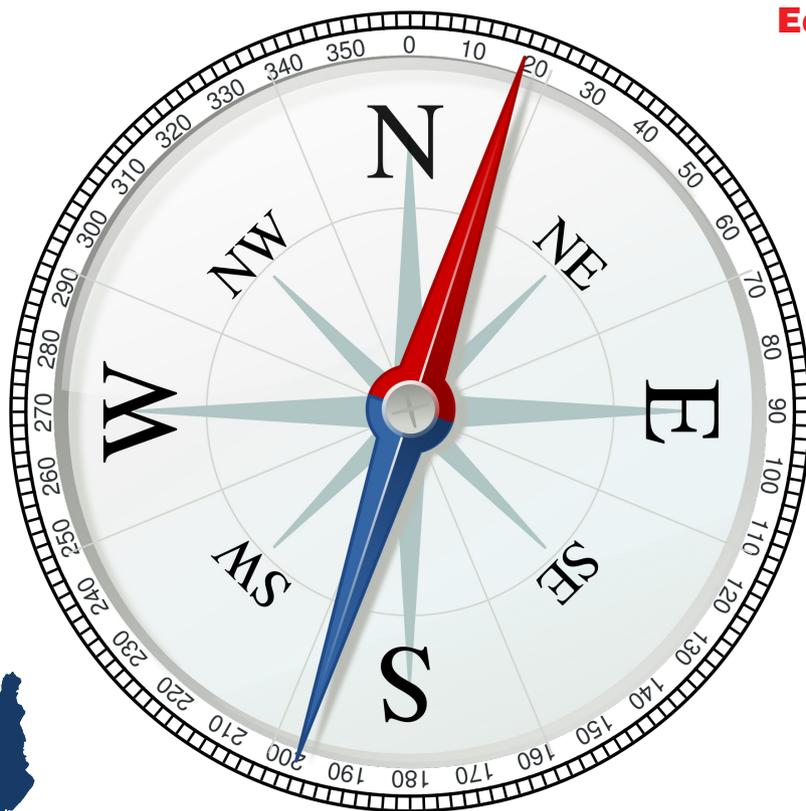


# Emerging Paradigms in the Shifting Foreign and Domestic Environments

## The Czech Centre-Right's Solutions to the Political Challenges of 2022

Ed. Lucie Tungul



Wilfried  
**Martens Centre**  
for European Studies



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## Project Partners

**TOPAZ** was established in 2012 as an educational platform and think tank associated with the political party TOP 09. Its goal is to open up discussion with the public concerning conservative ideas. Its main activities are focused on social debates with independent experts, cooperation with TOP 09 expert committees, fundraising, presentation of alternative views on the work of public authorities and preparation of analytical and conceptual policy documents suggesting alternative answers.

**Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS)** is a German political foundation closely associated with the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU). Its main principles are freedom, justice and solidarity. The goal of KAS is to support Christian-Democratic values in politics and society, foster democracy and rule of law, support European integration and intensify transatlantic and development cooperation.

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## Abbreviations

AFET	European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs
AI	Artificial intelligence
AKP	Justice and Development Party
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRIC	Brazil, Russia, India, China
CAI	Comprehensive Agreement on Investment
CDU	Christian Democratic Union of Germany
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CHP	Republican People's Party
ČSSD	Czech Social Democratic Party
EC	European Commission
EDF	European Defence Fund
EEAS	European External Action Service
EIB	European Investment Bank
EMGF	East Mediterranean Gas Forum
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign direct investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
KDU-ČSL	Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party
KSČM	Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia

ICT	Information and communication technologies
ILO	International liberal order
IMF	International monetary fund
IT	Information technologies
MFČR	Ministry of Finance of the Czech Republic
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party
NATO	North Atlantic Alliance
OBOR	One Belt One Road
OCU	Orthodox Church of Ukraine
OECD	Organisation for economic cooperation and development
ODS	Civic Democratic Party
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
SALIS	Strategic Air Lift International Solution
STAN	Mayors and Independents
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UGCC	Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UOC-MP	Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow patriarchate
USSR	Soviet Union
V4	Visegrad 4
WTO	World Trade Organization
WW2	World War 2

# Introduction

*Lucie Tungul and Reda Ifrah*

The European Union (EU) and its member states have recently faced a wide range of fundamental challenges. If the EU does not want to take a back seat in world affairs, it will have to strengthen its role as a global player. The political representatives of the EU member states will also have to increase their citizens' trust in the project of European integration, which had been declining before 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the negative trends (Dennison 2021). The primary goal is to fully renew the single market, which has traditionally had strong support even among moderate Eurosceptics. Its limited operation caused by insufficient coordination amongst the EU member states when fighting the pandemic has had a significant impact on how the EU citizens assessed the EU (Dennison 2021).

Other than renewing the full operations of the single market (and its long-expected completion), we need to focus on the EU's global role. More than half of EU citizens want the EU to assume a strong role in the international arena, especially in providing security from external threats, the fight for democracy and human rights protection. Relations with the United States will be crucial; an increasing number of Europeans think that the USA represents different values than Europe. The other important protagonists will be China, the Indo-Pacific and closer to Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and Africa. Migration is still waiting for a long-term sustainable solution.

Europe is only at the beginning of the adaptation and mitigation to climate change. Green diplomacy will play an important role in the process. This is one area, where the EU has had a traditionally strong role, has a good reputation, the support of EU citizens and could find a common ground with the administration of the new American president Joe Biden. Even a positive development in this field will still leave many other problems to address, which the COVID-19 pandemic did not cause but reinforced and revealed in their totality, such as the weaknesses of the domestic political and party systems, the rise of populism, the transformative power of social networks, restructuralisation of the economy (and the states' tendencies to interfere with their economies) and digitalisation of education.

This publication addresses the challenges related to the EU's potential global power and assumes several points of view. Dalibor Roháč assesses the geopolitics of the European Commission using the examples of the recent negotiations with China, Belarus and Russia. He demonstrates the weaknesses of the EU institutions and suggests that the EU member states have strengthened their horizontal relations and links to third countries with similar interests. He argues that the EU should also start to apply power politics.

Michael Romancov addresses the situation in the Indo-Pacific and efforts to counter-balance China's hegemonic activities in the region. He argues that the Indo-Pacific has replaced Europe and the euro-Atlantic space as the dominant geopolitical and geostrategic region and we need to pay serious attention to the developments there.

Ladislav Cabada, Josef Mlejnek and Lucie Tungul analyse the situation closer to Brussels. Cabada examines the current situation in the Visegrad 4 (V4) and assesses the negative perception recently associated with the V4 common among liberal circles in Central Europe and in Europe at large. He argues that Europe is facing a fundamental need to include differing opinions into one democratic discussion instead of their ostracisation. He believes that we can achieve it by acknowledging the importance of negotiations and building compromises among various perspectives.

Mlejnek focuses on Ukraine, especially its economic transformation and national identity in a country that after the 2014 Crimean invasion cut decades-long economic, social and cultural links to Russia. He proposes that the EU should help the local economy, which would reverse the negative trends caused by brain drain and the loss of labour force, which migrated to the West to work. It would also strengthen the Ukrainian culture, the language and encourage a healthy national self-confidence. Tungul discusses the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean; she analyses the role of Turkey in escalating the conflict and presents possibilities that the EU member states could apply to deescalate the conflict. The main goals should be, however, to end the decades-long dispute, which also has a strong influence on the future of the EU as a geopolitical actor.

The years 2020 and 2021 were very difficult for the EU's foreign and security policy but the domestic challenges to political stability and predictability were equally difficult. The German elections in 2021 ended the 16-year rule of Angela Merkel as German chancellor. Parliamentary elections also took place in Czechia, the first with a new electoral law. Jakub Charvát summarised the main features of the new law and criticises the persisting shortcomings, which need to be removed based on expert discussions that would consider the various scenarios. The final version of the law should reflect these expert recommendations. Denisa Charvátová focused on a common problem with most European countries, this being social media and populism. Social networks have become ideal places for populist political communication. She argues that the mainstream parties should learn to work with the various segments of society and their programme should react to their needs. They should also use high-quality political marketing and use social networks for political communication to provide the voters with feelings of solidarity.

The last two chapters focus on economic challenges linked to the COVID-19 crisis and digitalisation in education. Alena Zemplerová highlights the positive and negative economic trends facilitated by the pandemic. Other than the obvious advantages such as digitalisation and greater flexibility, she draws attention to the need to protect competitiveness and intellectual property rights, labour force mobility (across fields and geographically). Equally important is the protection and promotion of market forces in the upcoming and inevitable economic restructuring. She argues that we have to prevent the deformation tendencies of state policies, which have a tendency to save companies regardless of the market.

Markéta Fibigerová and Markéta Tuhá offer in the last chapter of this publication an alternative view on online education and digitalisation of secondary education. Based on good practice at the First IT Secondary School, they contradict certain established views concerning using technologies in the education systems. They assert that we should teach students to use technologies instead of restricting or banning their use.

Although it might seem that the pandemic, lasting for almost two years, has fundamentally transformed our world, most of the changes started before the pandemic. It reinforced and facilitated the developments, which gathered speed. Europe is facing a crucial moment; it has to react to the changes and adapt to them. The authors of this publication analyse some of the pressing problems of contemporary European society and politics. They also present specific recommendations to take advantage of the situation, to reduce the negative effects and maximise the rewards.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank both reviewers for their fruitful and helpful comments and suggestions. We would also like to thank Filip Vondráček for carefully reading the Czech and English versions of the text.

# The Mirage of the Geopolitical Commission

*Dalibor Roháč*

**Summary:** Despite efforts to provide the EU with a shared foreign policy outlook, significant differences on key geopolitical issues exist both between and within its member states. The common European institutions – the European Commission, the European External Action Service, and the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy – are ill-suited to either bridge the existing disagreement or to act autonomously on behalf of the EU. The examples of the EU’s recent engagement with China, Belarus, and Russia illustrate the shortcomings of looking to common European institutions for answers. Instead, the EU member countries need to foster horizontal relationships between themselves, as well as with like-minded non-members, build capacity, and learn to deploy “normal” tools of power politics.

**Keywords:** EU, European Commission, geopolitics, China, Belarus, Russia

## *Introduction*

“The era in which we could fully rely on others is over,” Angela Merkel told her German supporters in 2017, urging Europeans to take fate into their own hands. Her campaign speech came just days after a tense G7 summit, dominated by the mercurial figure of the former US President, Donald Trump.

The strained transatlantic relations during the Trump era provided a new impetus to ongoing efforts to give Europe a unified voice on the global stage. The 2008 Lisbon Treaty already laid the institutional basis for the EU’s foreign and security policy by creating the role of a High Representative and the European External Action Service (EEAS). While EEAS was built on the foundations of the previously existing external relations department of the European Commission (EC), the new structure was granted organisational and budgetary independence and led to the upgrading of former EC delegations around the world into embassy-type European missions.

It was only logical that geopolitics and foreign and security policy would be a priority for the new Commission, which came to office after the 2019 European election. As a peace project based on rules and cooperation, the EU is distinctly threatened by the resurgence of great power competition and by a weakening of the transatlantic partnership. As she introduced her Commission to the European Parliament, the new EC President, Ursula von der Leyen, emphasised the need for Europeans to take on a much more significant role in the world: “The world needs our leadership more than ever. To

keep engaging with the world as a responsible power. To be a force for peace and for positive change.”

Alas, the EU’s own *modus operandi* – seeking to replace power competition and conflict with a rule-based order – limits the effectiveness of European institutions as vehicles for foreign and security policy, which both require making politically contentious judgement calls in real time. The current “geopolitical” Commission is no exception. It prioritises the process, multilateralism, and compartmentalisation of different policy issues over prudent European self-interest, strategic thinking, and the willingness to deploy hard power. This is not necessarily the fault of the Commission or the EEAS. The intentions behind the Lisbon Treaty notwithstanding, neither institution was truly designed to make strategic decisions or to forge the compromises between member states needed to sustain a unified foreign policy outlook. Member states, who continue to have substantial disagreements on foreign policy questions, have also displayed little willingness to delegate such decisions to European institutions. Accordingly, the appointments of High Representatives, recruited from second tiers of national politics, have reflected lowest common denominator compromises, rather than a genuine yearning for European leadership. Last but not least, the absolute lack of capacity, both at the national and European level, is a binding constraint on the amount of weight that the EU is capable of throwing around on the world stage.

This essay proceeds by briefly examining the EU’s – and the Commission’s – approach to Europe’s three recent pressure points: its relationship with China, its engagement with Belarus following Lukashenko’s stealing of the 2020 presidential election followed by a crackdown on opposition and civil society, and the ongoing challenge posed by Russia. In all of these areas, the EU’s actions have been shaped by its fundamental structural shortcomings, leading to moves that were ineffectual or internally inconsistent. The conclusion offers thoughts on how a common European foreign and security outlook could be cultivated in spite of the existing constraints.

## ***China***

Notwithstanding the rise of the challenge posed to Western democracies by China’s rise, illustrated recently by the NATO and G7 summits in June 2021, the EU’s official documents describe China simultaneously as a “competitor,” “a systemic rival” and “a cooperation partner.” The ambiguity reflects the belief that while China represents in many ways a challenge for the EU, there is also a cooperative side to the EU-China relationship, which needs to be cultivated. The most important “cooperative” facets of that relationship are the economic links between the EU and China, on the one hand, and the need to engage with China in order to reduce carbon emissions, on the other.

While China remains an important trading partner, the investment links are modest, with Chinese investment in the EU accounting for some €120 billion, a small and declining portion of the EU’s FDI

flows. The EU's investment in China is similarly sized (€140 billion), with a significant portion of it concentrated in automobile manufacturing. Since the publication of the Commission's 2016 China strategy, the goal of the EU's engagement has been to foster a level playing field and reciprocity in economic relations with China. Alas, lacking a fundamental change in the organisation of the Chinese economy, the hopes were bound to be disappointed. If anything, over the same time period China has amplified its politically driven investment outreach to European countries, making inroads particularly in Italy and Hungary. Chinese investment can be expected to follow the purpose of building leverage over individual European governments – something that the EU had left unaddressed prior to the advent of the foreign investment screening mechanism in 2020.

Meanwhile, the Commission pursued talks concerning the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), identified as a priority in the 2016 strategy. The negotiations continued throughout China's crackdown in Hong Kong and in spite of the regime's increasingly bellicose rhetoric and behaviour in the region. The treaty was signed – against some pushback from France and Poland – just weeks before the inauguration of President Joe Biden, who had long indicated his willingness to coordinate with the EU on the subject. The most charitable interpretation for the persistence in negotiation and for their ill-timed conclusion is a lack of strategic thinking and the belief, grounded in a legalistic, bureaucratic mentality, that different facets of the EU-China relationship can be neatly compartmentalised. In light of China's ham-fisted decision to sanction several members of the European Parliament in April 2020, however, the ratification was scrapped.

