Polgári Szövetség [Alliance of Young Democrats – Hungarian Civic Alliance]
KDU-ČSL	Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová [Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak Peoples' Party]
KSČ	Komunistická strana Československa [Communist Party of Czechoslovakia]
KSČM	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy [Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia]
ODS	Občanská demokratická strana [Civic Democratic Party]
SMER-SD	Smer – Sociálna demokracia [Direction – Social Democracy]
SNS	Slovenská národná strana [Slovak National Party]
SZ	Strana zelených [Green Party]
V4	Visegrad Four, Visegrad Group



## OŽIVLJANJE TRAVM IN ZAMER: GEOPOLITIČNE OZNAKE IN POLITIČNA KULTURA V SREDNJI EVROPI

*Zgodovinske travme in zamere močno vplivajo na politično kulturo in diskurz, volilne procese, odnos družbe in obnašanje volivcev več let, desetletij, včasih celo stoletij kasneje. Takšna stališča, ki se odražajo tako v domači politični kulturi in diskurzu kot tudi na mednarodni ravni, niso izključna domena nacionalističnih, ksenofobnih ali populističnih strank. Zato postanejo pomembna vprašanja. Namen prispevka je analizirati vlogo in intenzivnost izbranih dogodkov iz preteklosti v današnji politični kulturi in diskurzu na izbranih primerih srednjeevropskih držav, torej Češke, Madžarske in Slovaške. Ta regija je bogata z zgodovinskimi dogodki spreminjanja velikosti in oblike držav ali njihovimi geopolitičnimi oznakami, ki so pogladi korenine za nadaljnjo uporabo te 'dediščine' v političnih gibanjih. V času komunizma so bile nekatere od teh zgodovinskih travm in zamer umetno potlačene. Vendar so se po osemdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja lahko spet svobodno pojavile in postale vplivni dejavniki volilne tekme in političnih položajev.*

**Ključne besede:** geopolitika; travma; zunanja politika; volilno vedenje.

## COUNCIL NEWSPAPERS ON HOUSING. ONLY MOUTHPIECES OF THE GOVERNING COALITION?

Dan RYŠAVÝ and Dominika DOBIŠOVÁ<sup>1</sup>

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*The study presents an analysis of the communication of the currently highly salient topic of housing in the council newspapers of three Czech towns that differ in terms of their proportion of municipal flats. A quantitative content analysis did not confirm the presumed massive favouring of the governing coalition in the pre-election period. A qualitative analysis documented how communication on the topic of housing is influenced by the editorial policies of municipal periodicals. By changing them, the new administrations of towns can increase the space dedicated to presentation of their own housing policies or set the standards for communication on this topic. The third way is the PR-like manner of selective choice of non-conflicting parts of the local housing policies that portray the town leaders in a proactive role.*

**Key words:** council newspaper; local government; housing policy; content analysis; Czech Republic.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Elections are a celebration of democracy and free media are its watchdog. Does this, however, also apply on the local level and in a country whose history of democracy is not particularly long, such as the Czech Republic? In Germany, a neighbouring country whose media standards are considerably more developed, a content analysis of local newspapers showed that regardless of the quality work of news journalists concerning a diversity of topics and their relatively high independence rate, local newspapers tend to portray a harmonious local world in a rather uncritical way (Arnold, Wagner 2018). In other countries, there has also been an increasingly strong conviction that local newspapers do not contribute to local political life and local democracy as much as they used to (Franklin 2006). In the Czech Republic, local topics are easily marginalized in local newspapers because of commercialization pressure (Waschková and

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Císařová 2016), and the conditions for local reporting have also been deteriorating (Metyková and Císařová 2020). A missing legislative framework and weak support from the state towards local media result in their degradation and the extension of 'information deserts', in other words, regions with no independent media coverage of current affairs (EUI, Štětka and Hájek 2021, 14). Can periodicals published by municipalities be oases where one can quench one's information thirst? Or do they merely water the soil farmed by the governing elites and increase their chance for a voter harvest in the election?

The Czech Republic is characterized by a fragmentation of local government (Illner 2011). Considering the wide range of municipality sizes, the nature of local elections is not uniform, although they are subject to unified election regulations. There are several worlds of communal elections existing in parallel (Balík et al. 2015). In the smallest municipalities with several hundred inhabitants, the electoral lists frequently contain individual candidates that the inhabitants are familiar with or there is only a single electoral list, so the voters do not have a choice (Hájek and Balík 2020). The idea of existence of media plurality in such a limited space is far detached from reality and possibly also from the citizens' expectations. In such conditions, a municipal periodical, if published, becomes a very important source of information on local matters. In municipalities, towns and town districts with several thousand to tens of thousands of inhabitants, voters often choose individual candidates from various electoral lists, and most of them have no idea that this personalized choice is more of an illusion than genuine support for individual candidates (Lebeda 2009). The question as to whether the municipality-owned media play the role of a mouthpiece for the governing coalition is a pressing issue particularly in municipalities of this size. This fact may be documented with lawsuits demanding enforcement of the Press Law (Oživení 2016) or non-recognition of local elections held under unfair conditions in the election campaign. The judicial decision on invalidation of elections to the municipal assembly of the town of Strakonice was a breakthrough, although the reasoning concerning unfair access to the municipality-owned media was not part of the essential basis for the judgments made by the regional court and the Constitutional Court (Hájek and Balík 2020).

The voting in large towns, particularly in regional cities, is closest to the national-level elections. Voters decide which political party or political movement, active on the national level, they will vote for. Notable cases from regional centres are even covered in nationwide media. None of these periodicals are, however, distributed free-of-charge to all households, in contrast to municipality periodicals, which are frequently distributed in this way.<sup>2</sup> Local media therefore have the potential to significantly influence the decisions of voters. In Brno, the second largest Czech city, a communist member of the municipal assembly decided to crop his text 'The Elections Are Coming' after the head of the legal department of the municipal office notified him that contributions published prior to the coming elections cannot be written as an election campaign (Říha 2018). In contrast, according to an assembly member with the coalition Piráti and Starostové, *Olomouc Newspaper* remained 'the mouthpiece' of the governing coalition after the election, which was documented by the fact that the party could only express itself when answering an opinion poll question designed by the city council (Zelenka 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the case of regional government newsletters, the analysis of which could constitute a comparative case for this study. The quality of subnational democracy in the Czech Republic and Poland from the perspective of Dahl's theory of democracy has been discussed in this journal by Maškarinec (2023).



Is local democracy in the largest municipalities also in danger due to unbalanced political communication in municipality-owned media? And is it wrong if mayors of large cities, who, according to authors such as Barber (2013), have the authority to manage the most pressing current issues, take hold of channels to directly communicate the visions of the cities they govern? The first question concerns the responsiveness of local government, which strengthens the input legitimacy of a democratic regime. Efficient problem-solving is related to the output legitimacy (Scharpf 1999; Vetter and Kersting 2003). To maintain democracy, both perspectives need to be reconciled. This fact needs to be taken into consideration within analyses of the functioning of council newspapers, as well as the subsequent recommendations regarding their regulation, whether in electoral or media legislation.

Existing analyses of municipal newspapers usually have a normative framework and are topic-unspecific when it comes to the political content. They favour analysis of the entire content without any link to municipal policies. When quantifying the references to governing parties or the voices from the opposition, they frequently do not differentiate between important and marginal topics. In contrast, the present study is based on two assumptions. First, local politics are not made only prior to the elections. It does not only matter whether the authorities at the town hall use the council newspapers as a tool for free-of-charge election campaign, in other words, whether they attempt to preserve the gained positions using means that are not available to their pre-election rivals. It is also important to pay attention to how the local policymaking in municipal periodicals is communicated by new or renewed municipal coalitions established after the elections. Second, the salience of various political topics differs. An interconnection between the input and output perspectives for local democracy legitimacy is more easily achievable through analysis of communication focused on the pressing issues of municipalities and their citizens.

This paper aims to supplement existing knowledge on topic-focused analysis of council newspapers both prior to elections and after them. We intend to find out in what way local politicians communicate a particular topic via the newspapers in various periods. In our opinion a good choice of a topic is one that has shifted from being a 'partisan' to a 'valence' issue (Clegg and Farstad 2021); i.e., a topic that does not only build the profile of one party but is considered important by most parties. Housing and its affordability, in the context of large cities, is currently a globally relevant issue (Wetzstein 2017). In addition, major Czech cities show not only the increasing, but also the path-dependent saliency of the housing issue (Ryšavý and Sedláková 2022). Local housing policies reflect both the intensive increase in prices, the income ratio after 2015 (Delmendo 2022) and the decision-making of local politicians since the reestablishment of the local administration after 1989. For decades, privatization of municipal housing stock represented typical local housing policies. 'It was not until cities had almost entirely freed themselves from the role of owning housing stock that local politicians began to treat housing as a more serious issue and devote more attention to it.' (Ryšavý and Sedláková 2022, 309). With a boom in housing prices, people have begun to prioritize support for housing among other state social policies (Tuček 2018). Politicians competing for voter support have not been able to sidestep a topic which most of their predecessors preferred to let the market resolve.

We ask whether the availability of housing has become a mere slogan in the pre-election political marketing; something that cannot be omitted regarding the

situation on the housing market. An answer to this research question is determined based on a content analysis of local newspapers; the analysis involves three out of the ten biggest cities in the Czech Republic. All the three cities have been similarly affected by the housing availability crisis, but their histories of local housing policies differ. In Olomouc, the municipal housing stock has been almost completely sold. In contrast, the city of Brno and its districts own several tens of thousands of flats at present. The political representation in the selected cities consists of a similar combination of political subjects, but they may differ in the way they politically communicate the topic of housing. An analysis of council newspapers allows us to compare the content of this communication in various periods of the election cycle. Put briefly in the main research question, we ask who is connected in council newspapers to the topic of housing, where, when and how.

## 2 COUNCIL NEWSPAPERS IN THE WORLD OF LOCAL MEDIA AND LOCAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION?

City hall bulletins, council newspapers and municipal-owned media. Periodicals with these and similar labels represent a distinctive means of communication. In the Czech Republic and elsewhere, they often do not receive much attention from political scientists and media studies (see e.g., Kurp 1994, 168-169). Interestingly, local administrations of numerous Czech municipalities publish their own printed media. Although, from the legislative viewpoint, Czech city newspapers are regarded as media, they may be fairly defined as council publicity tools (Waschková and Císařová 2015, 70). They are oftentimes distributed free of charge to all households. This luxury is available, particularly for large cities, thanks to their budgets; concerning the nature of the current housing crisis, the study is particularly focused on them.

For a long time, pioneering work on analyses of council newspapers has been conducted in the civil sector particularly by the association OŽIVENÍ ([hlasnatrouba.cz](http://hlasnatrouba.cz); see also Kužílek 2006; Kameník and Kužílek 2015; Oživení 2018). Older master's theses and a legal analysis by Svatošová (2006) are referred to in studies published by political scientists (Fleissner and Müller 2016; Soukop and Hurtíková 2020) as well as by media analysts (Waschková and Císařová 2015).

The pioneering activities of the non-profit sector did not lack impact. An amendment of the Press Act (Tiskový zákon 2013) included a definition of printed municipal or regional periodicals. It defined the publishers' obligation to provide objective and balanced information and give appropriate space for opinions of members of the municipal assembly. Council newspapers were, however, not explicitly labelled as public service media: in accordance with the relevant legislation, these include Czech Radio, Czech Television, and the Czech News Agency. Unfortunately, the amendment complicated the understanding of the basic nature of council newspapers (Waschková and Císařová 2015).

Several authors have, nevertheless, inferred that council newspapers may be understood as public service media and as such should meet the respective requirements. There have been proposals for further amendments of the legislation and more rigorous enforcement of existing rules. One of the motives is that financing from public funds should be under public scrutiny. Other normatively oriented research projects are based on McQuail's social

responsibility theory or Habermas' concept of critical publicity (Fleissner and Müller 2016). Regardless of the starting point, the criticism is targeted on the situation where council newspapers provide most of the space for the currently governing political party, movement or coalition. In such cases, the council newspapers are referred to as 'mouthpieces of politicians' who govern in the municipalities (ibid.). An amendment to the Press Law (2013), which emphasized the need for opinion pluralism, did not manage to change the vast prevalence of promotion of the governing politicians' opinions and attitudes (Kameník and Kužílek 2015; Soukop and Hurtíková 2020). Even over a span of four or five years, the quality indicators monitored by the civic association Oživení in newspapers, published by the largest local governments, did not show any significant positive difference. In some of them, the situation deteriorated (Kameník and Trunkátová 2018). An international comparison revealed greater qualitative differences among newspapers in individual countries (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland) than in the quality of newspapers on the national level (Oživení 2018). Concerning the input legitimacy, the non-profit organization's study evaluates the status quo as follows: 'Local periodicals commonly do not fulfil their potential role as a tool promoting higher participation of citizens in local governance, as they do not provide the citizens with sufficient information and options for participation, nor do they provide an overview of various opinions on local matters' (ibid., 12).

Why should we pay attention to printed council newspapers in an era of increasing attention to utilization of social media in political communication both in the West and the East? (cf. Lilleker and Jackson 2011; Bruns et al 2016; Surovec and Štětka 2018; Vaccari and Valeriani 2022) It is particularly social media that gave rise to the hope of overcoming the present information monopolies (Hájek 2013). It might seem that the role of traditional printed media, including the specific branch of council newspapers, would gradually fade particularly because of the growing influence of social media. Having said that, it would be inappropriate not to pay attention to them.

One of the reasons is the fact that studies of social media are usually nationally focused (one of the exceptions is Seizov 2018). The fact that less attention is paid to relationships between media and local politics, compared to the national and currently also international or transnational levels, is also pointed out by researchers from the area of local political communication (Kurz 1994; Tenschler 2013; Baugut, Fawzi and Reinman 2017). They frequently observe the relationships among journalists working for local media or directly among the owners of these media as one party, and local politicians as the other, as well as the factors shaping these relationships (Hájek, Vávra and Svobodová 2016; Baugut, Fawzi and Reinman 2017), or they conduct more complex case studies concerning the relationships between local media and local bodies (e.g., Mecfal 2014; Mecfal 2016).

Local politicians are interested in services such as Facebook and Twitter, but still consider traditional channels of communication with potential voters to be more important (Larsson and Skogero 2018). They do not attempt to leave out journalists and address the public directly. For online communication of politicians, journalists represent an important target group (Bernhard and Dohle 2015). In contrast, for journalists, activities of local administrations on social networks serve as an information source to cover local issues, which complements, rather than replaces, traditional ways of information retrieval (Harmatiy and Kravčák 2021). Although it may not be the final stage of

development, according to a recent study ‘the local newspaper is more important for the local politicians’ popularity than Facebook’ (Elvestad and Johannessen 2017, 33). After all, what kind of media should meet the demand from politicians better than media published by the cities themselves?

### 3 METHODS AND DATA

Quantitative content analysis is one of the basic methodological procedures in both media studies and political science (Berelson 1952; Neuendorf 2017). A more topic-specific analysis differs from existing studies of municipal periodicals, which usually focus on the degree of politicization and plurality of opinions (Kameník and Kužilek 2015; Fleissner and Müller 2016; Soukop and Hurtíková 2020). It allows for a comparison of the extent to which politicians and other local bodies express themselves in local newspapers in relation to a particular topic in both the synchronic and the diachronic perspective. The former involves local contextualization, while the latter captures the dynamics of media representation of politicized messages in relation to the election cycle.

As with other cases, even here the employed quantitative content analysis has its limits that may be overcome in various ways. A rather analytically simple option would be the extension of the number of compared local periodicals. Another very interesting option might involve a confrontation with the conclusions from a similar analysis focused on another topic having a similar impact in local politics.<sup>3</sup> The present study chose a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis of local periodicals whose nature was closest to interpretive reading (Kronick 1997). The qualitative analysis focused on the politicized content of the message and its contextualization throughout the changes of the local political representations, which is reflected even in the management, preparation and content of council newspapers. Through reading of the texts, the number of relevant media articles was reduced. It was determined that in some of the texts, that fulfilled the criteria for inclusion into the quantitative content analysis, the prevailing topic was not housing but e.g., transport, safety, cleanliness and greenery in the city, etc. Deeper insight into the changes in the applicability of the housing issue on the pages of council newspapers was gained through analysis of local government documents and interviews with selected city representatives and officers whose scope of responsibilities includes housing policy.

The currently prevailing quantitative analyses of council newspapers showed an inverse trend; they either concerned a greater number of periodicals over a shorter time span, typically the pre-election period (the association Oživení), or focused on a smaller number of periodicals over a longer period: from the election year and analyses of 11 regional cities (Soukop and Hurtíková 2020?)<sup>4</sup> to a systematic selection from three deliberately chosen periodicals published by ‘progressive’ municipalities over a ten-year period (Fleissner and Müller 2016). The present study chose three newspapers from three regional cities, particularly Brno (*Metropolitan*), Olomouc (*Listy/Newspaper*), and Pardubice (*Zpravodaj/Newsletter*). With certain exceptions, the cities of importance for

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<sup>3</sup> The easiest choice would probably be the topic of local transportation, which has a similar or higher saliency in election campaigns (cf. Hájek and Balík 2020).

<sup>4</sup> A quantitative analysis concerning references to the coalition and opposition parties in regional city newspapers over a longer time span was presented in a master’s thesis by Foldyna (2022).

political parties and movements (Soukop and Hurtíková 2020) correspond to the regional centres affected most significantly by increasing housing prices.

Although their indicators differ from ours, previous studies still provide us with important input information. The study conducted by the association Oživení shows that the content of newspapers from Pardubice and Olomouc in 2014 was highly unbalanced, since the space provided for coalition parties was several times bigger. In comparison, the Brno *Metropolitan* was one of the relatively most balanced regional periodicals. Repetitive monitoring of opinion pluralism in municipal periodicals (Kameník and Kužílek 2015; Oživení 2018) suggests a convergence in evaluation. In the election year 2018, the opinion pluralism index<sup>5</sup> of all three newspapers was ranked in the first third out of 65 periodicals evaluated. Nevertheless, concerning the more complex index focusing on the contribution of a periodical in informing citizens about politics and activities of the local administration, *Metropolitan* achieved the top of the ranking, the *Newsletter* of Pardubice was ranked at the end of the first quarter, and *Olomouc Newspaper* was in the second half.

The content analysis presented here, concerning the coverage of the topic of housing, observed the two-year period from November 2017 to October 2019 divided into four periods, so that it covered the entire year preceding the municipal elections taking place in October 2018 as well as the entire year after them. The second period constitutes the six months preceding the elections. The third six-month period is the period after the 2018 municipal elections characterized by the establishment or re-establishment of council coalitions and preparation of the program statement. The first and the last six months may be considered periods not directly related to the elections. A revision of a city's policies may also bring about a change in the manner of political communication towards citizens including communication via council newspapers.

Samples for analysis were articles related to the topic of housing. For this reason, all issues of council newspapers of the three selected cities were first searched for any texts from the delimited period containing the following key words: 'housing', 'houses' and 'flats' and words derived from them (Note: The search for relevant texts was carried out by students of sociology at the Faculty of Arts of Palacký University within the sociological practice courses under the guidance of the first author). The selection was subsequently expanded with texts related to 'home', for instance ones concerning retirement homes, homelessness, or individuals in homeless shelters, etc. A subsequent check of individual sample texts, in contrast, resulted in the exclusion of obviously unrelated ones (for instance ones mentioning parking houses, random mentions of houses in articles related to transportation, etc.).