Contrary to claims that the separation of different aspects of the relationship has been a strategic success for Brussels, it is difficult to hold Beijing accountable for its human rights violations or abusive trade practices while pretending that China is a good-faith economic actor. The desire to keep China at the table thus directly undercuts the tools that the EU would be willing to deploy in response to its behaviour. That logic extends, unfortunately, to the area of climate change, where the EU has championed a consistently multilateral approach.

Yet, it is far from clear that China's explicit cooperation is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for successful decarbonisation. The country may be the world's largest carbon emitter, accounting for more than a quarter of all global emissions, but it is not the only important emitter among the emerging economies. If the rising demand for energy in India or sub-Saharan Africa is met with fossil fuels, a green China will have only a marginal effect on the global outcome. And while China has become the world's largest investor in solar energy, accounting today for practically half of the world's production, its commitments and past track record are not encouraging, notwithstanding the fact that Beijing has been at the negotiating table.

Between 2000 and 2018, China’s annual emissions almost tripled, from 3 billion to over 13 billion tons. Its official pledges — including peaking carbon emissions before 2030 and reducing, by 2030, carbon intensity to 60 percent below its 2005 level — are deemed “highly insufficient” in slowing down the growth in global temperatures by the Climate Action Tracker. Worse yet, China has not been a good-faith actor in its own international outreach. As part of its Belt and Road Initiative, China is constructing coal-fired power stations in countries in Asia and Africa – and even in Europe, in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which undermines the goals of the Paris Agreement.

Furthermore, approaching the question of decarbonisation through the lenses of climate summitry forgets that “the ultimate goal of [such policies] is to develop non-carbon energy supplies at unsubsidised costs less than those using fossil fuels,” as noted in the 2010 Hartwell Paper, written by a group of climate policy academics as a response to the failure of the Copenhagen summit. Despite President Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Accord, for example, the U.S. economy has been decarbonising every year since 2004, with the exception of 2018 – mainly due to a gradual move away from coal. What is far more important than multilateralism and explicit climate targets is the willingness of governments to commit real resources to the research and development and accelerated deployment of low-cost non-carbon energy sources, which will be adopted around the globe precisely because they are cheaper and more efficient than the carbon ones.

### ***Belarus***

Starting in August 2020, Europe’s “last dictatorship” has provided another geopolitical test for the EU. Alas, the bloc’s lethargic answer left a lot to be desired. The initial reaction from High Representative Josep Borrell and Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Várhelyi criticised the regime’s crackdown against the opposition and expressed the expectation (unrealistic by that point) that votes would be counted accurately. On behalf of the Council, the High Representative later stated that Lukashenko’s new presidential mandate lacked “any democratic legitimacy” and called for “an inclusive national dialogue and responding positively to the demands of the Belarusian people for new democratic elections.” However, any concrete action was blocked for weeks by Cyprus, which used it as a bargaining chip in its own dispute with Turkey, and it took until October 1 to introduce the first round of sanctions – which were later escalated in the light of the regime’s intensifying repression.

A further test came in May 2021, when the Lukashenko regime used a fighter jet to hijack a Ryanair flight between two EU capitals, Athens and Vilnius. Short of actual war, this represented the most blatant use of hard power against the EU in years. While some praised the EU’s supposedly swift reaction, which was simply a function of the fortuitous timing of its Council the day after the hijacking, the response was minimalistic. It called for an “international investigation” and promised to deploy

additional sanctions, to be tailored by the Commission and adopted by the Council of the EU at a later stage, without even considering the wide range of escalatory moves that the EU could have easily deployed at very little cost to itself. These include a comprehensive trade and investment embargo, perhaps, or working with the United States to cut Belarusian banks off SWIFT, the standardised system of transactions between banks worldwide, and seeking to exclude the regime from the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization.

The EU's unwillingness to respond disproportionately to acts of aggression means that effective deterrence has not been established – the expected sanctions-related costs to Lukashenko's regime were surely factored in as the Belarussian dictator was making his decision. Furthermore, the EU's decision to disregard the obvious role played by the Kremlin in the brazen act also allowed Moscow to move first by banning EU flights that were avoiding Belarussian airspace, placing the EU again into a position of a second mover instead of being the one to set the terms of engagement.

### *Russia*

The new Commission has made little progress on updating the EU's approach toward Russia, other than maintaining the existing sanctions regime, which was put in place following Russia's annexation of Crimea. One reason is that the EU as a whole continues to be divided by the question of how Putin's regime should exactly be confronted and/or engaged with, as illustrated by the recent controversy surrounding the Franco-German proposal for reviving EU-Russia summits. The German government has continued in its pursuit of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which – among other things – departs from the spirit if not the letter of the EU's Third Energy package, which calls for an unbundling of energy supply and transmission. Thanks to growing interconnections within Central and Eastern Europe, the Gazprom-led venture might not have an enormous adverse effect on energy security in “new” member states. However, it does undercut the prospects of a deepening of Ukraine's ties with the EU – which are among the key foreign policy interests of the Union.

The EU reacted without much resolve to the arrest of the Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny upon his return from Germany where he had been recovering following his poisoning, presumably at the hands of Russian security services. The arrest was followed by a dumbfoundingly poorly timed visit to Moscow by the High Representative, during which Russia expelled a number of EU diplomats and Borrell suffered a public humiliation at the hands of his Russian host, Sergey Lavrov. It took another two weeks for the Council to enact sanctions against the four individuals complicit in Navalny's arrest. The EEAS or the High Representative had no substantive response to the revelations of Russian state terrorism in Vrbětice, Czechia, where an arms depot had been bombed by Russian intelligence services. Likewise, the EU appeared defenceless in the face of the Russian

military build-up on Ukraine's Eastern border in March 2021, until the Kremlin autonomously decided to deescalate. In June 2021, the Commission released its Russia strategy, which identified the nature of the challenge posed by Russia, including its "pursuit of a privileged sphere of influence," disinformation campaigns, and hybrid warfare (European Commission 2021a). Characteristically, however, the document spends more time on subjects of possible cooperation and discussing ways in which the EU could retaliate and impose costs on Russia for its rogue behaviour.

### ***Discussion and Policy Implications***

In *Alarums and Excursions*, the historian Luuk van Middelaar skilfully describes the tension between the EU's institutions geared towards a politics of rules and the demands of a politics of events, which has characterised the EU's recent crises. For all the talk about a "rules-based order," geopolitics is often dictated primarily by events. Invariably, events leave the EU blindsided – until national leaders or their coalitions take matters into their own hands.

The problem is not a recent one. From the 1990s onward, the primary tool of the EU's engagement in its neighbourhood was its enlargement policy, seeking to export European standards of democracy, human rights, and rule of law to the new and emerging democracies of the post-communist world. The low-hanging fruit of that approach, however, has already been picked. Today, the highly hypothetical prospect of membership is clearly failing as an instrument of leverage in Turkey, in Eastern Partnership countries as well as in the Western Balkans. Yet, and despite a lack of appetite for enlargement in leading member states, the notion of future membership remains the basic framework through which the EU seeks to exercise power over its neighbours to its East and South.

Unsurprisingly, the EU took a back seat to the developments of the Arab Spring. Even the modest air campaign in Libya, championed by a subset by member states, was made possible by the United States. Arguably because of the EU's rules-following nature and the centrality of enlargement as a tool of foreign policy, the bloc failed to deploy more aggressive trade and development assistance tools that could have tipped the balance in favour of pro-democracy forces in the region. The consequences of the EU's failure came to haunt it shortly thereafter. The refugee crisis of 2015 and the surge of Islamist terror activity, instigated or inspired by the Islamic state, were direct consequences of allowing the civil war in Syria to fester for years, with disruptive consequences for European politics. It is worth noting that the creative (though perhaps cynical) solution to the refugee crisis – namely to strike an agreement with Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – came from German chancellor Angela Merkel, not from the EEAS' officialdom.

True, the EU preserved a significant gravitational pull toward some countries in its vicinity – most significantly Ukraine. Yet, ultimately, it was an ad hoc group of foreign ministers who facilitated Yanukovich’s departure from the presidency, not the EU’s High Representative, and it was likewise Angela Merkel who played a decisive role in the Minsk agreements as well as in the efforts to hold the Kremlin accountable through sanctions, which has held impressively. Going forward, Ukraine’s prospects for membership remain tenuous and the EU lacks alternative instruments that could keep the country more firmly in its orbit.

The new Commission has not changed these fundamental flaws. To be sure, the three examples discussed in this paper – China, Belarus, and Russia – involved a multitude of other EU actors besides the Commission, the High Representative, and the EEAS. However, all three point to a geopolitical outlook that remains shaped by bureaucratic habits of mind. The prioritisation of multilateral engagement and of process, as with China and climate policies, over substantive results is one manifestation of such a mindset, as are the efforts to compartmentalise different facets of foreign policy. What frequently ensues is stasis, in which the European Commission pursues its default policies set years ago, as if by entropy, notwithstanding changing circumstances on the ground.

There is no way of getting around the basic fact that member states have different perceptions of their strategic interests and of the most salient threats that they are facing. While the European Commission has proven to be an effective enforcer of agreed-upon rules and a purveyor of technical expertise, it is singularly ill-equipped to navigate the perils of real-time, real-world, decision-making on subjects that remain of great importance to member states. Proposals to discard unanimity in favour of a qualified majority vote might look appealing. In practice, however, they would risk further alienating members that would be systematically outvoted – a problem that ought not to be underrated in the post-Brexit era. Neither is there any easy, straightforward fix to the sorry state of European militaries, most prominently of Germany’s.

### ***Recommendations:***

Instead of trying to remodel the EU into something it is not, Europeans could improve their ability to navigate the world through a combination of the following three approaches:

- Foster horizontal relationships between member states, which take initiative on matters that are salient to them instead of waiting for the emergence of shared, lowest common-denominator, solutions. Even with Cyprus stalling, the remaining 26 member states could have responded to Lukashenko’s fraudulent election at a time when doing so could have made a difference to the outcome of public protests in the country. A greater emphasis on horizontal ties allows for the deepening of partnerships with non-members, most prominently the UK and Norway, which share many of the same geopolitical concerns as most of the EU’s members.
- Build capacity. Europe’s weight on the global stage is held back by the weakness of its defences, national and European. For all the debates about Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), launched in 2017, and the European Defence Fund (EDF), these initiatives remain miniscule in size. Whether investment takes place at the national or European level is secondary to the question of whether such investment takes place at all. However, it is important that the slow-moving European initiatives do not serve as an excuse for a lack of national investment particularly within NATO.
- Do “normal” power politics. Europeans cannot afford to remain vegetarians in a world of carnivores. And neither is the primary purpose of the EU to “fix” countries in its neighbourhood, the way the bloc famously did through its previous enlargements. Both member states and the EU as a whole have to learn to use the whole spectrum of foreign policy tools, including coercive ones, instead of seeking to lead purely by example and through dialogue. Once again, it is the lack of hard power at the national level that is the binding constraint on how much power politics European governments can do, either individually or jointly.

# Thirty Years of Visegrad: From “Back to Europe” to the Fight for a Different Europe

*Ladislav Cabada*

**Abstract:** The Visegrad Group has become a visible but predominantly negatively perceived protagonist over the last decade. This paper observes the transformation of V4 into a populist regional group within the framework of European national-populist and nativist forces. Using the concept of culture wars, it presents the basic positions of two clear-cut groups both within the V4 and in the wider European context. It rejects the Manichaeian conception of “good” and “evil” established by these two groups and emphasizes the need for consensus using the basic premise of classical liberalism, i.e., the right to have a different opinion.

**Keywords:** Visegrad group, European Union; conflict of values; populism

## *Introduction*

The Visegrad Declaration celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in February 2021. There have been some bilateral crises within the group, with the individual positions of some prime ministers and governments limiting the cooperation to a minimum. There have also been rather significant value disagreements particularly in the last decade, including an attempt to establish an alternative Central European partnership with a different ideological basis on the platform of the Slavkov Triangle (cf. Cabada 2018). Despite this fact, the current Visegrad Group (V4) can be viewed as a relatively vivacious structure with a very ambitious self-presentation. V4 is currently (self-)presented in various media and political contexts and narratives from an exceptionally wide range of perspectives – one time demonised, another time perceived as the advocatus diaboli or the protector of “normality.”

It is apparent that the images and narratives of the V4 frequently prevail over other significant aspects of the cooperation, i.e., the success of the group and its members. This success involves particularly their accession to NATO and the EU, which demonstrates sufficient socialisation based on western standards (Walsch 2018). This success is an old one and relativised by the fact that apart from the “champions” of Central Europe, many more countries acceded in 2004 and over the following years. What may be considered a success is the significant economic progress of the V4 countries. Poland is currently the seventh biggest economy in the EU, and Czechia and Slovakia have also experienced clear economic success. What may also be perceived as success is the fact that for many countries of

Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Western Balkans region, V4 has become a symbol of successful Europeanisation while at the same time maintaining the status as the greatest promoter of EU further EU enlargement. Here we also observe the most positive aspect of the frequently specific European politics of the Orbán government.

The V4+ format is proving to be functional when pursuing interests at the European level, as illustrated for example with the repeated establishment of the “Friends of Cohesion” group when negotiating the EU’s multi-annual financial frameworks. The V4 is also visible within the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy, not only in relation to efforts aimed at stopping the migration waves at the EU borders, which is frequently presented by V4 politicians in a very unfortunate way, but also e.g., in the form of the V4 EU Battlegroup or their significant contribution to the fight against cybernetic and other hybrid threats (cf. Cabada, Waisová et al. 2018).

The above-mentioned examples of success, as well as many others, are relativised, however, by the problematic behaviour of their key actors at the national, Visegrad, and European level. Paradoxically, even the V4 governments frequently do not present their success in the EU, but instead focus primarily on criticism of the EU institutions, using a significantly populist narrative along the lines of “we are the good Central Europeans” versus “the hegemonic EU.”

It also needs to be noted, however, that many key protagonists on the European level, not only politicians but significantly and frequently also the media, created a post-2015 image of the V4 based on its demonisation and presenting the national-conservative populists Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán as the sociotype of a Central European politician. This kind of presentation of “the new Europe” is misleading and fails to acknowledge numerous cases of success not only of the V4, but also of other countries of the post-communist area in terms of democracy, their contribution to common European defence, joining the eurozone, etc. (Cabada 2019). As is the case with the national level, one can observe a strong and not always reasoned polarisation even at the European level.

The aim of this paper is to specifically point out that all kinds of black-and-white classifications into “the bad Visegrad” and “the good ones” at the European level, or “the radical-right-wing populists” and “the pro-European liberals” at the national level are a cliché. The right wing, in relation to the radicalisation, nativisation, and anti-liberal positions of a significant (and increasing) part of its members, fails to acknowledge the Europe-wide scale of the problem. The opposition powers standing against national populists overestimate their “liberal” nature and ignore the negatives, including strong populism resembling the populism for which the majority of current V4 leaders are criticised. My goal is to point out the problematic nature of this black-and-white perspective, which is labelled by many as a “culture war,” especially regarding the fact that it is one of the key sources of a strong and deepening polarisation and therefore also the weakening of the pro-democratic liberal mainstream.