The basic data set included 254 texts. The number of pages of the individual newspapers ranged from 24 (Pardubice) to 32 (Olomouc) up to 40 (Brno). The periodicals were published monthly in Olomouc and Brno; in Pardubice, there was a summer double issue with the usual number of pages. The analysis of texts considered the different page count of the individual newspapers as well as the missing advertising section in one of the newspapers (*Newsletter*).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The opinion pluralism index expresses the proportion of space allowed for messages different from the governing coalition's opinions from the total space dedicated to political information.

<sup>6</sup> In Brno and Pardubice, periodicals are published even by individual city districts with their own administration. Olomouc does not have such an internal division.

Apart from the location and extent of the texts, individual articles were classified according to their type as advertising, political and non-political texts. The category of political texts contained ones where elected politicians from either the governing coalition or an opposition party were represented. As a result of the elections, some of the opposition parties became coalition parties and, in contrast, some of the parties disappeared from the municipal assemblies because of their low success rate. Non-political texts were sub-divided into ones expressing statements of the city hall's officers, ones quoting external experts (e.g., architects), and others (articles on the history of housing, etc.). The classification was checked multiple times and minor mistakes in classification were corrected.

TABLE 1: NUMBERS AND STRUCTURE OF THE ANALYSED TEXTS

		Brno	Olomouc	Pardubice	Total
		METROPOLITAN	NEWSPAPER	NEWSLETTER	
Advertising		18	40	X	58
Political	Coalition	26	15	15	56
	Opposition	13	12	3	28
Non-political	Bureaucrats	31	9	16	56
	Experts	4	1	2	7
Others		11	19	19	49
Total		103	96	55	254
Total number of pages		880	768	704	

Source: Brno Metropolitan, Olomouc Newspaper, Pardubice Newsletter. Authors' own calculation.

#### 4 RESULTS OF THE QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The quantitative content analysis was conducted in accordance with the following research questions: To what extent is the topic of housing politicized in municipal newspapers? In other words: How often is the topic of housing in these newspapers related to local politicians? What is the proportion between the statements of the governing coalition and the opposition parties in relation to housing and when were these statements made? How do individual newspapers under comparison differ? The frequency and extent of the individual types of texts on housing were dependent variables; independent variables were the place (three cities) and time of publication (four six-month periods framing the elections of 2018).

*Whose voice is stronger? The housing market or local politics and administration?* Before we approach the analysis of the extent to which the topic of housing is linked in municipal newspapers to coalition or opposition members of the municipal assembly, it is useful to focus on the overall composition of the set of sample texts. Despite their different numbers of pages, both Brno and Olomouc newspapers contained a similar number of texts concerning housing (102:96), which suggests a higher relative representation in the Olomouc Newspaper. When omitting advertising texts, however, there is practically the same number of texts in Newspaper and the Pardubice Newsletter (56:55), although the latter has fewer pages. As for Newsletter, it was unfortunately impossible to analyse the advertising section, since the version available online did not contain it.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> These 'blank spaces' involved 5 out of 24 pages of the Newsletter. According to the analysis of the association Oživení, focusing on five pre-election issues of the newspapers, the extent of

Notwithstanding this deficit, a comparison of *Metropolitan* and *Newspaper* is sufficiently illustrative. In Brno, the most published texts related to housing were non-politicized (45 % of media statements) and politicized texts (38 %); in Olomouc, the most prominent type were advertising texts (41 %). A distribution over time is illustrated in Figure 2. The pages of the newspapers also document the path-dependent saliency of the housing issue (Ryšavý and Sedláková 2022). In Brno, with its tens of thousands of flats, the topic is addressed by politicians as well as officers. In contrast, in Olomouc, following the almost complete sale of municipal apartments, greater space in the pages of *Newspaper* was dedicated to the market in the form of advertisements commissioned by real estate companies compared to statements by local politicians and administration. These appear in a repeated fashion with the advertisements of one company, which is a rather poor information source for the city's inhabitants. Olomouc *Newspaper* may therefore be regarded as the mouthpiece of the market rather than the governing parties.

*An election voter hunt or a long-standing topic?*

Decision-making on the part of former city representatives certainly matters. Changes may also occur, however, over a shorter time span. The development of representation of political texts within the two-year period under observation may be characterized by three divergent trends (Figures 1, 2). In general, the most stable situation occurred in Brno, whose *Metropolitan* frequently included approximately 2 % of texts on housing related to the political representatives of the city. There was, nevertheless, a visible increase in the proportion of texts attributed to the new coalition governing after the 2018 election and a corresponding reduction of space provided for the opposition. A dramatic increase in politicization of the housing issue following the elections took place in Olomouc, particularly within the new coalition led by the former strongest opposition party. A topic previously neglected by politicians began to receive attention comparable to that in Brno. In contrast, Pardubice manifested a decrease in politicization of the housing issue; following the elections, the topic was not addressed by the opposition, but it was also less frequently addressed by representatives of the governing coalition, which saw a significantly smaller changes compared to Brno and Olomouc. The topic of housing was therefore still most frequently addressed in texts quoting municipal officers and in 'other' texts concerning housing in the past (the section *Traveling through the Past*), invitations to exhibitions related to housing, etc.

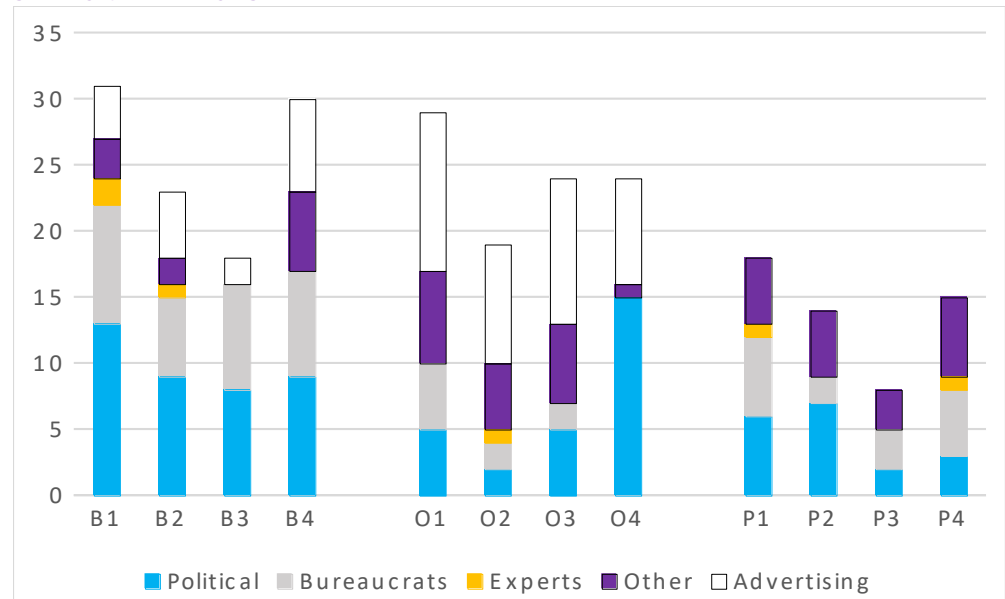
As for the political text, from the general viewpoint, all three newspapers provided greater space for coalition politicians. Immediately before the elections, however, the extent was rather smaller. Pardubice was one of the observed cities where the number and extent of political texts addressing housing was the highest in the pre-election period. It was only here, however, that the assumption about the pre-election period being more extensively used by politicians to present their own positions, however, not conclusively. Extra space was dedicated in the *Newsletter* to the housing issue, not due to politicians of the council coalition; as with Brno and Olomouc, it was the opposition who addressed the topic of housing more often before the elections compared to the other periods. In Olomouc, the topic was addressed only by the opposition; in Pardubice it was also mentioned in the preceding and the following periods. In Brno, the voice of the opposition prior to the election was only slightly less represented than texts related to politicians of the council coalition.

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advertising in the three selected cities is rather similar, but the greatest extent was reached in Olomouc (Oživení, hlasnatrouba.cz).

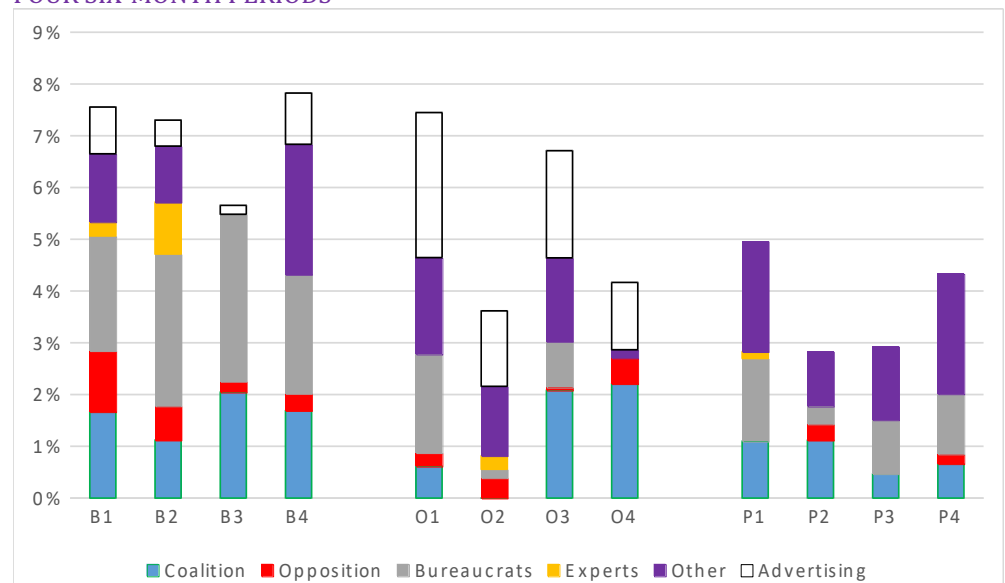


FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF TEXTS ON HOUSING IN THE THREE NEWSPAPERS AND FOUR SIX-MONTH PERIODS



Source: Brno Metropolitan, Olomouc Newspaper, Pardubice Newsletter. Authors' own calculation.

FIGURE 2: SPACE TAKEN UP BY TEXTS ON HOUSING IN THE THREE NEWSPAPERS AND FOUR SIX-MONTH PERIODS



Source: Brno Metropolitan, Olomouc Newspaper, Pardubice Newsletter. Authors' own calculation

In summary, while it is generally possible to agree with the repeating finding that municipal newspapers provide more space for representatives of the governing coalition, in relation to the housing issue, it does not happen every time and in every place. A comparison of only three periodicals shows the significant variability of the development in time and space. The results of the quantitative content analysis do not correspond to an explicit assumption that the coalition would attempt to benefit from its position particularly in the pre-election period. A long-neglected topic which gained importance before the 2018 elections provided an opportunity for the opposition parties to make themselves heard as well. A question for the qualitative analysis was therefore how the topic of housing was communicated by political bodies in various periods.

## 5 RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The qualitative analysis indicates how municipal newspapers are used in relation to local housing policies and local policies in general. Our comparison of three cases is based on how housing is presented in the newspapers by the governing coalition through strategic documents, program statements, as well as statements from individual politicians. It subsequently points out how housing is communicated by representatives of the opposition. The elections do not only result in the changes to the structure of the coalition and the opposition, but frequently also in changes to the way local policies are communicated via the newspapers. These changes constitute an important part of the context of the individual statements.

### *Metropolitan (Brno)*

In the existing studies, it was the Brno *Metropolitan*, out of the three newspapers analysed, that was considered the one with the highest quality and which presented a relatively large variety of opinions. There was a twofold principle for publication of the *Metropolitan* valid over the period under observation which declared that members of the editorial office work as journalists, not public relations workers. The content of the newspaper is reviewed by the editorial board representing not only city hall workers but also members of all parties represented in the assembly. In contrast to other cities, the editorial board in Brno does not include city councillors and local politicians do not hold the majority in it. The newspaper has a rather stable list of sections, including *OPINIONS* of representatives of individual parties of the assembly and the mayor's *WORD*. It was particularly in these sections that politicians' statements on housing appeared. A quantitative content analysis showed that prior to the 2018 elections, the voices of coalition and opposition politicians were provided a rather similar space.

The *Metropolitan* provided all opposition parties with the opportunity to prepare topics for the intense stage of the election campaigning, which involved the topic of housing. Compared to the traditionally represented topic of vacant municipal flats, opposition members of the assembly paid more attention to two projects of the city hall coalition. The greatest criticism was targeted on the project Rapid Re-Housing focusing on families living in unsuitable conditions and in danger of homelessness, as well as on the plan for exchange of lucrative houses and apartments owned by the city for land in the vicinity of one of the sports centres that was promoted by the city mayor. The deputy mayor responsible for housing, healthcare, and family policies repeatedly used the opinion section to express support for housing for young people, seniors, and the disabled as well as the housing strategies adopted by the assembly. Most of these topics appeared in the June issue of the year 2018, for which the editors chose the topic 'The city as a developer'. This was an issue presented ongoing construction and reconstruction projects. A several-page article explained when, how, and about what the city assembly decides. No politicians were quoted there. The project Rapid Re-Housing was described through an interview conducted by a journalist with an expert on social housing.<sup>8</sup> A shorter article described the steps undertaken by the city administration following the sudden closing of one of the private housing facilities. The latter issue became another opportunity for the opinion columns

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<sup>8</sup> In the previous issue, the topic of the relocation of the main train station, which had been controversial for years, was addressed by a foreign architect cooperating with the city architect on the urban planning study concerning the locality.

of opposition assembly members, who criticized the city hall's communication with citizens who opposed the moving of people accommodated in the housing facility into their neighbourhood. Neither the opposition nor the coalition parties dealt for instance with the issue of the fairness of the rules for allocation of municipal apartments, which apply to an incomparably greater number of citizens, particularly candidates for rented accommodation (Jančaříková 2018).

Following the municipal elections, Brno saw a transformation of the city hall coalition where some of its previous members were joined by its main critics. The new deputies for social matters and for the matters of housing and city property attempted in the opinion section to present a policy different from the one adopted by the previous administration. If the topic of housing, was one uniting the opposition parties before the elections, after them it began to divide them. The former mayor deflected the criticism from his successors and advocated the policy of the former city coalition. In contrast, a representative of the new opposition party, the populist SPD, criticized even one year later the social housing project, although its continuation was not supported by the new coalition. The topic of housing was addressed briefly, but repetitively even in the columns written by the mayor. This seems like a step towards a change in the structure of the *Metropolitan's* sections that took place later. Apart from the mayor's regular addresses, there were also the so-called *Deputies' words* that also appeared outside the framework of the opinion pages: even the new deputy responsible for housing matters was given space several times to provide more detailed information on the starting and cooperative housing. The increasing prevalence of opinion-based texts from coalition politicians, which was identified by the quantitative analysis of statements on housing, is connected specifically to this obvious transformation of *Metropolitan*.

#### *Newspaper (Olomouc)*

A quantitative content analysis demonstrated the crucial importance of advertising among media statements related to housing in the Olomouc Newspaper. It also identified that the topic of housing saw a significant politicization after the elections. The editorial boards of Olomouc Newspaper had been politicized even in the previous election period, since the chair of the board was the city mayor and other members were his deputies and councillor, representatives of opposition parties, and the city hall's spokesperson. The city councillors took turns preparing editorials of individual issues,<sup>9</sup> but these were not rich in information. The section *Booked for the Opposition Assembly Members* was located at the end of the newspaper between Sport and Entertainment. Those few texts in the year before the elections that mentioned the topic of housing appeared in two contexts. The first is the subordination of the housing to the city's social policy. A brief description of the city's new strategic plan adopted by the assembly named 'the social sector including housing' as one its pillars (Red 2018, 4). The second context may be labelled as the market context. One of the opposition assembly members pointed out the settlement of a citizens' petition, criticizing the conditions for implementation of a particular developer project. The fact that the importance of the topic of housing availability may be increasing was only admitted by one member of the editorial board – an opposition assembly member, according to whom implementation of the strategic play would 'bring along modernization of the city and better services for citizens,

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<sup>9</sup> An exception to this rule, as interpreted by the editor of the newspaper, was his own editorial in the issue informing on the election results. These were published prior to the election of the new city council.

whether that involved the public spaces and greenery, housing availability, or the transportation quality and safety' (Pejpek 2018, 29).

Following the elections, the political representation of the city underwent changes. The winners, the party ANO 2011, created a new coalition with some of the parties that had refused to cooperate with it in the previous election period. After 2018, the rules for publishing in *Olomouc Newspaper* also changed. The editorial board began to be led by an employee of the marketing department which was subordinate to the mayor's office. Most board members are still members of the council and politicians in general. The editorials are created by the city hall's spokesperson, but individual council members can express themselves in a whole-page editorial interview, which resulted in an increase in the number of references to housing. The editorial board adopted and published the rules which, among other things, delimit the space for statements from assembly members in the section *Opinions of Assembly Members* and in opinion polls on selected topics.

Neither the elections, nor the changes to the editorial policy changed anything about the fact that housing was not established as an independent topic. It instead remained within the framework of the social policy of the city in the program statement of the city council, which mentions 'affordable housing' multiple times within the 'social sector'.<sup>10</sup> The emphasis put in the program statement on 'more readily affordable flats' is accompanied by a goal, a non-ambitious one for a city with a hundred thousand inhabitants, to build 'at least twenty flats under the scheme of affordable housing' (Red 2019, 8). In subsequent interviews, the mayor's deputies (Newspaper No. 3 and 5/2019) provided information on municipal housing projects, piling up adjectives such as 'starting', 'assistance', 'affordable', 'supported', and 'social' housing without giving any detailed explanation. In an opinion poll asking, 'Do you have any ideas for changes in the city's social policy?', representatives of the coalition and the opposition agreed on most of the groups that would deserve support in the housing area: seniors, young families with children, the disabled, and those who cannot afford to pay expensive rents or buy their own housing. The only difference concerns the topic of homeless people, which divides the attitudes of the liberal and the populist part of the opposition. A representative of Pirátská Strana considered homelessness one of the most urgent problems of the city, mentioning the Brno project Housing First as an example worth following. In contrast, a representative of the populist SPD party requested a reduction in 'subsidized social programs intended for maladjusted citizens'. Following the opinion poll, the topic was concluded with an article complemented with a photograph depicting the new mayor making a vigorous gesture while restoring order in front of the railway station, a place strongly linked to the homeless.<sup>11</sup> The almost idyllic image of a caring city hall was later disrupted by articles from other media repeatedly pointing out a legally unsolved transfer of municipal flats built in the past by the city with state support and subsequently transferred to their inhabitants. Even the few flats owned by the city after extensive

<sup>10</sup> A similar emphasis is evident in the statement from the opposition communist party reflecting on the approved budget: 'For us, the communist party, the social sector is important. We are absolutely against insensitive increasing of rents in flats, nursing homes and barrier-free flats.' (Zima 2019).