### ***The Changing Image of V4: From a Star Pupil to an Unwanted Child***

In the first fifteen years following the fall of Communism, the group of Central European countries (apart from the V4, literature commonly puts Slovenia in this group as well) were labelled as “star pupils.” This image was strengthened thanks to their relatively stable economies, the absence of greater internal or bilateral conflicts, institutional adaptation, and the overall formal democratisation including relatively strong rule of law. The disruption to this “harmony” by Meciarism in Slovakia was minimised after 1998, and in 1997, the Central European countries were accompanied in the so-called Luxembourg group by Estonia, the most successful transition country of the Baltic Region. As pointed out by Lovec, Kočí and Šabič (2021: 2), this image changed as the result of an (alleged) failure to adapt to western standards, and the V4 received a new label as “the problematic children of Europe.” The fundamental reasons for such a refutation are considered to be specifically their rejection of migration relocation mechanisms and the fact that Poland and Hungary have been facing an EU investigation for alleged infringements of the rule of law (Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty).

The V4 is perceived by external critics as an internally consolidated and integrated organisation whose member countries have uniform attitudes, i.e., they may be perceived as homogenous units (like-units). Such a perception is, however, very far from the reality. As already demonstrated in numerous studies, the V4 is a highly inconstant and fluid regional group based on the interaction of sovereign states and purely inter-governmental cooperation. Put in a different way, from the hundreds of particular political topics tackled by them, the governments of the V4 countries sometimes find those where their positions correspond significantly with one other.

Traditionally, they agree of further EU enlargement. The V4 countries have also had similar attitudes to energy security and after 2015 to migration and the so-called relocation quotas. There are nevertheless many topics where their attitudes differ and, in some areas, there is even a rivalry between them, for instance when competing for foreign investments. Slovakia is a member of the eurozone, while the other V4 members are not. The political parties of Kaczyński, Viktor Orbán, Andrej Babiš, and Robert Fico, governing the respective countries at the same time, belong to four different fractions in the European Parliament. Presenting the V4 as a fully coherent group would therefore be misleading and in fact populist, even more so that the critics of “the evil V4” often also point out the positive deviations from negative regional trends, such as the Slovak presidents Andrej Kiska and Zuzana Čaputová or the mayors of the V4 capitals (see below).

One-sided criticism of the V4 therefore obscures the other side of the picture – the long-term institutional crisis within the EU (Ágh 2019). In the context of the deep sense of insecurity impacting the entire EU and actually all its member states, the “core” of the EU decided to strengthen integration

and a common identity. Opposition to such a development was used and often misused by western mainstream media and politicians to criticise the new member states for their alleged failure to adapt to the European environment and values – in other words a failure to achieve (full) socialisation. Compliance with enforced political and identity-related integration was therefore perceived as a new condition for the club membership, which supplemented the previous conditions known as Copenhagen criteria. Some new member states partly or fully rejected this policy of “post-accession conditionality,” particularly the one-sided criticism of their own opposing attitude and the overall stigmatisation of the “newcomers from the East” (Lovec, Kočí and Šabič 2021).

Critical voices in some EU-15 member states gradually increased as well, although unevenly. Some “Old Europe” states have seen the critics becoming members of governments, although usually as junior partners (Italy, Austria), or have faced a cordon sanitaire (re)established against them in the political and especially the media environment. In contrast, the critics of rising EU transnationalism have gained control over governments and other institutions in the V4 and the wider CEE region emphasising the primacy of national politics and national interest against the EU narratives. They criticise the EU, primarily the European Commission (EC), as exceedingly activist and call for its “re-bureaucratisation” and subordination to the Council of the EU. They use the classic populist repertoire and present themselves as defenders of the nation and the Visegrad/Central European people from Brussels’ hegemony and oppression. Central European populists led by Orbán define the “people of the V4” as traditionally and permanently oppressed. They present themselves as the greatest defenders of alleged Christian values against the (ultra)liberal developments in “Old Europe” and against migration (Cabada 2021).

The European mainstream’s reaction to the criticism of one-sided and non-alternative politics linked to the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty was often insensitive. The utterly legitimate new member states’ demand to preserve the intergovernmental paradigm including each member state’s veto was perceived as old-fashioned and illustrating a low political culture. This is perhaps why some V4 countries display sympathy for Brexit. The stigmatisation of CEE was affected, among other things, by a long-term geo-political and geo-cultural perception based on the stereotype of “the Europe in-between,” understood as “the outer circle” of Western Europe/the EU, a (semi-)periphery and a source of (potential) instability. Europeanisation and socialisation paradigms were therefore perceived as a tool for preventing a return to violence or a move in that direction (Lovec, Kočí and Šabič 2021: 4).

The migration crisis was a turning point in the perception of Central Europe and the development of its hetero-stereotype on the part of the EU-15. The rejection of the relocation mechanisms and other steps of (some) Central-European governments were perceived as a clear failure of the Europeanisation mechanisms. As pointed out by Lovec, Kočí and Šabič (2021: 11), the following years saw intensive

academic interest in the institutional failure and rise of nationalism in Central Europe. The media and political stigmatisation were thus complemented with the scientific framework. Central Europe, primarily the V4, became “the big bad wolf” presented as a coherent group of Eastern countries permanently obstructing the EU policies (Walsch 2018). Numerous “counter-union” statements of Central European politicians, some having a clear populist basis but many of them rather well reasoned (the issue of double standards, the absence of discussion, and generally the absence of alternatives in the area of public policies), may even be seen from the perspective of “the counter-stigmatisation strategy” (Lovec, Kočí and Šabič 2021: 12).

From the point of critical or constructivist theories, the advance of de-democratisation, disruption of the rule of law, and anti-liberalism in the V4 and (some of) its member states are manifestations of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The systematically promoted image of the V4 as a problematic subject turned it into a problematic subject. Positions deviating from the “common” voice are marginalised (numerous statements or reservations of Slovak dissidents are ignored or presented as irrelevant) or their strength and importance are overestimated. As demonstrated by Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi (2021), the ideological leadership of anti-liberal “counter-revolutionaries” Orbán and Kaczyński and the opportunists Babiš, Miloš Zeman and Fico have transformed the V4 (cf. Hesová 2021: 130–131) into a populism-driven format. The above-mentioned protagonists prefer intergovernmental concepts emphasizing the autonomy of member states and a high interaction rate (Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi 2021: 14).

Populism-framed regionalism is based on three key institutional preferences: the principle of personalised governance (leader-driven format), political symbolism, and *à la carte* cooperation. A typical feature is keeping a distance from the international liberal order (ILO) and its protagonists (Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi 2021: 3). Within the *à la carte* cooperation, populists focus on selected international topics with the aim of domestic mobilisation and symbolic protection of the nation’s integrity (a typical recent example is the issue of migration) (ibid.: 16).

In relation to this, the Visegrad populist leaders (and not only them) attack liberalism, its institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Commission, as well as some leaders who (allegedly) represent the ILO and their own dominance in this allegedly unfair regime (for instance Germany, represented by the former Chancellor Angela Merkel). Particularly Orbán’s supporters present him as a strong leader, who has to face the allegations of populism and anti-democratic practices from western hypocrites, since he is a true challenger of the EU’s neo-colonial influence (Furedi 2017).

The outlined development of the V4 as a populist regional organisation sees Orbán as its obvious leader. He benefits from the ideological accord with the one-generation-older Kaczyński and from a pragmatic counter-union cooperation with some Czech and Slovak politicians who act as somewhat

passive supporters of these two ideologists. This has naturally resulted in a situation where the entire V4 has become a populist “challenger” of the EU’s institutions, primarily the EC. The leaders of Fidesz and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość view themselves as the leaders of the European “counter-revolution,” as demonstrated during the 2016 meeting in Krynica (Cabada 2021: 297). They have become the most prominent Central European politicians using anti-globalism and nativism which is globally connected to Donald Trump, Jose Bolsonaro and Rodrigo Duterte. This stream is characterised by strong anti-liberalism and an emphasis on moral and symbolic politics going as far as a culture war.

The culture war is fought primarily over social norms, national values and historical symbols (Hesová 2021: 131). According to Hesová, culture wars in Central Europe have three dimensions: a war over the past or collective memory, a war over identity, and a war over morality. The conflict over the past concerns revisionism in relation to both the Communist past (Czechia) and the mid-war period, or in the case of Slovakia and Hungary (as well as Slovenia, Croatia, or the Baltics) World War II. Identity conflict focuses on using the so-called Christian values to define a nation and Europeanism. National populists and nativists lack the necessary liberalism defined as respect for every individual’s rights and freedoms. Moral politics focus on gender, the so-called traditional family, abortions, etc. All these disputes deepen the gap between the two ideological groups and become primarily a tool in the struggle over cultural hegemony (Hesová 2021) and eventually also political hegemony.

It is also apparent that the above-described culture wars extend beyond the V4 and CCE and create a framework for a Europe-wide or even global conflict between two conceptions moving further away from each other. Clear evidence of the overlap and penetration of national-conservative populism from the V4 and CEE into the European level is the cooperation of Orbán with Matteo Salvini and other western right-wing populists before and after the 2019 European Parliament elections. The newest and apparently very ambitious project of uniting the nativist and anti-liberal (formally) Christian tendencies in Europe is the Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe presented in early July 2021. Of the sixteen signatories, Kaczyński signed it first and Orbán fourth. Other parties on the list are the Italian far-right formations League and Brothers of Italy, Marie Le Pen’s National Rally, the Dutch Flemish Interest, and the Austrian Freedom Party.

The Declaration is the essence of the so-called culture counter-revolution and the struggle for “Christian” Europe. The liberal ideological framework of integration and the “European” approach are perceived as a violation of the independent state principle. The signatories claim that the EU “is becoming more and more a tool of radical forces that would like to carry out a cultural, religious transformation and ultimately a nationless construction of Europe, aiming to create ... a European Superstate.” The declaration was supposedly written by Kaczyński; the reasoning and narrative displayed Orbán’s strong influence (mal 2021).

As suggested in the previous analysis (Cabada 2018), one alternative to a national-populist V4 might be a Central-European cooperation within a different format, for instance the Slavkov Triangle, which would be less ideology-driven and more focused on particular public policies. Another alternative might be a withdrawal from the V4, either in the form of a full withdrawal or an empty chair policy. In the last five years, Slovakia has been closest to such a solution and has occasionally used. A transformation in the V4 development would require a weaker ideological and populist profile, i.e., a different government in some of the countries.

In this respect, it is important to mention the alternative format which is most visible from the marketing perspective – the cooperation between the mayors of the V4 capital cities. The alliance of the mayors Gergely Karácsony, Rafał Trzaskowski, Matúš Vallo, and Zdeněk Hřib is presented as a pragmatic alliance defending the interests of the cities in the context of national and European policies. At the same time, it emphasises the fight against illiberal governments (Matišák 2021; Zichová 2020), the “nationalist and populist regimes choking the local democracy” as stated by Karácsony in December 2019 upon the establishment of the Pact of Free Cities. All mayors of the V4 capitals may be perceived as progressivists: particularly Trzaskowski and Karácsony represented or have represented the key challengers of the present governments in their respective countries. At the same time, their programmes and narratives frequently include radical ideas, populism and strong elements of post-modern political marketing (Matišák 2021).

## ***Conclusion***

The aim of this paper was to briefly point out that some of the new EU member states and their representatives legitimately oppose some changes in the EU machinery including political preferences, institutional framework, and the division of competences. A legitimate opposition to European Commission’s one-way road (supported by many EU-15 politicians and the media) that rejects any compromises clearly cannot serve as an excuse for non-compliance with democratic principles (Lovec, Kočí and Šabič 2021: 3). On the other hand, the role of a strong opponent has raised the profile of the V4. A major challenge that could ideally result in cooperation among politicians of the V4 member states, regardless of their ideological profile, is to transform the present rather negative coalition potential in the EU and fulfil the ambition of making the V4 a “second engine of integration.” In other words, the V4 needs to overcome the situation wherein it is primarily a veto-player or a destructor. It should, in contrast, enforce as many of its own proposals as possible by building broad coalitions. In order to accomplish this goal, it needs to seek much more consensus. This is a generally a challenge for the entire EU and “the West.” The political mainstream has been disrupted. Populist politics, that

is both right-wing populists and left-wing progressivists, are moving towards radical or even extreme positions. These ideological rivals jointly oppose the right to a different opinion. They do not view politics as a competition over various conceptions and as an art of finding a consensus, but rather from the Manicheist point of view, i.e., as a fight for hegemony and a zero-sum game. A return to the liberal roots, including respect for s different opinion without banishing it or penalising it, remains a challenge for all democratic forces and not only the V4.

***Recommendations:***

- Political debate at the national, regional and European levels should lead to consensus and should not dismiss different opinions.
- Liberal-conservative policies should emphasise the key roles of negotiation and finding consensus among various perspectives,
- Reconstitute the democratic political mainstream and integrate all the pro-democratic forces.

# Indo-Pacific Cooperation: A Counterweight to Chinese Hegemony

*Michael Romancov*

**Abstract:** The economic and political rise of China inevitably caused reactions of other powers, especially the USA. The rise of China irritates and provokes its neighbours, mainly India. American-Indian relations have been burdened by many problems in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of them persist until today. Face to face Chinese power, their relations start to dynamically change. Their co-created concept of the Indo-Pacific is on the one hand a geopolitical term, which allows politicians, soldiers, scientists and journalists to describe and analyse relations, links and problems in this part of the world. On the other hand, it is a concept that allows us to follow intensive military and security cooperation between the USA, India, Japan, Australia as art of Quad group. Political and security consultations between Quad and member states of ASEAN, which also perceive China as a (growing) problem that could become a basis of a broad international cooperation, which aims at limiting and balancing the Chinese power. For the future development of international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it might become a space (or future institutions) that can play a similar role that NATO played in the Euro-Atlantic space in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** USA, India, China, Japan, Australia, Russia, power, Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean, ASEAN, cooperation, confrontation

## *Introduction*

One of the key deficiencies in the Czech public debate is the long-term absence of a thorough discussion on foreign and security policy. Discussions take pace in academia and among experts including the relevant Ministries, but a systematic and critical public debate is absent. In light of the fundamental changes that the international relations system has undergone, especially the Arab Spring with the related migration crisis and the Russian attack on Ukraine, it is apparent that this is a long-term trend.

The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, which states: “Major changes in Czech foreign policy took place in the first fifteen years after the fall of the Iron Curtain: the Soviet army withdrew from the country, the Warsaw Pact fell apart, Czech-German relations were settled and Czechia joined NATO and the European Union” is quite illustrative. It does not say anything else, as if accession to

the EU and NATO completed everything and forever. The text is only available in Czech so if anyone, who does not speak Czech, might be interested in Czech foreign policy, he/she would be out of luck (Romancov 2019).