<sup>11</sup> A reflection on who deserves support from the city appeared in the Newspaper 9/2019 in responses to the question 'How shall the city solve the problem with drunk individuals and disturbances of public order?' Members of the assembly came up with various forms of repressions. Housing is addressed only exceptionally. The topic is closed with 'a word from the mayor' presenting a plan to offer jobs to those homeless individuals who are willing to work.

privatization proved to be problematic. The opposition criticized the delays in preparation of the promised concept for development of affordable housing as well as the construction of new apartments.

#### *Newsletter (Pardubice)*

According to the results of the quantitative content analysis of municipal newspapers, the case of Pardubice seems to be the opposite of Olomouc. The topic of housing saw depoliticization following the elections. Elements of depoliticization were also manifested in the *Pardubice Newsletter*, published by the city together with a prominent private publisher in the regional press (Vltava Labe Media). According to the journalists interviewed, there are no written rules. The nature of the editorial boards is apolitical (Foldyna 2022, 44), although at least in the past the content of the individual issues used to be consulted with the mayor and her deputy (Hándlová 2010, 152). At present, the texts are approved at a meeting with higher city hall officers (heads of individual departments and of the mayor's office). Political representatives of the city are interviewed (*What is being talked about*) or are quoted in anonymous texts of the editorial office. The opinions of the city assembly members are published in the section *Discussion Forum*. Councillors, higher officers, and representatives of relevant organizations can react to articles and often make use of this option.<sup>12</sup>

As concerns the topic of housing, the pages of *Newsletter* had long been dominated by a long-term project for starting accommodation. Every year, young people were offered several dozen municipal flats under favourable renting conditions. The topic was addressed most frequently by the deputy mayor or a higher officer whose scope of responsibilities involved the project, but it was also mentioned by the mayor in an interview on investments. Another piece of information mentioned was the option combining starting flats with social flats in a more extensive project involving reconstruction of municipal housing stock. Instead of focusing on starting accommodation, the city hall communicated information concerning new projects related to housing in the pre-election period, whether municipal flats or developers' projects on brownfields. Criticism from representatives of two opposition parties received a response from the deputy mayor. After the elections, one of the criticizing parties became part of the re-established city hall coalition. The number of references to starting accommodation and preparations of new projects on housing for seniors and other target groups increased once again.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

For a long period of time, the issue of housing in the Czech Republic had been largely left up to the private initiatives of individuals in need of accommodation and their families. Considering the increasing prices of flats and rents, the affordability of housing represents an increasingly pressing problem for thousands of inhabitants in the three selected cities and those who would like to establish their own households, i.e., particularly young people. The cities differ especially in the way their past political representations dealt with the housing stock that became assets under their management. Privatization of municipal flats has transformed the housing market into an environment with unequal opportunities concerning the factors of location and age. The content analysis

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<sup>12</sup> The most extensive dispute concerning the topic of a waste incineration plant included representatives of two opposition parties.

shows that where privatization progressed most, a municipal newspaper became more of a mouthpiece of the market than the governing coalition in relation to the housing.

It seems, however, that from the perspective of communication of local housing policies via council periodicals, there were no radical differences. Concerning housing, the pages of the municipal newspapers commonly referred to dozens of flats, whether as part of the existing housing stock or as planned construction. From the vantage point of problem-solving related to the housing availability 'it is a drop in the ocean', as the deputy for social policy from Pardubice put it. From the perspective of local political campaigning, however, it may be the visible tip of the iceberg where a dispute over a rather small social housing project conceals the issue of empty apartments and rules for allocation of municipal flats in various city districts (see Brno).

Now let us return to the research question: Who is connected in council newspapers to the topic of housing, where, when and how? The answer is much more complex than presumed in the hypothesis concerning the mouthpiece of governing parties. In other words, those who rule the city use, particularly prior to the elections, the local newspapers as tools for their election campaign. The quantitative content analysis, focusing on the topic of housing and its affordability, did not provide sufficiently robust evidence to support such a statement. If opposition parties are given some space, they may also make use of the pages of municipal periodicals prior to elections. The openness to opinions, other than those stated by the governing parties, does not automatically ensure either critical discussion, or the fulfilment of the standards of public service media on the part of these periodicals. The opposition, as is obvious on the example of the Brno *Metropolitan*, may use the space to express populist criticism of projects focused on socially excluded individuals and try to benefit from manifestations of the NIMBY syndrome among rank-and-file inhabitants of the city. The post-election period saw, however, a considerable change in editorial office policies. The introduction of a new section *Deputies' words* provides the new Brno coalition with an obvious advantage in communication of (not only) the topic of housing towards the citizens.

In Olomouc *Newspaper*, the voice of the market was stronger than that of the local politicians. The new city coalition began to use it to create the image of a caring city hall. Issues are newly addressed through opinion poll questions answered by members of the assembly, as well as the greater space provided for the mayor. In this way, it opened the door for often rather theatrical activities which, however, prevent critical discussion and marginalize the role of the political opposition.

The Pardubice *Newsletter* is closest to the model of a newspaper serving as a PR tool of the city hall (Zavattaro 2010). It is steered by officers who provide space for politicians' statements. What is foregrounded are non-problematic policies focused on young people. It is impossible to expect that those at whom the policies are targeted would constitute most of its target readers. Young people attracted to Pardubice, based on its well-functioning project of starting housing, do not find the newspaper in their mailboxes. Moreover, it is not necessary, as the offers for starting flats are more than sufficiently met by applicants who receive information from other information sources. In contrast, the information on projects, that might potentially raise citizens' disagreement resulting from the NIMBY syndrome, is communicated very carefully.



All three cases investigated show that the policies of the editorial offices have a substantial influence on the way local housing policies and other issues are communicated. The changes in the city's representation may or may not happen after the elections start or substantially affect following changes in editorial office policies. Whether they bring an advantage for the governing coalitions in the next election campaign remains to be investigated in a follow-up study. It is therefore appropriate to conduct an analysis of the content of council periodicals not only in the pre-election period but in combination with an analysis of publishing practices. Only then will it be possible to capture to what extent and in what way the periodicals become the proverbial mouthpieces of the governing political parties or whether they are actually an important tool in communicating policies which might help resolve pressing matters concerning the cities and their inhabitants.

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## OBČINSKI ČASOPISI O STANOVANJSKI POLITIKI. SAMO TROBILA VLADAJOČE KOALICIJE?

*Študija predstavlja analizo komuniciranja trenutno zelo pereče stanovanjske politike v mestnih časopisih treh čeških mest, ki se razlikujejo po deležu občinskih stanovanj. Kvantitativna vsebinska analiza ni potrdila domnevnega množičnega favoriziranja vladne koalicije v predvolilnem času. Kvalitativna analiza je dokumentirala, kako na komunikacijo na temo stanovanjske politike vpliva uredniška politika občinskih periodičnih publikacij. Z njihovo spremembo lahko nove mestne oblasti povečajo prostor za predstavitev lastne stanovanjske politike ali postavijo standarde komuniciranja na to temo. Tretji način je piarovski način selektivne izbire nekonfliktnih delov lokalnih stanovanjskih politik, ki mestne veljake prikazuje v proaktivni vlogi.*

**Ključne besede:** občinski časopis; lokalna oblast; stanovanjska politika; analiza vsebine; Češka.

## WOMEN IN SLOVENIAN LOCAL POLITICS: FEMALE MAYORS 1994–2022

Simona KUKOVIČ<sup>1</sup>

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*Men and women who hold public political office differ in their attitudes toward politics, advocate different policies, shape policies in unique ways, create alternative policy outcomes or effects, and choose different ways of leading. These differences are a result of socialization: men are dominated by the values of justice and autonomy and learn to emotionally distance themselves from public policy problems, which enables them to make clear judgments about important decisions. Women are raised to care for others, which sharpens their sense of social service, which they also prioritize in their leadership roles. This study uses an original time series on local elections in all Slovenian municipalities over an extended period (1994–2022) to examine where women run for and win mayoral offices. The analysis of the objective data shows that women are more likely to win in smaller municipalities, but despite some progress in recent local elections, local politics remains in the hands of men.*

**Key words:** women; female mayors; local elections; local (self)government; Slovenia.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

There is nothing new about gender differences in favour of men, both in the number of candidates and in the number of elected (local) representatives. This topic, however, remains scarcely analysed among researchers in political science and public administration.<sup>2</sup> The influence of gender on (local) politics thus remains an isolated topic in the political science literature, since the meritocratic approach is highlighted, which assumes that norms in organisations are based on a gender-neutral situation where only results are important (Calas et al. 2014). Calas et al. (2014) explain that this approach is based on abstract individualism,

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<sup>2</sup> It should be emphasized that there is a wide range of literature dealing with the study of genders in the fields of sociology, organisation, culturology and other sciences. See, for example, Eagly and Carli (2012); Paludi et al. (2014); Northouse (2013) and others.

which focuses solely on numbers when researching gender differences in organisations. This means that, if there are not as many women as men, the solution is very simple, i.e., to "fix" women. Such an approach completely rejects any possibility of the presence of gender substructures. In contrast, Acker (2016, 422) points out that gender processes in organisations operate through four dimensions. The first dimension is the gendered division of labour, in which, according to stereotypes, women are only suitable to perform certain functions that are (usually) found lower down in the hierarchy. The second dimension is based on gendered symbols, in the sense of organisations being "lean and aggressive", which is usually associated with masculinity, while female symbols – such as empathy, kindness and support – are less often associated with the nature of organisations. The third dimension emphasizes gendered interaction, with the author arguing that gender is often "an internal part of the activities that make up the organisation itself". The fourth dimension is the mental work of individuals within the organisation, which focuses on what individuals believe to be the appropriate behaviour of a particular gender. This creates a façade which obscures their true identity. Acker (ibid.) vehemently rejects the idea of gender-neutral organisations, arguing that the evaluation of a work within an organisation is completely unrealistic if the impact of gender is not taken into account. Based on this, it can be concluded that considering the structure of local governments through a gendered perspective is very important, especially when analysing women in leadership positions at the local level (Kukovič 2019).

The relationship between the gender and politics became an important issue many decades ago, particularly in Western Europe, which resulted in extensive research on the effects of various factors contributing to women's political participation at the national, regional and local levels of government. On the contrary, this topic delayed in time in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and although there are some studies on the representation of women at the local level in CEE countries (see for example Gendźvill et al. 2022; Maškarinec 2022), there is still a huge potential to research and analyse various aspects of female participation – from the willingness to run for office to their decision-making process once they are elected.

Gender representation in local bodies in Slovenia is captured by summary statistics published by the State Election Commission<sup>3</sup> every four years when local elections are held. On the other hand, an in-depth analysis of these results, focusing primarily on women – both candidates and those who have already been successfully elected to hold a political office – is rarely seen. The above-mentioned shortcoming thus became the main reason and motivating factor for a more detailed analysis of the objective data on women's commitment to the office of the mayor. In this article, we highlight the participation of women in mayoral offices in all eight local elections (1994–2022) that have taken place in the Republic of Slovenia since the local self-government reform.

Using statistical data, we analyse the number of female candidates and elected individuals for mayor, deepening the analysis for the last three local elections (2014, 2018, and 2022), when the number of municipalities in Slovenia has remained unchanged. For the last three local elections, we examine the electability of women for the office of mayor depending on the size of the municipality according to the criterion of the number of inhabitants, and therefore test the hypothesis set by Smith, Reingold and Owens (2012) that the probability of women being elected increases with the decline in the prestige of

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<sup>3</sup> State Election Commission, available at: <https://www.dvk-rs.si/>.

a political office. In this way, we complement the analysis with the knowledge gained so far about women in local structures and highlight the gaps that remain (rather) unexplored.

## 2 CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE UNDER-REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN (LOCAL) POLITICS

Literature presents a wide variety of reasons why women are less likely to engage in politics than their male counterparts. Hoyt (2013) cites three explanations for the gender gap. The first reason is human capital, whereby the author tries to explain the differences by claiming that women have less capital in education, work experience, and training. Hoyt further explains that women tend to occupy less prominent positions in organisations, such as job positions in accounting departments or human resources departments (HR departments) and are less often present in management and leadership structures and processes where the most important decisions are formed and made. Another explanation given by the author are the general differences between the two genders. The arguments mainly focus on the basic differences between men and women, and on their psychological traits. Stereotypically, women are less likely to engage in self-promotion and negotiation, while men are more talkative and aggressive. Studies (Fox and Schuhmann 2000; Carli and Eagly 2011) have shown that men are not only more confident and dominant than their female counterparts but are also physically and verbally more aggressive. When it comes to leadership styles, researchers have also detected a juncture, since women are slightly more inclined towards a democratic and transformational leadership style compared to their male colleagues who are slightly more authoritarian and less inclusive (Northouse 2013). Hoyt's (2013) third explanation pertains to prejudice which explains stereotypical expectations for each of the genders. These prejudices are particularly detrimental to women, as the characteristics associated with women do not coincide with those expected for managerial functions. This also contributes to the difficulties faced by women seeking to take up leadership positions; however, if/when women assume masculine traits, they are met with negative reactions (Killeen et al. 2006).

Women are therefore under-represented in leadership positions, be it when it comes to political or administrative functions (Johansson 2006). Duerst-Lahti (2010) even argues that the more important the position or the higher the function, the less likely a woman is to occupy it. This particularly applies to the role of the mayor, who is the most visible actor in terms of competence and the part they play in the creation of local politics (Janas and Jánošková 2022; Ručinská et al. 2023) and development (Melović et al. 2020; Hoffman 2023) (see more in Kukovič 2015). In addition to the three aforementioned generic explanations, other factors also influence women's involvement in local politics. Johansson (2006) explains that the number of women in the highest positions in local structures is also influenced by different types of welfare countries, network resources, political experience, and other individual factors. The share of women in local politics is thus the highest in the countries where gender relations are more equal and not closely related to the concept of family (i.e., in the Scandinavian and liberal types). Women who are involved in local politics are therefore more likely to live in a family where an equal division of roles between women and men can be observed, and where household chores and taking care of children is equally divided between both partners. When it comes to network resources, Johansson explains that women are more likely to have political

support (political parties and organisations), while men are more likely to have community support (NGOs and other local stakeholders). In terms of political experience, Johansson points out that women in the liberal and Eastern European type of welfare countries are more often members of political parties than their male counterparts; on the other hand, in all types of welfare countries, except in the Eastern European type, women members of political parties have less time compared to their male counterparts (Johansson 2006, 104–113; Kukovič 2015, 84). Regarding other factors, Johansson (2006) agrees with the conclusions of Welch (1978, 372–380) who concluded, based on an empirical study, that indirect factors such as the existence of (disguised) discrimination against women, lack of time, energy and networks, frequent family and household care, and difficult political socialization based on the division of labour between the genders, are to blame for the fact that politics still remains (more or less) a man's game.

We find that there are quite a few factors that make it difficult for women to engage in local politics. They can be roughly divided into social factors and institutional factors. Among the *social factors*, we must first mention the political culture and values of a certain country. In Slovenia, we perceive the presence of the so-called transition model (see Brezovšek and Kukovič 2015; Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014), where the leadership positions are held by men, while women are still considered as part of the supporting functions and as the guardians of the family. Many factors which emerge from the political culture also influence women's participation and presence in local politics. One such factor is voter reluctance towards women and giving preference to male candidates. The male part of the population is particularly reluctant to leave important positions to women, which is most often reflected in the composition of the lists of candidates, where women either don't hold the leadership position or they are only included for the purpose of complying with the normative framework (such as gender quotas). On the other hand, we must not neglect another factor, i.e., the attitude of women towards politics and their (un)preparedness to run for office, since women consider politics as "dirty" and therefore do not want to enter it. Often, women also don't want to go into politics; they are describing themselves as under-experienced and therefore prefer to give up their seat in favour of their more experienced male colleagues. Undoubtedly, support and incentives also play an important role in their decision to run. As a rule, women who follow the development in the municipality and are therefore familiar with concrete issues, as well as women who have been persuaded to do so by people from the local community, local political actors or a political party, are more likely to get involved in local politics (Antić Gaber et al. 2015; Kukovič 2019). The *institutional factors* regulated by the normative framework include the electoral system, gender quotas, the zipper system, the preferential vote, the size of the constituency, and the like (more in Kukovič 2019).

In addition to these social and institutional factors, political parties/lists should also be mentioned as important actors who play a key role in recruiting and selecting candidates for local elections. Political parties/lists select their candidates based on the influence by external and internal factors. The parties use external factors to determine the voters' perception of their potential candidates to select the candidates who will get the highest number of votes in the elections. If the prevailing opinion in a certain environment is that women do not belong in politics, a political party/list will not put them on the list of candidates, even though it might not think so itself. The internal factor is the pressure within the political party/list, whereby the ideology of political



party/list plays an essential role. At the very beginning of the process, ideology can accelerate or inhibit the participation of women in the process of selecting candidates, since the openness of a political party/list when it comes to the demands of women depends on the ideological orientation. The organisation of women within the political party/list is also one of the internal pressures, with their efficiency being one of the key factors. It is important that women increase their own access to politics, which will make it possible for them to obtain a greater degree of representation, both in the political party/list and in the electable functions. To increase the representation of women, the simultaneous existence of external and internal factors is desirable. In the phase of determining candidates, when political parties/lists are re-evaluated, support and attitude towards gender equality by voters and other political parties/lists are also important. If parties/lists find their voters advocating for gender equality, they put more women on the lists of candidates and present themselves in public as a party/list that is aware of such a problem. In addition to the voters' perceptions of women, the preferences of other parties/lists that compete with each other for voter affection and their votes are also important (Matland and Montgomery 2003, 24–25).

The decentralisation of the candidate selection process also plays an important role. The question is the level at which the selection process takes place. Rahat (2008, 9) states that decentralisation occurs in two forms, namely in a territorial form, where candidates are selected and placed on the candidate lists by local selectors (for example, local political leaders, local political agencies, social groups within a party/list or all members of a party/list of an electoral district), and in a functional form, which involves providing representation to various groups, including women. If candidates are nominated by national selectors (for example, the head of a political party, national party agencies or selectors responsible for determining candidates from across the country), a centralised candidate selection process occurs (Rahat and Hazan 2001, 304–305). Crowder-Meyer (2013) points out that selectors are of a key importance; the findings, based on a study, show that political parties are subjected to "gender-based recruitment" and somehow limit women's engagement. According to Crowder-Meyer, (local) party leaders are mostly men who recruit candidates from networks of their acquaintances, which are also mostly men. This is why a lack of women candidates suitable for assuming certain political functions occurs.

The institutionalisation of the candidate selection process, which refers to the (in)existence of rules within the party/list that are followed by selectors in determining candidates, also contributes to a larger or smaller number of female candidates. In addition, the number of female candidates may also be influenced by the political party/list by the way in which candidates are selected by the party, either on the basis of a voting system or on the basis of a determination system. As stated by Rahat and Hazan (2001, 306), the ranking and position of an individual on the list of candidates is determined exclusively by votes in the voting system. For a candidate voting process to occur, two conditions must be met, namely that the candidates are exclusively selected by the voters and that the results of the vote are made public. Since all candidates are voted or selected on the basis of the sum of individual votes, none of the selectors can change the candidate list (Rahat and Hazan 2001, 306). If these conditions are not met, another system for determining candidates is used, in which the power to select candidates is in the hands of a small group.