When examining the speeches of the top Czech political representatives, especially current President Miloš Zeman and his predecessor, Václav Klaus, one cannot help but think that this is a good thing. The changes, however, in the world (dis)order are dynamically increasing. We should focus on topics, regions and concepts, which have the potential to strongly resonate today and tomorrow. One such concept is the Indo-Pacific. It has become a key aspect of cooperation (potentially also an institutionalised alliance) between the USA, India, Japan, Australia, and the ASEAN countries brought about by the rising and increasingly aggressive economic, political and military activities of Communist China.

### *An Emerging Concept*

The current<sup>2</sup> concept of the Indo-Pacific emerged in the early 2000s. It was initiated by the US think tank Rand Corporation<sup>3</sup> and the Indian think tank ORF,<sup>4</sup> which felt the need to initiate a dialogue between the world's largest democracies, whose relations had been burdened by numerous obstacles. The first meeting took place in New Delhi in December 2003 and discussed issues that had until then divided the USA and India (such as Indian nuclear tests in the late 1990s) but also points of shared interest.

It held the prospect of possible productive cooperation in the future. They explicitly discussed the future of American-Indian relations; the fight against terrorism; the security situation in Pakistan, Afghanistan; political trends in the Persian Gulf (Lal and Rajagopalan 2004). It is fascinating from today's point of view that no one felt the need to include China on the list.

The USA and India initiated a state-level “strategic dialogue” in 2010 and in January 2013 the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, proposed to create an “Indo-Pacific economic area.” The USA (Japan also wanted to provide capital) wished to support development, investment, trade, and transportation among the dynamic economies of South and Southeast Asia. The key country, without which the project did not make sense, was Myanmar, where the military junta rule officially ended in 2011.<sup>5</sup> John Kerry stated then that a strategic dialogue was taking place at a time of a quickly changing

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<sup>2</sup> The first person to use the term Indo-Pacific was in all probability a member of the mid-war German geopolitical school, Karl Haushofer. His concept was different from the current one in terms of both its functional and geographical delimitations.

<sup>3</sup> For more, see [rand.org](http://rand.org).

<sup>4</sup> ORF (Observer Research Foundation) is an independent think tank in New Delhi in India. Established in 1990, its mission was to prepare analyses and documents for the Indian government, political and economic elites within the 1990s reform process. Its ambitions today include reflection on and analysis of global developments and its relevance to Indian foreign, security and economic policies. For more, see [orfonline.org](http://orfonline.org).

<sup>5</sup> It was in power from 1962 and is once again in power since the military coup in February 2021.

strategic environment in the region and that the Indo-Pacific economic corridor was “celebrated as the new Silk Road” (Maini 2016).

The term “Silk Road economic zone” was coined by then the Chinese president and General Secretary of the Communist party (since 2012) Xi Jinping during his state visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013. China, through its highest state and party representative abroad, introduced the idea of the so-called New Silk Road, today better known as the One Belt One Road Initiative<sup>6</sup> (BRI).

Beijing introduced the project as a comprehensive financial and trade strategy, representing China’s answer to the challenges of the 2007-2008 global economic crisis and the world it created.

This followed the intentions of the “peaceful rise.”<sup>7</sup> The ambitious plan counted with investment worth tens of billions of dollars into the transportation and mining infrastructures in tens of countries in Africa, Asia and Europe. The project gradually became an essential building bloc of Chinese foreign policy under the current leadership.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Why the Indo-Pacific?***

The emergence of the concept was greatly affected by the fact that the enormous Indian and Pacific oceans began to be seen as one naval zone not only in economic but also in political and military terms. The current mode of economic globalisation would not be possible without international maritime trade. The economic rise of China was the fastest and more visible in the coastal regions thanks to the increasing volume of disembarked and embarked goods in the Chinese ports. Planned Chinese transportation corridors across the Asian inland, especially through the former Soviet Central Asia, Mongolia, and Russia to Europe are interesting from the perspective of Central Europe but a closer look only complements the activities linked to the seas and oceans.

Both the above-mentioned initiatives, the American (American Japanese) project of the Indo-Pacific economic corridor and the naval competent of the Chinese BRI, primarily focused on the development of naval communications, ports and the subsequent inland infrastructure. It was a matter of time until the originally “innocent” economic initiatives gained clear foreign policy and security dimensions. Countries around the Indian and Pacific oceans caught the interest of both the USA and China. Without any doubt, China was very successful because it gained the support of the local elites for implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects. China was able to provide and supply all

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6 The Chinese initiative changed its name many times. Journalists used the term New Silk Road, which was originally composed of two projects: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. One term later replaced the two projects, One Road One Belt (OROB). After foreign criticism that the word “one” means that China wants to dominate the initiative, a new term emerged, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It should be extended in cooperation with Russia to the Ice Silk Road in the Arctic.

7 “Peaceful Rise” was an official Chinese policy under Hu Jintao (2002 – 2012). Beijing tried to reassure the international community that the growing economic, political and military strength of China would not represent an threat to the existing international order, peace and security.

8 The “Belt and Road Initiative” was incorporated into the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017 (Xinhua 2017).

that was needed and without any political conditions, especially regarding protection of human rights. If needed, it has been able to provide its clients with diplomatic (including UN veto) and military support as well.

China focused its attention primarily on countries with extensive natural resources potential and strategic locations. This applied especially to countries close to the very busy maritime routes connecting the two oceans. These were first, the Straits of Malacca between Malaysia and Indonesia (it is possible to also use the Lombok Strait and Sunda Strait) and potentially also Thailand, where China would like to build a Kra Isthmus Canal.

It was logical and inevitable that the USA had to react to the fast-growing Chinese economy, power and own ideas about the global economic (dis)order not only in international organisations (IMF, World Bank, WTO), but also directly in the region, where it was most visible. The Obama administration turned its attention to Eastern Asia and then to Pacific Asia, where for the first time in modern history the three biggest economies are located (China, Japan, the USA). It resulted in an ambitious project of Trans-Pacific Partnership. Soon after the treaty was signed, the incoming Trump administration rejected it.

### ***An Aggressive China: A Novelty or a Return to a Skilfully Masked Pattern of Behaviour?***

The USA finally began to realise that China was not only an economic competitor but also a political and military competitor by the turn of the 2010s. Facts confirm this but many in Europe still doubt it. Multilateralism and the patient search for compromise that undoubtedly worked in the EU, do not work elsewhere, especially not in Asia.

This is not something new. In the 1990s, at the beginning of the spectacular economic and power rise of China, Europe witnessed the reunification of Germany and ended the division of the continent into two blocs. Although Asia was just as much affected by WW2 and the subsequent Cold War conflicts, nothing along these lines took place there as evidenced by the existence of two Koreas and Chinas.

The transition from Chinese assertiveness to Chinese aggression was most clearly demonstrated in the South China Sea. It is the busiest part of the world oceans,<sup>9</sup> and one of the few places in Asia which has a (relatively) strong regional organisation, ASEAN<sup>10</sup>. Beijing constantly reinforces its military presence in the region, ignores limitations brought by international law (UNCLOS), and unilaterally

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<sup>9</sup> According to UNCTAD data, about 80 % of the world trade and 70% of its value is seaborne. Out of that, around 60 % of maritime trade passes through Asia and around one third of all maritime trade through the South China Sea. Its waters are particularly important for China, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea; the Strait of Malacca connects the South China Sea with the Indian and Pacific Oceans. China is the second largest economy in the world, 60% of its trade is seaborne, so its economic security is closely linked to the South China Sea (China Power n.d.).

<sup>10</sup> ASEAN was founded in 1967 in reaction to the Vietnam War and the related fear of spreading Communism. It was established by five founding members states, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore. It has ten member states today, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia joined later. Vietnam was the first Communist country to join ASEAN in 1995.

and through force promotes its interests and avoids multilateral negotiations with smaller and weaker neighbours, member states of ASEAN. Is the situation in the South China Sea an exception or is it evidence of the developmental trajectory that the current Chinese leadership will follow in the future?

Michael Pillsbury, author of the thought-provoking book *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, was one of those who believed that it was a long-term trend. He argued that the American/Western interpretation of China was wrong, but deeply rooted. Sinologists, missionaries and scholars who have visited and studied China since the seventeenth century were guided to create a biased picture of Chinese history. The Chinese sources emphasised the Confucian, pacifist face of Chinese culture. The bloody Warring States period (ca. 475 BC – 221 BC), won by the Qin dynasty, which gave China its name, was trivialised and often not mentioned at all.

The part of the current Chinese elite that aims to change the current setting of international relations, the so-called nationalists or hawks (*jing-pchaj*), follow this very historical era, its ideological and strategic legacy. So-called hawks and doves can be found in every country around the world. Most foreigners never meet the Chinese hawks due to the nature of the Chinese regime while everyone meets the Chinese doves.

The current Chinese leadership skilfully controls the mood of the Chinese people, who wish for a revived (powerful) China. The Chinese hawks, not all that visible for the West, have directed, persuaded and motivated the Chinese leaders to take revenge for “centuries of humiliation” since the days of Mao. This should take place in 2049, one hundred years after the Communists came to power. China should be strong enough by then to form a world order, from its perspective just and right, which foremostly means that it would not be an American/Western world order.

For this to take place, China must become an economically strong and independent country, which is impossible without foreign assistance. To grow economically, China first cooperated with the Soviet Union but was too impatient and Moscow (some say) unveiled its true motivations. When their mutual relations turned cold and a direct military confrontation took place in 1969, Beijing did not have any other option but to look elsewhere. It negotiated an agreement with the USA (Pillsbury 2019).

### ***Action Leads to Reaction***

Regardless of how much Americans misinterpret China, Beijing’s behaviour raises increasingly intensive and visible negative reactions in many countries around the world. Europe has for the most part been spared most of the negative effects linked to the increasing Chinese self-confidence. Although Montenegro’s failure to repay its loan on a motorway built by the Chinese received a great

deal of attention in the spring of 2021,<sup>11</sup> this is just the tip of an iceberg because there are many equally or more indebted countries around the world that are being pushed into a corner.

Analysts from the CNAS think tank<sup>12</sup> have identified seven major risks related to Chinese projects built across the world under the BRI umbrella. First, the possible erosion of national sovereignty because Beijing gains long-term control over important infrastructure projects that it helps finance and build. Second, insufficient transparency of negotiating and financing of the projects. Third, an unbearable financial burden because many countries that worked with China will fall into the so-called debt trap.<sup>13</sup> Fourth, limited positive effect on the local economy because the projects are built by Chinese companies and by Chinese workers. Fifth, geopolitical hazards because the countries where China builds the infrastructure could find themselves in the centre of a strategic rivalry between Beijing and other powers. Sixth, the negative effects on the environment, and finally, the corruption potential (Kliman et al. 2019).

In addition to Americans and the immediate neighbourhood, other Indo-Pacific countries have begun to react to the Chinese activities. Japan and Australia have also reassessed their attitudes to China. Tokyo was very critical from the beginning and tried to carve out space for its own ideas in a quickly changing environment. Canberra has looked at the growing influence of China in both Australia and the Pacific with growing concern.

The first major power that openly declared its unhappiness with Chinese activities was, however, India. The government in New Delhi was very suspicious of the goals and ambitions of Beijing despite their membership in the BRICS initiative.<sup>14</sup> India did not send its representatives, for example, to the BRI summit organised by Xi Jinping in Beijing two years ago. Crucial for India's decision was the fact that part of one of the most important transportation corridors – the link between Western China to the Indian ocean through Pakistan<sup>15</sup> - runs through a territory that Pakistan unlawfully occupies. It consequently violates the territorial integrity of India.

Furthermore, China and its unilateral initiatives have undermined India's ability to offer its own visions and measures that better correspond with its interests. It does not come as a surprise that for New Delhi the BRI, originally possibly intended as a mosaic of infrastructure investments, has become a tool that Beijing wants to use to build an alternative system of international relations concentrated around China. It seems very unlikely that anything could change India's negative approach (Deo 2019).

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11 For more details, see, e.g., Euractiv (2021).

12 CNAS (Center for a New American Security) was established in Washington, D.C. in 2007. For more information, see <https://www.cnas.org/mission>

13 The “debt-trap diplomacy“ is a term in all probability coined by the Indian scholar Brahma Chellaney, who used it in 2017. At least ten countries have fallen into the Chinese diplomatic trap. For more details, see, e.g., Sethurapan (2020).

14 BRICS stands for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

15 The so-called CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), for more details, see: <http://cpec.gov.pk/>.

## ***Conclusion***

The Indo-Pacific space concentrates crucial current human, economic and military potential. We must accept the importance of this part of the world and the fact that its problems will grow. Regardless of whether the problems are political, military, security, economic, demographic, or environmental, they will resonate around the world. It is highly probable that the current setting of the multipolar international system will persevere. The strong actors will clash when promoting their ambitions and ideas.

All the major and strong actors, the USA, China and India, but also Russia, Japan and many more, will have to react to the activities and ideas of the others. The already existing concepts such as the Chinese BRI or the American-Indian concept of the Indo-Pacific (in other parts of the world, for example, the Russian concept of Eurasia or the EU's Eastern partnership) are examples of such reactions. Local "cold wars" can emerge in places where these powers will clash, such as India and China did on their Himalaya border (Saran 2018).

An institutional basis for coordinating the political - and in the future possibly also military activities - is emerging among states, which view the rise of Chinese power as a problem. During the major Indo-American naval exercise (with Japan present) called "Malabar Coast" in 2007, the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, proposed a strategic dialogue to the USA, India and Australia, which became the basis for the so-called Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue).

Ten years later, during the ASEAN summit in Manila, India, Australia, Japan and the USA agreed to transform Quad into a platform that would allow them to face Chinese military and diplomatic activities in the South China Sea. Certain commentators viewed Quad as the seed of a future Asian NATO and the summit as the beginning of the Cold War in the region (Heydarian 2021).

The joint declaration from the 2021 summit<sup>16</sup> committed the leaders to: "promoting a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. We support the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity." The extended format, Quad Plus, invited New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam to the forum.

One would hope that we will not live to see a direct confrontation between the powers. Having said that, the perspective of several regional Cold Wars and sharp political, value-based, economic and military confrontations between China (possibly supported by Russia) and the USA, India and their allies from Quad, Quad Plus or ASEAN seems very plausible.

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16 For more details, see White House (n.d.).

***Recommendations:***

- The dynamic of a changing world economic, political and military (dis)order in the world has been accelerating.
- Europe and the entire Euro-Atlantic space ceased to be the main geopolitical and geostrategic region. Asia/Indo-Pacific is taking over its position.
- The outline of the future order is only starting to become visible and smaller and weaker players like Czechia have to pay extraordinary attention to the international developments. This includes following events far away from Europe and its borders. Other than the Indo-Pacific, it also concerns the concepts of Eurasia and new activities in the Arctic.
- The future will bring with it harsh competition, which will in some cases turn into political, value-based, economic and also military confrontation between the powers.