As we can see, there are many points of view through which we can describe the role of political parties/lists in the recruitment and selection of candidates, but we also want to highlight the element of the electoral districts, which means that the political party/list supports the female candidate for mayor in an environment where it has a stable and strong electoral base, which therefore increases the possibility of a woman being elected. However, political parties/lists also differ from one another; in particular, consolidation and the strength of a particular political party/list are at the forefront. Especially smaller, younger and politically weaker political parties/lists do not have many already established politicians, which means that women therefore have a greater chance of competing, compared to well consolidated parties/lists that strive to maintain the trust of their voters by presenting already established politicians who are (usually) men.

The consequences of the under-representation of women in local politics may surface in various ways. Men and women namely favour different policies, formulate policies in a unique manner, and create alternative political results (effects). These differences arise as a result of patterns of sexual socialization, i.e., with socially learned gender roles, where women are socialized in the direction of caring for others and eliminating poverty, and also have a sharper sense of social services, which they also prioritise in their leadership (Holman 2017). Gilligan (1982) even explains that there are two voices, namely the *voice of men*, in which the values of justice and autonomy prevail, and the *voice of women*, where the values of concern and integration in terms of responsibility and response to the needs of others are at the forefront. According to this inner voice, men solve problems by mediating between the rights of individuals, while women focus on helping others (Gilligan 1982, 19–21). This paper further presents an analysis of the existing literature on how gender influences policy thinking, how policies are formed, and the content of political results.

#### *Attitude towards public policies*

Existing research has shown that women and men have different attitudes towards public policies, as well as to the leadership of the local community itself. According to Kathlene (2001), two ways of leading were formed, namely the male (instrumental) mode and the female (contextual) mode. Male (instrumental) leadership is characterised by a separation between the private and public spheres. Interpersonal relations are competitive, and the solution of problems takes place in the direction of the protection of the voters' rights, which are limited by righteousness. On the other hand, women perceive the leadership of the local community as the leadership of the family, i.e., a process in which mutual relations, caring for others and connecting the public and the private sphere are essential. What's more, women are also subject to the "personal is political" rule (Kathlene 2005).

#### *The impact of gender on the political process*

The differences between genders in the conceptualisation of public policy problems and the search for their solutions are interesting. Men perceive public policy problems through experts or political actors with specialised knowledge who they value and trust, which allows them to distance themselves from the problem and the subjectivity. When perceiving problems, however, women usually take a slightly different approach; they pay attention to the problems based on general information, consider the opinions of individuals and their direct experience, and allow for an emotional inclusion. Women thus cooperate more with voters, consider their opinions and attitudes, and use more inclusive

approaches in policymaking (Tilly and Gurin 1992; Holman 2017). Holman (2017) even notes that in municipalities led by women, more citizens participate in public meetings that are highly inclusive and based on good community relations.

When it comes to genders, differences in the sources of information that are crucial for policymakers in the policy-making process also exist. Men rely on fewer politically legitimate and objective sources of information, which allows them to distinguish between important and insignificant sources, as they are convinced that select traditional sources bring them reliable information, which they do not need to verify with the public or for which they do not need to obtain additional information. Women need to integrate as much information as possible from different sources, since they want to hear every side of the story. They want to involve all interested stakeholders in the topic, to bring non-traditional sources of information into the political arena (Kathlene 2005).

The differentiation in the conceptualisation of public policy problems consequently results in a different approach to solving these problems. According to Kathlene (2005), men are narrowly focused on the problem, perceiving it in the light of abstract rights and disregarding the circumstances of the situation (Swers 2002). They only support being attached to a problem as long as they can emotionally distance themselves from it; according to them, a clouding of political rational judgment can otherwise occur. They reject and dismiss unsuccessful proposals to focus on new ones. When it comes to women, the objectives of public policies are inherently motivational, with the aim of motivating as many stakeholders as possible and hearing their proposals for solutions. They are persistent and diligent in finding innovative solutions to problems; if one of their proposals is rejected, they resubmit it, since they are convinced that they will (eventually) succeed. Before they resubmit the proposal for a solution, they collect supporters and try to attract as many people as possible, because – as they say – it is necessary to believe in the solution and invest time and effort in developing it (Kathlene 2005).

Differences between men and women also exist when it comes to making decisions; we could say that they counterbalance each other (Kathlene 2001). Women bring new dimensions to the decision-making process, as they involve citizens as much as possible, thus promoting a greater openness of the democratic process. Unlike their male counterparts, they spend more time identifying the needs of citizens and listening to the electoral body, which is how they achieve the common goals of the local community (Reingold 2006). Because of the latter, men often describe them as too emotionally involved in the problems of the local community, which prevents them from being analytical enough (Beck 1991). Women strive to act differently in politics, and they want the political process to be based on consultation, inclusion, dialogue, consensus-seeking and compromise, as well as reducing aggression. Female local leaders are more accessible, respond more intensely to community needs, are persistent, understanding, humane, patient, and able to compromise, and they also shape a more constructive and less conflicting process (Lovenduski 1997). During discussions, men repeatedly interrupt their (co)speakers and intensely impose their way of thinking on them, while women encourage and invite discussion based on personal experience (Kathlene 2005; Chaney 2006). Although the method employed by women is less time-efficient, the predominance of a soft tone in political debates and political decisions help to make politics humane and civilized, which gives it a completely different overtones while also avoiding conflict (Childs 2004).

*Gender and the impact of local politics*

The representation of women in local government bodies also brings different results and effects of local politics. It is typical for men to be somewhat bolder in the implementation of local politics; furthermore, they also involve various stakeholders in the process in the form of public-private partnerships, and various commissions and working bodies are also used. For women, such an approach represents an additional cost, which is why they prefer to use various financial transfers that provide benefits for all social groups and, in particular, direct assistance to people. Kathlene (2001) even says that women are more responsible (and frugal) in distributing financial resources because they have a different, more caring approach towards money compared to their male counterparts.

Gender also plays a key role in the impact of local politics. Women devote most of their resources to so-called "soft politics" (Holman 2015; Smith 2014),<sup>4</sup> which mainly involve children, young people and elderly citizens, while the views of men are more focused on the areas of construction, environment, economy, and agriculture (Holman 2013). Ferreira and Gyourko (2014) point out another interesting finding: female local leaders increase the employment of women in municipal administrations and local services and encourage women to start their own local businesses.

The review of the existing literature suggests that, despite some positive discrimination measures, women<sup>5</sup> face several obstacles on their way to occupying political offices at the local level, which is especially true for occupying the most prominent political functions, such as the mayor's office. Bullock and MacManus (1991) even explain that, compared to their male colleagues, women are less likely to be elected to the mayor's office in direct elections, although according to Steyvers and Reynaert (2006, 46) it is precisely this central executive function of the mayor that represents the (in)balance of the existing involvement of women in politics. In the continuation of the article, we analyse the engagement of women in the most prominent function at the local level in Slovenia. The statistics of local elections are analysed in a longitudinal perspective.

### 3 DATA AND ANALYSIS

Slovenia consists of 212 municipalities, which were gradually established between the time of the re-establishment of local self-government in Slovenia, from 1994<sup>6</sup> to 2014, when the youngest municipality first elected their local representatives. Local elections, in which mayors, municipal councillors and representatives of the sublocal units are elected directly, are held every four

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<sup>4</sup> Soft or compassionate policies apply to children, family, education, health, social care, care for elderly citizens, social housing, culture and the like (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986, 45).

<sup>5</sup> Positive discrimination measures are measures that allow sub-represented groups in politics to reach the threshold of minimum representation needed to make their voices heard at all (such as quotas, pre-reserved places in political bodies, etc.).

<sup>6</sup> The 1994 reform of local self-government, which brought substantive, organisational and territorial changes, established 147 municipalities. Four years later, local representatives were elected in 191 municipalities (and, additionally, in one more few months later); in 2002, local representatives were elected in 193 municipalities. During the next local elections (2006), 17 municipalities were additionally established; in 2010 and in 2014, another municipality was established. For the first time, the 2018 local elections were only held in the existing number of municipalities, without further fragmentation.

years and are not related to any other elections in the country (more in Haček 2007; Haček 2023, 80–81). The local level represents an important level of government, as it is still considered as the most appropriate entry point into the political arena and the beginning of the construction of a political career.

In the Slovenian local self-government system, the mayor is the central and most important actor, in terms of both the role and its competences (Kukovič 2018). The mayor is elected in direct and secret elections for a term of four years. The mayor is elected by citizens with the right to vote in the municipality, as well as by foreigners with a permanent residence in the municipality. An adult citizen of the Republic of Slovenia who has a permanent residence or voting rights in the municipality may run for mayor. Every citizen who has the right to vote in the municipal council elections has the right to vote for and be elected as the mayor. The mayor may be nominated either by political parties or by citizens who show their support by collecting signatures. The candidate who receives the majority of the votes cast is elected mayor. If no candidate receives the majority of votes in the first round, a second round of elections is held between the candidates who received the most votes in the first round. The mayor is therefore elected directly, through a two-round majority system (Kukovič 2015, 121).

The data in Table 1 show the number of all candidates who ran for mayors in individual local elections, and the number of female candidates, whereby the latter were divided into two groups, namely those who ran in urban municipalities<sup>7</sup> and those who ran in ordinary rural municipalities. The table also includes data on the number of elected female mayors.

The data show that the absolute number of mayoral candidates increased constantly from 1994 to 2010; in the 2014, 2018 and especially in the 2022 local elections, the number slightly decreased, and we also notice a decrease in the number of all candidates who ran for the office of mayor. The largest number of women (absolutely and relatively speaking) ran for mayor in the 2022 local elections in the largest Slovenian municipalities. From the data collected from all eight local elections, we can conclude that most mayoral candidates are still men, and that female candidates have never even represented one fifth of all mayoral candidates.