# Ukraine Thirty Years after Independence: The Struggle Continues

*Josef Mlejnek*

**Abstract:** Ukraine celebrated 30 years of independence in August 2021. The anniversary comes at a difficult time when the country faces a long conflict with the Russian Federation, difficult economic conditions, and the COVID-19 crisis. The problem of Ukrainian sovereignty is often perceived through the narrow lens of occupied Crimea, fighting against the separatist forces in its eastern regions, and the manoeuvres of the Russian army at the Ukrainian border. This chapter focuses on selected long-term parameters that have a major impact on Ukrainian independence, i.e., the effects of a deindustrialised economy, national identity, and its links to religious (church) life.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, sovereignty, nationalism, identity, airline industry, Antonov, de-industrialisation, Orthodox church, autocephality

## *Introduction*

Many saw the results of the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections as a fundamental breaking point. Volodymyr Zelensky's victory can be attributed to his acting talent and the support of the oligarch Ihor Kolomojsky (at least in the media) but also the great disillusion in the country plagued by the war with Russia, corruption, and the poor economic conditions. The Ukrainian intelligentsia, especially in the Western part of the country, saw the victory of Zelensky and his party Servant of the People (Слуга народу) as a great danger to preserving the country's pro-Western orientation and perceived the "political comedian" as a direct or indirect result of the Russian information war. These concerns have not been widely confirmed but the developments have shown that the permanent problems and parameters defining Ukrainian statehood and politics can hardly change by political will alone.

## *A Deindustrialised Economy*

Ukraine used to be known as Europe's breadbasket. It experienced massive industrialisation in the Soviet era, in many aspects problematic. It was one of the heavy industry centres manufacturing planes and strategic weapons such as intercontinental ballistic missiles. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most of the manufacturing companies faced major problems. Cooperation with Russia was

still important to many of them both in terms of common development and in terms of manufacturing of some goods and their heavy reliance on the Russian market.

Measured by income per capita, Ukraine is one of poorest countries in Europe. The macroeconomic indicators show Ukraine as relatively stable; its GDP has been growing in single digits except when the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. The negative effects of the crisis mostly affected tourism and transportation, its impact on labour migration is hard to predict. Public debt has been growing and the country depends on assistance from international financial institutions (MZV 2021; The World Bank 2021). A long-term pressing problem is the deindustrialisation of the Ukrainian economy; the share of agriculture is growing together with the production of raw resources and semi-finished products and the share of high value-added production has been decreasing (Abysova et al. 2021).

The poor economic situation and the related labour migration have contributed to the negative demographic development. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, its population was almost 52 million, in 2013 (before the occupation of Crimea and the emergence of separatist republics in the East) it fell to 45.6 million. The Ukrainian statistical office estimated the population at 41.5 million this spring (not including Crimea and Sevastopol) (State Statistics Office of Ukraine 2021). The causes are many, but one is the number of Ukrainians who work abroad as *Gastarbeiters*. They find jobs in the West, including Czechia, and send home a share of their usually low earnings; they do not, however, live at home and do not start or expand families there.

The desired cooperation of Ukrainian companies with Western companies is hampered by the oligarchic structure of the Ukrainian economy and the related high level of corruption. The loss of the Russian market and suspended cooperation with Russian companies opens the door to China. The shape and possible consequences of deindustrialisation will be illustrated below using the example of a plane manufacturer and the former flagship of the Ukrainian economy, the state company Antonov, and also the airplane engines manufacturer Motor Sič.

### ***The Broken Wings of Antonov***

Ukraine is proud of having the largest (longest and heaviest) plane in the world, Antonov An-225 Mrija (for more on the construction of giant planes manufactured by the Antonov company, see Gordon and Komissarov 2020). Mrija means “dream” in Ukrainian, and the colossal six-engine air giant is like a dreamlike image. Calling this air giant “Ukrainian” is, however, problematic. It was originally a Soviet plane, developed mainly for the Buran rocket project. Mrija should have carried Buran to the cosmodrome and fulfil other such logistical tasks as part of the Soviet space programme. Buran went to space, however, only once, in 1988. Shortly afterwards, the Soviet space industry collapsed together with the Soviet Union.

There is only one Mrija plane and it is part of Antonov Airlines run by Antonov. The company also owns several smaller, but still large, cargo planes that were also constructed and produced in the Soviet era, Antonov An-124 Ruslan. NATO makes use of Antonov planes by ordering their shipping capacity from Antonov Airlines and a Russian airline company Volga-Dnepr. During the first COVID-19 wave in spring 2020, An-124 planes transported medical supplies from China to Czechia as part of NATO's strategic shipping programme called SALIS (Strategic Air Lift International Solution). Germany used the gigantic An-225 for transporting medical supplies as part of the same programme (Natoaktual 2020).

Antonov is logically trying, however, to produce new airplane types. The company had high hopes for Antonov An-148/158, a two-engine passenger plane for shorter distances. It closely cooperated on its development and production with Russian companies as was then usual for the Ukrainian manufacturing companies as it reflected the long history of shared economic space. The war with Russia, however, restricted economic relations between the two countries. Only few tens of the Antonov 148/158 were produced and the project de facto ended (Russian Aviation Insider 2018).

Antonov also developed cargo planes, mostly the military version of An-178, which might have a chance to succeed on the international markets. They have thus far only completed one prototype and are currently manufacturing several pieces for the Ukrainian military forces and one for the Peruvian air fleet (Mil.in 2020). They also negotiated the delivery of them to China or even produced them there (Kauffman 2017). Also just a prototype, it is the project of a turbo-prop military passenger plane An-132, whose construction builds on the older Antonov types in this category. The negotiations to produce and sell them to Saudi Arabia fell through, however, in 2019 (Planes 2019). Antonov struggles to survive even though the construction and manufacturing of planes and plane engines has a long tradition in Ukraine and many research and education facilities still exist there (for more on the problems of the Ukrainian air industry, see Abysova et al 2021).

China is trying to make use of industrial companies with interesting technologies, but without markets such as Antonov. Other than the above-mentioned negotiations to introduce a Chinese share into the production of An-178, China tried in 2016 to complete and take over the second piece of the giant An-225, which remains unfinished from the Soviet times, and then transfer the production to China. The plan fell through, but Antonov is still looking for an investor that would renew their production (Beresnevicius 2021; Venckunas 2021).

The Chinese effort to take over an important producer of plane engines Motor Sič, hurt by losing the key Russian market, became a nerve centre in the Ukrainian-American relations. Chinese companies would gain access to Ukrainian plane engine production technologies, which the USA saw as a threat to their own national security, placing significant pressure on the Ukrainian government to end this

cooperation with China (Kuzio 2021). Ukraine nationalised the company in 2021 and pushed the Chinese capital out, but the company's economic situation remains unresolved (Planes 2021). The Ukrainian plane industry acutely needs to improve its access to the western markets which cannot happen without replacing Russian technological components with the western ones. The plan to produce Antonov An-74 in Canada, announced in July 2021 (Ukrinform 2021b), represents a step in the right direction.

The COVID-19 pandemic could strengthen, however, China's presence in Ukraine. Ukraine rejected the Russian vaccines and vaccination continues but slowly. Most doses come (at least according to the signed contracts) from the Chinese company Sinovac Biotech (Ukrinform 2021a).

### ***Struggle for National Identity***

A strong and prosperous economy can – directly and indirectly – have a positive effect on the development of culture and national consciousness, these being key factors for state sovereignty.

The formation of Ukrainian statehood could be perceived as an effort to leave not only the Soviet, but also pre-revolutionary Russian, empire behind, because Ukrainian historical, cultural, linguistic and ecclesiastical realities have deep roots in the time of the tsarist empire, which was characterised by, among other things, the suppression of the Ukrainian language and russification. The second Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma had a reputation as a pro-Russian president. He published a book *Ukraine Is Not Russia* in Russian in 2003 and a year later in Ukrainian, where he described the country's main task after gaining independence and even more difficult than independence itself as the need to “create Ukrainians” (Kuchma 2004: 17–28) or so to say create a strong Ukrainian identity across its entire territory, which in the 1990s existed mostly only in the Western regions of Ukraine. When independence was declared, the Ukrainian language was dominant only in the Western part of Ukraine and national identity was quite unclear.

Russians and Ukrainians have long been fighting over the interpretation of Kievan Rus history and its Christianisation. Was Kievan Rus pra-Ukraine? Or rather pra-Russia? The second interpretation is obviously preferred by many current Russians, who base on it their relationship to Ukrainians, whom they perceive as only a local variant of the Russian nation, whose centre moved from Kiev to Moscow due to several historical events such as the Mongolian invasions. They perceive Old Russia and its inhabitants as their direct ancestors, thus, direct ancestors of ethnic Russians and also their state, the Russian Federation, which they believe has a historical legitimate right to (directly or indirectly) control all Orthodox Eastern European Slavs, since Belarusians and Ukrainians are only a “little bit different” Russians. After all, Tsarist Russia called Ukrainians Little Russians and the Ukrainian territory as Little Russia.

The Russian president Vladimir Putin reinstated the notion that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians are one nation during his TV appearance in late June 2021 (Putin 2021a) and his Office's website consequently published "On Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" on (Putin 2021b). He speaks in a similar spirit quite often. He tries to build on the concept of the triune Russian nation composed of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians developed in the nineteenth century or on various pan-Slavic concepts and the concept of Orthodox Slav civilisation. This perspective perceives Ukrainians within a broader definition of the Russian nation, as part of the so-called Russian world (for more on this concept, see, e.g., Laruelle 2015). Putin's aggressive policy, however, leads to the opposite results, strengthening national identity and weakening the perception of Russians and Ukrainians as brother nations.

### ***The Orthodox Church's Autocephaly and National Identity***

Autocephaly (independence) for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church played an important role in the process of forming Ukrainian national identity. All the important Ukrainian Churches derived and still derive their origin from the Christianisation of Kievan Rus by Prince Vladimir I at the end of the tenth century. They use the Byzantine (or so to say Eastern) ceremony and worship the same icons. This group includes the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) responding to the Roman Pope but being de facto Eastern – especially its ceremony – and based on the "Kievan baptismal font." Nationwide, around 10% of Ukrainians belong to this Church and it is the dominant Church in some parts of Western Ukraine. But the Russian Orthodox Church also derives its origins from the Christianisation of Kievan Rus, and therefore, of course, also its (autonomous) branch the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (of the Muscovite patriarchate), which is internally divided between the pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian wing.

Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) was established in December 2018 and received autocephaly from the Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople in January 2019, although the Russian Orthodox Church refused to acknowledge it. It fulfilled the dream of Ukrainian patriots that Ukraine should have an Orthodox Church independent of Moscow. Its predecessor, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, was not recognised as canonical by the Orthodox community. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow patriarchate (UOC-MP) remains, however, the largest Ukrainian church in terms of churches, priests and believers. Public opinion polls showed that when established, about two fifths to one half of Ukrainian Orthodox believers endorsed the new OCU (Socis 2019). The split of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy has persisted, and a large group of the believers label themselves in the polls as "only Orthodox," without an affiliation to any specific Church.

The former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko was a great fan of a unified Ukrainian Church with a seat in Kiev. He defined it as one of his main political goals. OCU faced a great deal of criticism calling it a political project of the Ukrainian president. Poroshenko's insistence on autocephality also stemmed from the ongoing conflict with Russia and was linked to the electoral campaign in the 2019 presidential election (Elsner 2019: 12). The main motto of Poroshenko's campaign was "Army, language, faith," but the nationalist religious argumentation could not hide the negative assessment of his personality as in the eyes of the Ukrainian voters he represented a corrupt oligarchical establishment that could not fulfil many of the 2014 electoral promises (Kuczyński 2019).

Poroshenko's attitude and arguments are quite common among the autocephaly supporters and are well summarised in this passage from the President's speech at the military parade celebrating the anniversary of Ukrainian independence on 24 August 2018: "The body cannot be free if the soul is in captivity. [...] We are determined to cut the last knot that the empire has desperately been trying to use in order to tie us to itself. We are determined to end [...] the persisting dependency of a significant part of our Orthodox community on the Russian Church. The Church that blessed Putin's hybrid war against Ukraine, which day and night prays for Russian power and Russian military." Poroshenko also said that Ukrainian Christianhood has more than a one-thousand-year-old history, its own theological, liturgical and church tradition. As he emphasised, "the question of receiving autocephaly crosses religion's borders. It has same importance as building a strong army, protecting the language, as the struggle to join the European Union and NATO. It represents a strategic milestone of our historical development. It forms an important part of our independence" (Poroshenko 2018).

The current president Volodymyr Zelensky has a rather neutral approach to the Church. The question of Ukrainian autocephaly that especially in the years 2018-2019 shook the entire Orthodox world, among other things due to the historical and canonical ambiguity of this process, has somewhat come to a standstill, but most likely only temporarily. Vladimir Putin in the above-mentioned text places a great emphasis on the Orthodox Church (the Orthodox religion) as a shared feature of Russians and Ukrainians, writing about their "spiritual unity" and interprets the emergence of a Ukrainian autocephalic Church as a politically motivated religious schism, as part of Western efforts to "enforce an identity change" on Ukraine (Putin 2021b).

## ***Conclusion***

The serious difficulties of the Ukrainian economy keep the country at the level of a developing Third World country, which reinforces all its social and political problems. Ukraine therefore needs a working and technologically advanced economy. Most people of a productive age should work in local companies and in qualified, not unskilled labour positions.

As Petro Poroshenko claimed though, “a body cannot be free if the soul is in captivity.” Ukrainian national identity grew stronger during the thirty years of independence, but its completion is still a major task for the future. The ideational or identity part of the Russia-Ukrainian conflict, which also has an essential religious dimension, is often neglected abroad, where the primary focus is on the conflict’s military and international political dimensions.

## ***Recommendations:***

- Strengthen Ukraine’s economic cooperation with Western partners. Support development of Ukrainian businesses that have the potential to produce goods with high added value.
- Help Ukraine fight the COVID-19 pandemic, for example provide unused vaccines or vaccines close to their expiry date.
- Help the development of the Ukrainian culture and language and strengthen the bonds between Ukrainian and Western cultures. For instance, provide financial support for translating the works of foreign writers and academics into the Ukrainian language.
- Support projects which would introduce the Czech and European public to Ukrainian history and culture. One important reason is to better understand, as stated by the title of the above-mentioned book by Leonid Kuchma, the fact that *Ukraine Is Not Russia*.

# Turkey, Europe and the Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>17</sup>

*Lucie Tungul*

**Summary:** The current Turkish foreign policy is affected by economic, political and military instability, polarised domestic political environment, strong nationalism, but also alliances and disputes from the Cold War era and the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Its dissolution left a strong distrust of the West and the East. The rising tension in the Eastern Mediterranean does not only concern access to natural resources but also the very complex questions of international maritime law and regional rivalry. It is not in the EU's interest to isolate Turkey or support its enemies. Keeping the accession negotiations alive gives the EU substantial influence over Turkish domestic developments. The recommended reaction to growing aggression in Turkish foreign policy would be a combination of arms embargo and sanctions on its arms industry with positive incentives engaging Turkey in talks on the future of the region. The Green Deal and EU's green diplomacy could also represent a positive force in motivating Turkey to deescalate.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, France, conflict, gas pipeline, EU

## ***Introduction***

Turkey entered a new geopolitical situation when the Cold War ended. Although its dependency and importance for the West decreased, Turkey expected to strengthen its regional power. Strategic autonomy seemed like a good approach at the time as it promoted a flexible foreign policy, new partnerships and alliances without jeopardising the old ones. It should have guaranteed political, military and economic security (Neset et al. 2021), but proved impossible.

Efforts to apply strategic autonomy under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pushed Turkey into isolation and gave it the reputation of an unreliable partner. The reasons for the failure included overextended efforts to play a leading role in the region, interference with the domestic affairs of neighbouring countries, and since 2015 the alliance between Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) and the extreme-right Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP).

Erdoğan labels his domestic and foreign critics enemies of Turkey, which his voters (and not only them) accept because the Turkish public traditionally believes in conspiracies, in the existence of the so-called deep state (*derin devlet*) and is generally paranoid (Göknar 2019). Since the war of

<sup>17</sup> This chapter was supported by GA CR Grant Europeanization Discourse in the EU Candidate Countries (GA19-15958S).

independence, Turkey has defined Europe as “the other.” The narrative about the world waiting to destroy Turkey has been disseminated by history books and is strongly present in popular culture. This defines the Turkish split identity which has already been known as far back as Ottoman times.

Efforts to join the West have not materialised because the West never truly accepted it as an equal partner. The East has not accepted Turkey either because Arab countries often view Turkey as a competitor and aggressor, relations with Iran are complicated and Turkish efforts to spread its political and cultural influence to Caucasia and Central Asia after the fall of the Soviet Union clashed with Russian interests. The Turkish public across political parties is consequently extremely suspicious of Turkey’s neighbours and its Western allies (See Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Do you think the following countries threaten Turkey?

COUNTRY	YES	NO	I DON'T KNOW
USA	70,0	16,6	13,4
ISRAEL	66,7	17,5	15,8
SYRIA	65,4	19,3	15,3
IRAN	59,0	22,0	19,0
GREECE	58,9	23,0	18,1
ARMENIA	58,6	22,5	18,9
IRAQ	56,5	24,8	18,7
RUSSIA	55,0	26,6	18,4
UK	54,7	26,6	18,7
FRANCE	53,8	27,9	18,3
GERMANY	48,7	32,8	18,5

Source: Aydın, M., et al., quoted in Neset et al. (2021).

The July 2016 failed coup, which Erdoğan blamed on the preacher Fethullah Gülen, reinforced these trends. The fact that Gülen lives in the USA and his extradition requests have not been approved, that Western countries were late to denounce the coup and that the Kurdish forces in Syria received more support than Turkey, elevated the anti-American and anti-Western moods in Turkish society.

Despite the nationalism which the Turkish public demonstrated for instance in high support for the Syrian operations among voters of almost all political parties (they believed that the Syrian conflict posed a threat to Turkish territorial integrity), the deployment of Turkish military forces abroad has lower support and clear party lines can be observed. AKP and MHP voters are more favourable than voters of the secular centre-left Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) and the secular nationalist Good Party (İYİ parti, İYİP)<sup>18</sup> (see Fig. 2).

<sup>18</sup> It was founded when some of the MHP members left the party in 2017 protesting against the MHP’s support for Erdoğan. The shared roots with the MHP are visible in many foreign policy preferences – in April 2021 when the new American President Joe Biden recognised the mass murders of

Figure 2: Support for the Military Presence Abroad: Total and by Party Affiliation

YES	NO	NO OPINION	PARTY	YES	NO	NO IDEA
36,8	35,6	27,6	<b>AKP</b>	51,1	19,8	29,1
			<b>CHP</b>	19,9	54,1	26,0
			<b>MHP</b>	60,4	17,7	21,9
			<b>HDP</b>	6,0	66,0	28,0
			<b>IYIP</b>	28,2	45,9	25,9

Source: Source: Aydin, M. et al., quoted in Neset et al. (2021).

The reorientation of Turkish foreign policy was not only caused by the domestic developments. Certain policy choices of the West also played an important role. The open dislike of Erdoğan since the violent suppression of the 2013 Gezi park protests strengthened Turkish nationalism and indirectly helped him consolidate his political, economic and military power. The US decision to withdraw the Patriot antimissile batteries from Turkey at the peak of the Syrian war in 2015, the lack of interest in Turkish concerns about Kurdish nationalism (some of them justified), the unwillingness to play a more constructive role in handling the migration crisis, and the late response to the 2016 failed coup reduced the trustworthiness of the West in Turkey.

Most Turks do not believe at present that the West would come and help Turkey if under threat. They consider the USA and Europe as countries as unreliable as Russia and other traditional rivals. They consequently support efforts aimed at diversification of foreign policy and cooperation in military and security aspects. This context provides useful background for assessing the tense relations in the Eastern Mediterranean. The conflict does not concern access to hydrocarbons only (Turkey is dependent on imports and the demand is increasing; Erkul 2021), but also the very complex issues of international maritime law and regional rivalry.

### ***Turkey-Greece Relations***

Turkey-Greece relations are built on realpolitik, where concessions and conflict change as the immediate situation required. Greece played a major role in the formation of Turkish national identity,

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Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during WW1 as genocide – the chairman of MHP asked to activate the anti-missile system S-400, which Turkey bought from Russia. The chairwoman of IYIP wanted Erdoğan to limit US access to some Turkish military bases.

as the Turkish “other.” The victory over Greece under the leadership of Kemal Pasha (Ataturk)<sup>19</sup> is a dominant national myth of the modern Turkish nation. Half of the Turkish national holidays relate to Ataturk and “his” victory over Greece. Similarly, Greece based its statehood on the struggle against the Ottoman Empire/Turkey (Heraclides 2011).

The case of the Hagia Sofia museum is an example of how symbolic the relations between these countries are and how deep in history they often go back. This renowned Byzantine temple from the sixth century AD became the very first mosque in Constantinople (Istanbul), when Sultan Mehmet II Fatih conquered the city in 1453. Atatürk turned it into a museum in 1934. A 2020 Turkish court ruling cancelled the museum status, and the temple once again became a mosque. Greece perceived it as a major disturbance of neighbourly relations and labelled it as an offence to Christianity, international law and the international community (Buyuk 2020). The Turkish president argued that it was a domestic affair and that Greece had no right to interfere (Daily Sabah, 2020). The dispute only worsened the already poor mutual relations between the two countries, which reflected the decades long period of disputes over maritime boundaries and the division of Cyprus.

### *Cyprus*

Turkey cannot join the EU unless the Cyprus conflict, lasting since 1974, ends. After the failed Annan plan<sup>20</sup> to reunify the island, only the internationally recognised Greek-majority Cyprus Republic joined the EU. The problem was addressed by adding Protocol No. 10 to the Cyprus Accession Treaty. It stated that Cyprus joined the EU on behalf of the entire island, including the Turkish-majority part occupied by Turkey, but the EU *acquis* would only be applied to the Greek-majority territory until reunification.

As Turkey refused to apply the Additional Protocol of the Ankara Association Agreement to Cyprus, the European Council decided in 2006 to suspend the EU-Turkey negotiations on eight chapters<sup>21</sup> until Turkey recognises Cyprus. Moreover, Cyprus vetoed other chapters due to Turkish demands to resources off the Cypriot coast.

The informal negotiations under the UN auspices in April 2021 did not bring about any progress. A permanent solution of the Cyprus problem, which would be acceptable for everyone involved in the conflict, is a prerequisite for any long-term peace in the Eastern Mediterranean.

19 The Ottoman Empire was forced to sign the Treaty of Sèvres after WW1, which (among other things) deprived Turkey of eastern Thrace and the Dardanelles, the historical “heart” of the Empire. Greece attacked the weak Ottomans in 1919 hoping that Britain and France, which pledged to protect the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, would not interfere and that Greece would gain more territories in Anatolia. The war lasted three years and Greece was forced to withdraw in 1922 and return Eastern Thrace and Dardanelles to Turkey. The new peace treaty was signed in Lausanne in 1923 and the Turkish Republic was founded more or less on the current borders.

20 For more, see, for example, Štěpánek (2012).

21 Free movement of goods, right of establishment and freedom to provide services, financial services, agriculture and rural development, fisheries, transport policy, customs union, external relations.

## ***France***

While France had good relations with the Ottoman Empire, its relations with Turkey have been problematic. France has a large Armenian diaspora and when Turkey and Armenia were engaged in so-called football diplomacy (2008-2009), the diaspora strongly opposed the reconciliation. The French parliament attempted to adopt a law that would make the denial of the Armenian genocide a criminal act (both attempts were overruled by the French Constitutional Court).

France is not popular in Turkey either. It perceives France as a country that historically tried to dismember and destroy the Republic. Erdoğan has used France as an example, (not) worth following multiple times. When criticised for trying to introduce the presidential system, he referred to France while claiming that France violated minority rights and suppressed the religious freedom of Muslims.

It has also been one of the most vocal opponents of Turkish EU membership. It does not view it as beneficial, as in its perception Turkey is a poor, large, Muslim country, which unlike the Ottoman Empire, does not have a strong links to France. It is a key member state of NATO which French president Emanuel Macron called “brain dead” in 2019. Turkish and French foreign policy goals directly collide in the Eastern Mediterranean.

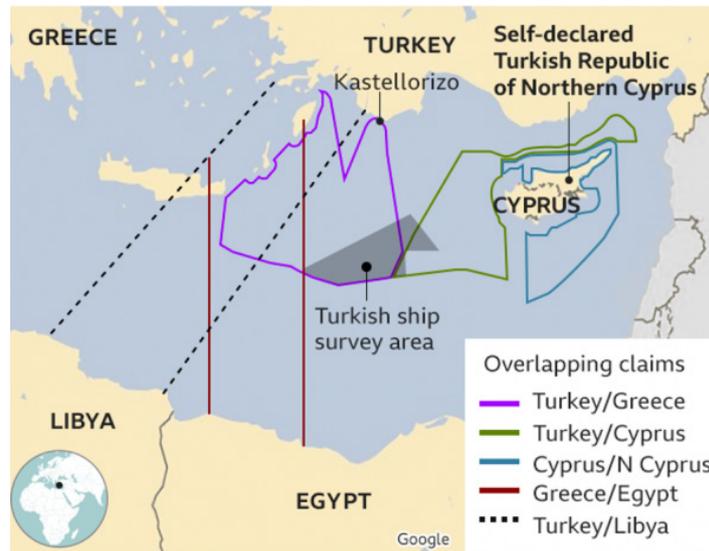
## ***Eastern Mediterranean***

The dispute between Cyprus, Greece and Turkey over the so-called exclusive economic zone began in the early 2000s<sup>22</sup> and became even more acute when natural gas reservoirs were discovered in 2010 (for more detail, see Axt 2021). Turkey began with drilling operations off the coast of occupied Northern Cyprus. It views it as its own continental shelf, which Greece disputes, and argues that all its inhabited islands are surrounded by a 200 mile-wide exclusive economic area as established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which Turkey never signed. The maximalist interpretation of the Treaty would mean that despite having the longest coast in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey would only have exploitation rights in a small area around the Gulf of Antalya (see Map 1). This is unacceptable to Turkey, and Greece is also aware of its unsustainability.

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<sup>22</sup> Its roots go back to 1958 when the First UN Conference on the Law of the Sea took place in Geneva. Greece ratified the Convention on the Continental Shelf but Turkey did not. The Turkish government announced in 1973 that it would start exploratory drilling in the Aegean Sea, but Greece claimed the area belonging to its exclusive maritime zone. The possibility of a diplomatic solution waned when Turkey invaded Cyprus. The dispute over maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean became a permanent factor in the relationship between the two countries. For more information, see Axt (2021).

Map 1: Overlapping Claims in the Eastern Mediterranean



Source: Yiallourides (2020).

As the Turkish foreign policy became more assertive and distrustful of the West, it began to turn away UN level negotiations and relied more on its own resources and military strength. Turkey activated the Blue Homeland doctrine (*mavi vatan*) from 2006, which has wide public support. The doctrine promotes steps that would provide Turkey with navel dominance over Cyprus and Greece and would allow it to control the sea around Turkey.

This approach intensified after the establishment of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF). Originally an informal forum, it included Egypt, Cyprus, Israel and Greece and excluded Turkey. When France and United Arab Emirates (UAE) joined as well, Turkey perceived it as an anti-Turkish coalition. Turkish fears that it is standing alone among enemies strengthened in 2020 when the EMFG became an international organisation and France signed military agreements with the UAE, Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt (Hoffman 2020). Turkish assertiveness is in all probability a desperate attempt to ensure a chair at the negotiating table about the future of the entire region.

Turkish distrust of EMGF increased with the geopolitical rivalry between Turkey, UAE and Egypt. UAE and Egypt hold against Turkey its support for the Muslim Brotherhood (some of its key leaders found safe harbour in Turkey). UAE are displeased with the alliance between Turkey and Qatar, which they perceive as an attack on its interests in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Turkey supported Qatar in the 2017 crisis but their good relations go back to the early 2000s. They include economic and military cooperation. For more, see Altunışık (2021).

The normalisation of UAE's relations with Israel<sup>24</sup> was also a reaction to the Turkish expansionist tendency, as was the visit of French President Macron to Lebanon after the explosion in the Beirut port; France and UAE struck a deal with Lebanon to repair the damaged port and pushed Turkey out of the deal (Hoffman 2020).

Turkey reacted to the growing isolation by striking a deal with Libya. They signed an agreement in 2019 that attempted to legitimise the Turkish claims to exploratory activities offshore Cyprus. In early 2020, Turkey supported the internationally recognised government of Prime Minister Fayez Mustafa al-Sarraj by sending him military assistance against General Haftar, supported by France and UAE (iRozhlas 2020).

The ambitions of these regional bodies have risen as the US presence in the region declined. The new administration of Joe Biden was awaited with anticipation by those involved in the hope that the USA would share the burden of conflict resolution with the EU, increase pressure on Turkey and bring Greece and Turkey, both NATO member states, back to the negotiating table.<sup>25</sup>

The importance of the USA increased with the extended inability of the EU to provide a constructive and united approach to the problem. The EU is internally divided. The alliance between Cyprus, Greece and France is supported by some other EU member states including Czechia, while Italy, Malta and Spain are more careful – they consider intra-EU solidarity important but have their own economic and security concerns in the region.<sup>26</sup>

One of the fundamental motifs for their careful approach to Turkey is the migration deal and the fear of further damage to the already struggling economic situation in the country reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Peel 2020). They want a less conflictual attitude to Turkey and seek diplomatic solutions. Germany adopted a similar stance just like most of the countries of former Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries (Adar and Toygur 2020).