The data about the elected candidates for the mayor's office are even more telling. We can see that, in the first local elections after the reform of the local self-government in Slovenia in 1994, only two women (i.e., 6.5% of candidates) were elected, which amounted to 1.4% of municipalities with a female mayor. In the second local elections in 1998, the number of female mayors increased to eight (4.2% of municipalities), while the participation of female candidates increased to 15.4%. In 2002, the number of elected female mayors stopped at eleven (5.7% of municipalities), and the success of female candidates dropped by a solid percentage point compared to the previous elections. Local elections in 2006 were a disappointment in terms of the participation of women, as after two consecutive positive trends, the number of female mayors dropped to seven

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<sup>7</sup> From 1994 onwards, 11 Slovenian municipalities held the title of urban municipalities until the last local elections, when the number increased to 12. An urban municipality is defined by law as a compact, dense settlement or several settlements connected into a single spatial organism and urban environment, which is connected by the daily population migration. By law, a municipality can be granted the status of an urban municipality if it has a city with at least 20,000 inhabitants and 15,000 jobs in its territory, and is the economic, cultural and administrative center of the wider area (Local Self-Government Act 2007, Article 16). Local Self-Government Act, available at: <http://pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO307>.

(which represents a 6.8% success of the female candidates); the 2010<sup>8</sup> local elections also failed to repeat the best result so far from 2002. After this decadence, a positive turnaround occurred in 2014, as the success of the female candidates rose above 14%, which meant that 16 municipalities were headed by women. The 2018 local elections were the first surprise, as 22 female mayors were elected; for the first time in the history of independent Slovenia, more than 10% of municipalities were led by women. During the last local elections in 2022, we witnessed a renewed success of women, with more than 27% of female candidates elected. Today, 29 of the 212 municipalities (13.7%) are run by women.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF FEMALE CANDIDATES AND ELECTED MAYORS FROM 1994 TO 2022

	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
Number of municipalities	147	191	193	210	211	212	212	212
Number of all candidates for the position of mayor	635	739	724	991	926	811	800	618
Number of female candidates	31	52	77	103	109	108	102	107
Percentage of female candidates	4.9	7.0	10.6	10.4	11.8	13.3	12.8	17.3
Number of female candidates in urban municipalities	3	2	15	8	13	18	11	14
Number of female candidates in rural municipalities	28	50	62	95	96	90	91	93
Number of elected female mayors	2	8	11	7	10	16	22	29
Percentage of elected female candidates to mayoral office	6.5	15.4	14.3	6.8	9.2	14.8	21.6	27.1
Number of elected female mayors in urban municipalities	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
Number of elected female mayors in rural municipalities	2	7	10	7	10	16	21	28

Source: data of the State Election Commission, data capture June 2023.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that the mayoral function in urban municipalities remains firmly under the auspices of men. So far, only three women have been elected as mayors of the urban municipalities: one in the 1998 local elections, one in the 2002 local elections, and one in the 2018 local elections (she was re-elected in the 2022 local elections). The performance of female candidates in urban municipalities is therefore extremely low, except for the local elections in 1998, when only two women ran in urban municipalities and one of them won.

During the last three local elections (in 2014, 2018 and 2022), a total of 43 candidates (or an average of 1.3 candidates per urban municipality) were nominated in urban municipalities, while only one candidate has successfully won the local elections in 2018 and 2022 (which represents a 6% success rate). Meanwhile, during the last three local elections in rural municipalities, a total of 274 female candidates (or an average of 0.4 candidates per rural municipality) were nominated, while 65 candidates were successful (which represents a 10% success rate).

Table 2 shows the absolute numbers of mayors by groups of municipalities according to the criterion of population. We note that the majority of female mayors in the last three terms lead municipalities of up to 5,000 inhabitants, while only a few individuals are at the head of larger municipalities. If we consider the internationally established urban criterion (i.e., 10,000 inhabitants) for the analysis of the size of municipalities, this number is even higher.

<sup>8</sup> In 2010, 9.2% of female candidates were successful, which means that 10 mayors were elected.

TABLE 2: FEMALE MAYORS AND SIZE OF THE MUNICIPALITY

	2014–2018	2018–2022	2022–2026	<i>Number of municipalities</i>
Less than 1,000 inhabitants	2	2	3	7
More than 1,000 up to 2,000 inhabitants	1	1	2	21
More than 2,000 up to 5,000 inhabitants	9	12	15	82
More than 5,000 up to 10,000 inhabitants	1	4	5	48
More than 10,000 up to 20,000 inhabitants	3	2	2	36
More than 20,000 inhabitants	0	1	2	18
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>212</b>

Source: own calculations according to the State Election Commission data.

A longitudinal study reveals some interesting facts. Of the 29 current female mayors, 12 are newcomers, while 17 have entered a new term of office with mayoral experience. Eight incumbent female mayors have started their second term, six female mayors have already defeated the competition in the elections for the third time, and three female mayors have started their fourth term.<sup>9</sup> The longest seniority in history was held by two mayors who led their municipalities for a full twenty years (five terms) since 2002; during the last local elections in 2022, however, neither of them decided to run again.

## 4 CONCLUSION

In Slovenia, there are more than 3,600 political functions in 212 executive and legislative bodies at the local level. All these functions are directly elected by voters, which means that the citizens who decide who will lead their local community. In the paper, we focused our analysis on women who ran for the mayor's office in the time perspective of 32 years. We find that local politics, despite slightly more encouraging results regarding the election of women to the mayoral office compared to previous local elections, is still dominated by men, and that voters primarily see female mayors at the head of smaller municipalities (of up to 5,000 inhabitants), while larger municipalities, especially urban ones, are still entrusted to men.

If we want to understand the patterns and specifics that occur in a particular municipality, it is necessary to understand the local leaders and their way of leading, whereby gender is not a negligible variable. However, such an understanding of political leadership needs to be studied both substantively and in depth, which (especially for political scientists) represents a gap that will need more attention in the future. Nevertheless, we can form some patterns that we have already discovered by analysing objective data and reviewing literature. Firstly, women in local political functions remain in the minority. Secondly, we realised that social, legislative and institutional frameworks play an important role in the participation, engagement, recruitment and selection of female candidates for local political functions. Thirdly, although leadership positions are traditionally coloured by masculine values and virtues, women bring important innovations into the political arena and contribute to a more humane overtones of politics. Fourthly, women and men can be compatible partners when it comes to leading and developing the local community. And fifthly, it is clear that there is no simple answer to the question of how to increase women's participation in local politics, nor are there any quick solutions to (naturally) increase their

<sup>9</sup> In the past, one female mayor led a municipality for full four terms (from 1994 to 2010), while two female mayors led a municipality for three terms each (from 1998 to 2010).



chances of being elected, especially in direct elections, where the power to vote is in the hands of voters.

And why (if at all) is the presence of women in the local political arena so important? We see the importance of the presence of both genders especially in the leading (executive) function due to differences in perception and attitude towards public policies and problems of local communities that are brought into the public (local) sphere by men and women through socialisation. The lack of (or the under-representation of) a particular gender means that voices and views (whether of women or men) are lost in key processes – from perceiving problems in the local community, deciding on public policies or solutions to problems, and finally, to implementing these decisions. At the same time, we do not in any way argue that someone *should only be* elected for office on the grounds of gender; we do believe, however, that based on objective criteria, a candidate *can be* elected regardless of their gender. Since the (vast) majority of local political officials in Slovenia are (still) men, the presence of women is crucial for shining a light on soft policies, which is also true due to the different manner of leadership that women bring to the political sphere with their nature, characteristics, and behavioural patterns. In addition, we must also put the topic into a broader context. The under-representation of women at a local level can lead to a chain reaction, causing the under-representation of women at higher levels of power (regional, national, European). It is the local level that is best suited for entering the political arena, accumulating experience, establishing (and expanding) an electoral base, and building the foundations for a subsequent political career. Understanding local leaders is therefore extremely important, especially if they have progressive ambitions.

We conclude with a thought about the countries where women have already broken through the "glass ceiling"<sup>10</sup>, occupying the key functions both at the local and at higher levels of government. This was certainly due to the context and a wide range of different factors, from the culture of society, the mentality, the political tradition, the legislation, the welfare states, the dynamics of life and, in particular, the empowerment of women which makes them believe that they can change something in politics, and then actually do it.

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<sup>10</sup> The metaphor "glass ceiling" is used to describe invisible structural barriers that hinder the professional and political development of women (Klenke 1996).

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## ŽENSKE V SLOVENSKI LOKALNI POLITIKI: ŽUPANJE 1994–2022

*Moški in ženske, ki opravljajo javne politične funkcije, se razlikujejo v svojem odnosu do politike, zagovarjajo različne politike, oblikujejo politike na edinstvene načine, ustvarjajo alternativne politične rezultate ali učinke in izbirajo različne načine vodenja. Te razlike so posledica socializacije: pri moških prevladujeta vrednoti pravičnosti in avtonomije, naučijo se čustveno distancirati od javnopolitičnih problemov, kar jim omogoča jasno presojo pomembnih odločitev. Ženske so vzgojene tako, da skrbijo za druge, kar izostri njihov čut za socialne storitve, čemur dajejo prednost tudi pri svojem vodenju. Ta študija prikazuje časovno primerjavo lokalnih volitev v vseh slovenskih občinah v obdobju od 1994 do 2022, in analizira kje ženske kandidirajo in osvojijo županske funkcije. Analiza objektivnih podatkov kaže, da imajo ženske več možnosti za zmago v manjših občinah, a kljub določenemu napredku na zadnjih lokalnih volitvah lokalna politika ostaja v rokah moških.*

**Ključne besede:** ženske; županje; lokalne volitve; lokalna (samo)uprava; Slovenija.

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