The EU tardiness and indecisiveness have undermined EU credibility in the region. Cyprus refused to support EU sanctions against Belarus in September 2020 and conditioned its vote by harsh sanctions against Turkey. Instead, the EU condemned the Turkish activities, promised to extend the sanction list by people linked to the explorative drilling and postponed further steps until the March 2021 summit. Turkey in the meantime agreed to renew its negotiations with Greece that had begun in 2002 but have been interrupted since 2016.<sup>27</sup> They should address all the contentious questions from the continental shelf and rights to carbohydrogen resources, to airspace and the status of the islands in the Aegean

<sup>24</sup> For more information, see České noviny (2020).

<sup>25</sup> For more information on the US role in the region, see, for example, Alterman 2018.

<sup>26</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the diverging views between member states, see, for example, Aydintasbas et al. (2020); Axt (2021).

<sup>27</sup> Previous efforts to renew the talks were prevented by the different attitudes of the two governments to the content of the talks. Turkey wanted to open all questions but Greece only the borders of the exclusive economic area and the continental shelf (Gumrukcu and Maltezou 021).

Sea. The EU member states agreed in March 2021 to strengthen business cooperation with Turkey if it refrains from “new provocations” (České noviny 2021). By agreeing to renew the talks, Turkey demonstrated good will and prevented punishment for its behaviour in the past few years (Axt 2021).

It is not in the EU’s interest to turn Turkey into an enemy, especially in times when support for Erdoğan is shaky and the cooperation between AKP and MHP has many weak spots – keeping the accession negotiations open provides the EU with significant impact on Turkish domestic development. Supporting undemocratic regimes or even selling them weapons and military equipment to weaken Turkey is a very dangerous strategy that should be always very carefully reflected on.

Punishment for the aggressive provocations would ideally entail a military embargo on Turkey and sanctions on the Turkish arms industry (Adar and Toygur 2020). An incentive, however, would be the inclusion of Turkey in EMGF and in the green transition. Cooperation between the EU and Turkey on meeting the Green deal goals could help build trust between both and help the Turkish economy (Aydintasbas and Dennison 2021). Its implementation reduces the economic viability of building the EastMed pipeline and helps deescalate the hydrocarbons dispute.

Even if the cost of drilling and transportation to Europe was considered efficient, it cannot materialise without the agreement of all the countries concerned. The investors would not want to financially engage in such an expensive project without the guaranteed political stability of the deal. Thus, the first meeting of the Egyptian and Turkish presidents in May 2021 was particularly important as it was the first since 2013. Egypt is the biggest trade partner of Turkey in Africa and the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean was a thoroughly discussed topic of the meeting. Together with the renewed negotiations with Greece, it provides hope for normalising a situation that should be supported and promoted on all accounts.

## ***Conclusion***

The aggressive foreign policy decisions in a very nationalist state help unite the public opinion in the short-term but worsen the economic situation in a country, which is already damaged by the effects of the 2016 failed coup, the dispute with the USA and the Syrian crisis. It creates a vicious circle, where the bad economic situation causes lower electoral support, which the regime tries to fix by even more aggressive foreign policy populism.

The disputes with Greece and the military activity in Libya, Syria and Iraq divert the voters' attention. Nationalism and Islamic chauvinism are far less costly than military operations, which increase pressure on the already tight Turkish budget. The regime uses the fragile economic situation to argue that a destabilised government would decrease security and would lead to economic collapse, which would open the gates to the enemies of Turkey.

Every new crisis that Turkey initiated or decided to engage in increased Turkey's vulnerability towards its traditional enemy, Russia, and isolated the country, which minimised the chances of strategically utilising its unique geographical, historic and political position.

Just as Erdoğan was not the democrat that the West wished him to be 15 years ago, he is also not a fanatical Islamist. He is mostly a pragmatist. Turkey is ready to change its positions if pragmatic reasons support such a step. This has been apparent in the past in the relations with for example Israel, Germany, Greece or the USA.

Escalating the tension will not stop radicalisation. Negotiations are the only realistic solution for all the stakeholders. The EU has ways to demilitarise and deescalate the conflict. One of the most important steps is to rebuild trust, which can take place through regular cooperation in the areas of shared interests such as fighting climate change.

### ***Recommendations:***

- The EU should defend the interests of its member states, Cyprus and Greece, but should avoid further escalation of the dispute that would endanger the migration deal.
- Turkey should be included among the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, should be taken as an equal partner, and should be allowed to participate in all negotiations. This includes EU pressure to make Turkey a member of EMGF.
- EU member states should avoid making deals with undemocratic regimes such as Syria, UAE, and Egypt, thinking this would increase pressure on Turkey. Such steps only worsen the security situation in the region and weaken both the EU and NATO.
- Regarding the so-called green transformation, the EU should use the transition to renewable resources to deescalate the conflict over natural gas and seek joint solutions for mitigating the climate change effects in the region. International cooperation is a must if the green transition is to work.

# A Little Political Science Reflection on the Post-Reform Parliamentary Electoral System

*Jakub Charvát*

**Abstract:** Since electoral systems are seen as the most specific manipulative instrument of politics, they are at the forefront of politicians' interests. Although electoral systems make it possible to eliminate some of the imperfections and injustices of a given political system, by changing their settings, political protagonists often try to improve their position in the political system. Recently, parliamentary electoral legislation has been changed in Czechia. This chapter involves a brief reflection on this electoral system change, which was established by the Constitutional Court's ruling of February 2021. First, the shortcomings of the 2002 electoral system will be identified. A discussion of current changes in electoral legislation and a brief reflection on their political consequences follows.

**Keywords:** electoral laws; politics of electoral reform; Constitutional Court; Czechia

## *Introduction*

Electoral systems represent “the most specific manipulative instrument of politics” (Sartori 1968: 273) and are therefore the most suitable and effective tool for changing the character of democracy. Changing electoral rules can help fix imperfections and injustices of the political system because “electoral systems are the cogs that keeps the wheels of democracy properly functioning” (Farrell 2001: 2). The reverse side of the coin is that when given the opportunity, political protagonists often try to change the electoral systems to improve their power positions (Riker 1986).

The electoral law for the Czech Chamber of Deputies has recently changed. This chapter provides a political scientist's perspective on the electoral reform forced by the Constitutional Court ruling of February 2021. It first identifies the shortcomings of the 2002 electoral system, provides a short inquiry into the constitutional complaint and the ruling of February 2021. It is also worth comparing the circumstances between the years 2001 and 2021. The 2002 electoral reform was also preceded by a constitutional complaint and Constitutional Court ruling, which abolished certain provisions of the electoral law (see Judgment 64/2001 Coll.). The new electoral system was debated in a hurry and the adopted text was a forced compromise, which affected the outcome (although the legislators had twice as much time for adopting it in 2001 and 2002 than in 2021). Finally, I attempt to provide

critical insight into the current electoral changes focusing on the circumstances and the actual electoral reform process in 2021 and its possible political effects.

### ***The 2002 Electoral System and Its Shortcomings***

The circumstances of the 2002 electoral reform have been well mapped by research (see e.g., Novák, Lebeda, et al. 2004; Charvát 2013) and do not require further attention here. The amendment introduced fourteen electoral districts within the borders of the regional territorial units (*kraje*) and the d'Hondt method for calculating seat allocation based on the number of votes received. In contrast to the 1990s, legal threshold for electoral coalitions was changed (see Table 1) and it was enabled voters to vote abroad.

Table 1 Changes in Electoral Legislation according to the 2002 Electoral Reform

	<b>Act No. 247/1995 Coll.</b>		<b>Act No. 37/2002 Coll.</b>
Electoral formula	list proportional representation	≈	list proportional representation
Total number of seats	200	≈	200
Number of electoral districts	8	↗	14
District magnitude	M = 14 to 41 M <sub>av</sub> = 25	↘	M = 5 to 26 M <sub>av</sub> = 14,29
Number and character of tier districting	2 tiers I. regional lists (8 districts) II. national list, remaining seats	↘	single tier (14 regional districts)
Mathematical formula	I. tier: Hagenbach-Bischoff quota II. tier: Hagenbach-Bischoff quota (combined with the largest remainder method)	⇒	d'Hondt divisor
Legal threshold	5 % single party, 7 % coalition of two parties, 9 % coalition of three parties, 11 % coalition of four and more parties	↗	5 % single party, 10 % coalition of two parties, 15 % coalition of three parties, 20 % coalition of four and more parties
Political consequences of the electoral system	quite proportional low level of personalisation	↘ ↗	intermediate level of disproportionality intermediate level of personalisation

Two fundamental views of political representation in a democracy, majoritarian and proportional (Lijphart 1999; Powell 2000) can be distinguished. In other words, the majoritarian perspective has a preference for an efficient government, *i.e.*, favours larger parties, to proportional representation of political parties in the parliament. The proportional perspective has a preference for the most representative composition of parliament possible, *i.e.*, the one, which best reflects societal moods. The logic behind designing electoral systems corresponds with one of these two approaches. It is difficult to say which one is better. It depends on the political culture and structure of the given society (cf. Eckstein 1966), from which we can deduce how best to accommodate its vision of democracy and establish an electoral system suitable for the given society.

The majoritarian perspective was promoted by the Opposition Agreement parties (ČSSD and ODS) in 2000 (for more, see Klíma 2000; Lebeda 2004a; Charvát 2013), but the reform's majority-prone features were abolished by the Constitutional Court (Judgment No. 64/2001 Coll.) due to its failure to meet the constitutional requirement that the election to the Chamber of Deputies had to be based on proportional representation (see Art. 18, par. 1 Constitution of the Czech Republic). This kind of theoretical background was absent when drafting the 2002 electoral reform, which predetermined most of its shortcomings. Instead of a future vision and an elaborated setting of individual parameters, the new electoral system was an imposed compromise that attempted to find a compromise between quite diverging views of the relevant political parties. The new electoral system consequently provided an unbalanced combination of majoritarian and proportional elements without a clear preference for either type of democracy.

Compared with the 1990s rules, the 2002 electoral reform strengthened the seat gains of the large parties as demonstrated especially in their distance from the gains of other parties (as could be seen in 2006 and 2017) without significantly increasing the probability of establishing majority governments. The over-representation of large parties motivated the 2017 constitutional complaint, which among other things stated that ANO 2011 needed 19,232 votes to obtain one seat while small parliamentary parties needed twice and more as many votes (TOP 09 almost 38,402 votes, STAN 43,693 votes). The 2006 elections manifested a similar disproportion, where ODS and ČSSD needed 23,363 votes for one seat, while KDU-ČSL needed 29,747 votes and the Green party more than 56 thousand votes.<sup>28</sup> The 2006 elections revealed the clear shortcoming of the current electoral system for forming majority governments whereby ODS, KDU-ČSL and Greens, which declared their ambition to form a coalition government, received more than 200 thousand votes more than ČSSD and KSČM, but

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<sup>28</sup> Green Party fell victim to an almost equally distributed electoral support from 5.5% to 7% (falling below 5% in only the Moravian-Silesian and Vysočina regions); it only had higher support in the Liberec region, where it received 9.58% of the votes (volby.cz), which still was not enough to obtain a seat in the Chamber of Deputies because the electoral threshold there, *i.e.*, the limit needed to obtain a mandate (see footnote 3), reached 9.7% in 2006 (see Table 2).

had an equal number of seats (100). The advantage for large parties worked against the logic of the established coalition patterns and did not contribute to the easier formation of majority governments (for more see, Charvát 2013).

The main (institutional) problem of the 2002 electoral law was predominantly the different district magnitudes,<sup>29</sup> which led to the different effects of the electoral system across the districts. While seats were distributed almost proportionally in the large electoral districts (South Moravian, Prague, Moravian-Silesian, and Central Bohemian regions), the disproportionality of seat distribution disadvantaging smaller parties increased with the decreasing district magnitude. The effect of the d'Hondt method further reinforced this tendency in the small regions; electoral support of around 6% of votes proved to be critical. Table 2 demonstrates that the main cause of disproportionate seat distribution across the parties was not so much the mathematical formula as the district magnitude resulting in the discrepancy in electoral threshold values.<sup>30</sup>

Table 2 Electoral threshold values in individual regions (in %)

<b>(Electoral) Region</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2002</b>
<b>Central Bohemian</b>	3,17	3,07	3,41	3,84	3,73
<b>Prague</b>	3,24	3,00	3,10	3,45	3,38
<b>South Moravian</b>	3,43	3,42	3,08	3,72	3,49
<b>Moravian-Silesian</b>	3,54	3,49	3,33	3,69	3,61
<b>Ústí and Labem</b>	5,37	5,19	4,99	5,91	5,32
<b>South Bohemian</b>	5,26	6,39	5,34	6,11	6,13
<b>Zlín</b>	5,75	6,10	5,20	6,51	6,49
<b>Pilsen</b>	6,05	5,64	6,26	7,02	6,54
<b>Olomouc</b>	6,28	5,68	5,81	7,09	6,78
<b>Hradec Králové</b>	5,78	6,76	6,42	6,70	6,87
<b>Vysočina</b>	7,16	5,75	6,71	7,33	6,57
<b>Pardubice</b>	6,16	6,85	6,47	8,24	7,63
<b>Liberec</b>	7,46	7,62	9,70	9,70	9,02
<b>Karlovy Vary</b>	8,86	10,66	11,65	11,96	12,35

Source: author's own calculations using data from volby.cz.

<sup>29</sup> The district magnitude is defined by the total number of seats distributed in the given electoral district.

<sup>30</sup> The electoral threshold is a value, which is not given; it depends on several variables, especially the size of the electoral district, the method of allocating seats based on the number of votes received, or the number and relative size of parties in the count. Theoretically, the limit of the electoral threshold ( $T'$ ) is defined as  $T'=75\%/(M+1)$ , where  $M$  is the district magnitude. This value is only approximate, the actual value of the threshold can be higher or lower, depending on the values of the other variables.

Less attention is paid to preferential voting, another inequality, which the uneven size of the electoral districts brings into the electoral competition. The number of candidates on the list is based on the district magnitude (from fourteen candidates in Karlovy Vary region to thirty-six candidates in Prague). All the voters have four preferential votes and the potential upward move on the list requires in all cases an identical 5% of the preferential votes in the region. The higher number of candidates on the list consequently reduces the potential importance of each preferential vote for the final composition of the Chamber of Deputies (for more, see Lebeda 2004b; Charvát 2013).

The legal threshold for electoral coalitions introduced in 2000 also caused concern as it prevented effective establishment of electoral alliances. The process of its introduction resulted in a number of controversies because it was not included in the original draft version of the amendment and appeared during the discussions as a (successful) amendment. It appears that the main motivation for this change was the increasing electoral support for Four-Coalition (*Čtyřkoalice*), an alliance of four parties (incl. KDU-ČSL) challenging the then two major parties ČSSD and ODS.<sup>31</sup> In January 2001, the Constitutional Court abolished the other parameters of the 2000 electoral reform (especially the 35 electoral districts and the modified d'Hondt divisor) but the new legal threshold for coalitions remained in place despite the Court noted that it clearly was an intentional manoeuvre, which, however, did not contradict the Constitution (Judgment No. 64/2001 Coll.).

Another inequality the legal threshold for coalitions brought to electoral competition was the different perspective on electoral alliances in terms of financing electoral campaigns and entering the vote count. While campaign cost regulation rules had identical financial limits for coalitions and individual parties, the demands on coalitions as opposed to individual parties were higher with the legal threshold. It created a clear and difficult to defend disproportion to the disadvantage of electoral coalitions.

### ***Constitutional Court Ruling of February 2021***

A group of senators identified some of the shortcomings mentioned above in their complaint to the Constitutional Court in 2017. It mainly mentioned the d'Hondt method and its application in the fourteen districts of varying magnitudes and the legal threshold for electoral coalitions. The complaint claimed that the equal voting right principle and the proportional representation principle had been violated. As evidence, the complainants argued with the quite different number of votes the parties needed to obtain one seat (see above). The complaint also mentioned the fortuity and unpredictability of the system in smaller districts, where a small group of voters determined the result of the election, with it even being mathematically impossible for small parties to obtain a seat in the smallest districts

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<sup>31</sup> Four-Coalition was an alliance of four parties (incl. KDU-ČSL) challenging the then two major parties ČSSD and ODS.

(Karlovy Vary and Liberec regions). The complaints questioned the foundation of the legal threshold for electoral coalitions because it did not meet the anticipated integrative role and instead resulted in the break-up of the intended electoral alliances. The complaint also highlighted the non-standard way of introducing the legal threshold (see Judgment no. 49/2021 Coll.: 5an.).

After a long wait, the Constitutional Court published the ruling on 3 February 2021. It partially agreed with the plaintiffs and abolished certain parameters of the electoral law for violating the equality of votes, the right to vote and equal opportunities for parties and coalitions standing in elections. The Court related the constitutional demand of proportional representation in the Chamber of Deputies to the final distribution of seats on the national level, not the procedure *per se*. It did not view the distribution of electoral districts as in itself unconstitutional. It found, however, the use of the d'Hondt method in the specific circumstances of the fourteen districts of varying magnitudes problematic and abolished its use.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the Court defended the existence of the legal threshold for coalitions as conforming with the Constitution but agreed with the plaintiffs that the legal threshold was excessive and inconsistent because it did not meet its purpose and could skew the legitimacy of the election result. As a result, the Constitutional Court abolished the legal threshold for electoral coalitions (Judgment No. 49/2001 Coll.).

This “late” Constitutional Court ruling, announced three years after the complaint, was filed, but “only” eight months before the election date when campaign preparations were already on their way, putting the political representation in an uncomfortable situation.<sup>33</sup> Although the Court abolished only partial parameters of the electoral law, these were central provisions. In other words, the elections could take place with the remaining torso of the electoral law, but it would be impossible to determine the result of the election. The missing provisions had to be quickly added despite the fact that their character predicted a quite difficult journey leading to a necessary political compromise.

### ***New Provisions of the Electoral Law***

The consequent political debates confirmed the concerns that a compromise on the new electoral rules would be difficult to make. The 2021 reform therefore “only” added the missing provisions of the electoral law. Although it attempted to address the Constitutional Court’s ruling, it did not significantly reflect the (above identified) actual shortcomings and source of problems in the law governing the elections to the Chamber of Deputies.

The conversion of votes into seats takes place in two counts. The first count distributes seats on the level of the fourteen electoral districts using the scarcely applied Imperiali quota (used in Italy in

<sup>32</sup> The ruling in its conclusion permits the reintroduction of the d'Hondt method if the electoral districts were large enough to allow a proportional distribution of seats between parties (Judgment No. 49/2021 Coll.: 58).

<sup>33</sup> Among other reasons, the electoral law amendment had to be approved by both chambers of the Czech Parliament.

the second half of the twentieth century and currently used in Ecuador) and if some seats remain unallocated, the law introduced a national tier, where all unallocated seats and undistributed votes are transferred from the regional level. The seats in the second (national) tier are first allocated among the party lists using the Hagenbach-Bischoff quota combined with the method of the highest residuals for the remaining mandates. They are then allocated, for the given party, into the individual electoral districts based on the order created by the highest remainders in the first tier. A legal threshold was also introduced for coalitions, when a single party had to receive 5% of the votes to pass the threshold. Two parties need to pass an 8% and three and more parties 11% threshold (for more see Table 3).

Table 3 Changes in the 2021 Electoral Law

	<b>Act No. 37/2002 Coll.</b>		<b>Act No. 189/2021 Coll.</b>
Electoral formula	proportional representation	≈	proportional representation
Total number of seats	200	≈	200
Number of electoral districts	14	≈	14
District magnitude	M = 5 to 26 $M_{av} = 14,29$	≈	M = 5 to 26 (?) $M_{av} = 14,29$
Number and character of tier districting	single tier (14 regional districts)	↗	2 tiers I. regional lists (14 districts) II. national list, remaining seats
Mathematical formula	d'Hondt divisor	⇒	I. tier: Imperiali quota II. tier: Hagenbach-Bischoff quota (combined with the largest remainder method)
Legal threshold	5 % single party, 10 % coalition of two parties, 15 % coalition of three parties, 20 % coalition of four and more parties	↘	5 % single party, 8 % coalition of two parties, 11 % coalition of three and more parties
Political consequences of the electoral system	intermediate level of disproportionality intermediate level of personalisation	↗≈	rather proportionate intermediate level of personalisation

### ***The Political Consequences of the Electoral Reform***

Changing the mathematical formula brought about a partial solution to the inequality among the individual political parties (measured by the average number of votes per one seat). Compared with other electoral quota methods, the Imperiali quota lowers the value of the electoral quota potentially lowering the number of seats in the second tier, and thus the space for possible compensation of inequalities from the first tier. In addition, the Imperiali quota can decrease the electoral quota to such an extent in the smaller electoral districts that a higher number of seats is distributed than the district actually has. In this case, the excessive seats are taken away from the parties based on the lowest remainders after dividing by this quota. It does not necessarily represent a problem for seat distribution, but it is this method's deficiency when converting votes into seats. This will not occur frequently, but it can take place. If this method had been used in 2006, for example, the Imperiali quota would distribute 9 instead of 8 seats in the Liberec region and the Green Party would have to give up one of its seats there (author's own calculations based on data from volby.cz).

The above-mentioned demonstrates that the Imperiali quota method favours large parties more than the other electoral quotas. Its use in the fourteen districts of varying magnitudes actually restricts the elimination of the problematic inequalities. The main source of the inequality in the inter-party distribution of seats was not removed by this electoral reform. This can be documented through modelling the "critical" 2006 and 2017 elections using the 2021 reform. In the first case, the average number of votes per seat oscillates between 23,364 and 42,061 votes, and in the last election between 21,741 to 29,868 votes (see Table 4). The clear disproportionality can be also seen when modelling the 2013 elections based on the 2021 electoral system; KSČM would need on average 20,585 votes per one seat while ODS would need on average one quarter of votes more (author's own calculations based on data from volby.cz).

Table 4 Average number of votes per seat (reality vs. the 2021 electoral reform model)

	the 2006 parliamentary election		Parliamentary election 2017		
	reality	model	reality	model	
ODS	23 364	23 364	ANO 2011	19 232	21 741
ČSSD	23 363	23 683	ODS	22 918	23 873
KSČM	26 359	26 359	ČPS	24 836	22 766
KDU-ČSL	29 747	32 226	SPD	24 481	23 416
SZ	56 081	42 061	KSČM	26 207	24 569
			ČSSD	24 556	24 556
			KDU-ČSL	29 364	26 695
			TOP 09	38 402	29 868
			STAN	43 693	29 129

Source: author's own calculations based on data from volby.cz.

Finally, the combination of the Imperiali quota and the fourteen regions of varying magnitudes can violate the monotony of the electoral results, which can be seen if one applies the new electoral rules to the 2013 election results. While Úsvit would receive fourteen seats for its 6.89% votes, KDU-ČSL would receive fifteen seats for its 6.78% votes, the same as ODS with 7.73% votes (author's own calculations based on data from volby.cz).

The amendment's mechanism of second tier seat distribution into electoral districts introduced a spatial inequality caused by the disproportional representation of the individual regions. The current mechanism guaranteed that the electoral districts were proportionally represented in the Chamber of Deputies. Finally, the reintroduction of legal thresholds for electoral coalitions renewed the inequality of electoral competition due to an uneven approach to coalitions during campaigning and during vote count. Lowering their thresholds increased, however, the possibility of more parties forming joint ballot lists.

## ***Conclusion***

The recently reformed electoral system to the Chamber of Deputies has numerous shortcomings, at least following the arguments of the Constitutional Court 2021 ruling. They should be addressed to avoid yet another constitutional complaint. The deficiencies persisted despite many political scientists and constitutional lawyers quickly offered advice on how to modify the voting system to meet the requirements of the Constitutional Court and bring about the desired value added. During the debate in the Senate in February 2021, for example, two relevant proposals were presented: the second national

compensatory tier and the system of double proportionality – inter-party seat allocation on the national level and intra-party seat allocation on the regional level (for more, see Senát 2021). Both proposals counted on the preservation of fourteen electoral districts as they were a logical component given the needed natural development of political careers and the existing internal party organisational structures. Both proposals also included efficient tools to eliminate disproportionality in the distribution of seats among parties. Despite minor shortcomings, a clear political preference for one of these proposals would provide enough time-frame to “fine tune” the partial limitations and remove the small problems.

The voting law for the Chamber of Deputies will be needing of attention over the following months. It would be appropriate to think through and define what we expect from the electoral system and its results. Based on that and with the assistance of political scientists, constitutional lawyers, but also sociologists and electoral geographers a corresponding electoral reform proposal should be prepared and approved without significant political interference based on momentous societal moods. The amendment should be the result of expert committee work based on a negotiated political assignment rather than a mere result of deputies’ creative work.

### ***Recommendations:***

- Draft a comprehensive electoral law reform that would remove the current shortcomings.
- Any institutional reform should be well thought through and prepared. It should be ideally preceded by expert debates considering the various scenarios and its outcomes should be thoughtfully reflected upon in the final draft.
- The reform debates should not be limited to the proportionality of the inter-party seat distribution only but should also consider the territorial aspect of vote distribution.
- Keep the fourteen electoral districts, which reflect the desired development of a political career and the internal organisation of the relevant parties but complement them with effective tools to eliminate disproportionality in the intra-party distribution of seats on the national level.
- If single national electoral district should be introduced, it should be an important but “only“ the partial segment of a multi-tier process of inter-party seat distribution (e.g., for compensatory seats or as part of double-proportionality system).
- Consider possible reform of the preferential voting mechanism across electoral districts and unify the approach to electoral coalitions.

# Social Networks and Populism

*Denisa Charvátová*

**Summary:** Populism has become a phenomenon across European democracies, which thus face several challenges and problems. Many people are dissatisfied because they live in insecurity, or even in fear regarding their living standard in the years to come. The established parties are unable to respond effectively, and these citizens are forced to look for political alternatives elsewhere. Populist parties, on the other hand, can work effectively with fear, thanks to which populism has been on the rise both across Europe and in the USA. Although populism generally appears in the communication of parties at both ends of the one-dimensional right-left political spectrum, in most cases it is associated with extreme right-wing parties. A key element in the success of populist parties is their communication strategy. Social networks have become an ideal platform for populist political communication.

**Keywords:** populism, social networks, populist political communication

## *Introduction*

Populism has become a significant trend in Western democracies (Taggart 2004; Mudde 2004; Moffitt 2016) and is currently a phenomenon across all European democracies and in the USA. Populism is generally present in the communication of political actors on both sides of the right-left political spectrum and among opposition parties but is usually linked to extreme-right political parties (Aalberg and de Vreese 2017: 6; Kubát 2016: 18; Lipiński and Stępińska 2019: 78), especially in Western democracies. Newer parties, characterised by an anti-establishment policy, are more inclined to use populist communication (Ernst et al. 2019: 2).

The key to populist parties' success is their communication strategy (Aalberg and de Vreese 2017: 3), where the digital media play a significant role (Postill 2018: 755, Moffitt 2018; Lipiński and Stępińska 2019: 78), giving (but not) only populist politicians a closer connection to the people and a cheaper tool of political communication. It includes the “new” generation of citizens (Aalberg and de Vreese 2017: 6) that “grew up” with social media. The emergence and dissemination of social networks opened a way to address a wider circle of people and potential voters for the political actors without following the logic of the so-called old media. One can argue that social networks transformed politics, including populism (Moffitt 2018).

## ***Social Networks and Political Communication***

Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms enable politicians to spread their messages without external interventions and mediation (Bracciale and Martella 2017: 3; Ernst et al. 2019: 5), despite the fact that social networks are actually mediators in their essence. Their mediating role, however, is better disguised (Moffitt 2018). They have significantly contributed to recreating the current dominant patterns of political communication and on top of that underscored the existing social gaps. Populist parties skilfully use social moods and work with unsatisfied voters troubled by insecurities or fears as to what the future will bring due to their deteriorating economic situation (Postill 2018: 755). These parties can effectively work with fear and become for many voters an alternative to the established parties, which have not sufficiently reacted to these impulses or overlooked them (Charvátová, Charvát and Niklesová 2021).

With the considerate contribution of the social media, populism began to rise globally around the mid-2010s (Moffitt 2018), but in Czechia the change in voting behaviour became apparent in the 2010 and 2013 parliamentary elections, which are often termed as a political earthquake (see Maškarinec and Bláha 2014; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015). Political parties began to use anti-establishment reform rhetoric (Hanley and Sikk 2016), which some authors believe was based on the concept of grievance mobilisation (see, e.g., Haughton, Novotná and Deegan-Krause 2011; Charvát and Maškarinec 2019). This is in the Czech context, populist work with immigration mobilisation (it became one of the central motifs of the 2014 and 2019 European Parliament elections in Czechia), and ethnic grievance mobilisation linked to the maladjusted, by extension, Roma population, to which the Czech population often holds negative attitudes. As the established parties ignored these problems, dissatisfied voters have begun to look for solutions with the new parties, many of which worked with anti-immigration and ethnic rhetoric (Charvát and Maškarinec 2019). Last but not least, grievance mobilisation based on aversion to political elites and corruption also helped the rise of populist parties, which put clean, uncorrupted people above rotten political elites.

It is irrefutable that populist political communication is strongly affected by the character of social networks that use a different logic than traditional media (Blassnig et al. 2020; Klinger and Svensson 2015). Social media play a crucial role in the way political actors operate in the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017; Postill 2018).<sup>34</sup> Research has confirmed that social networks and microblogging sites have become ideal tools for populist political communication (Postill 2018: 755, Moffitt 2018, Lipiński and Stępińska 2019: 78), *i.e.*, suitable channels for spreading populist messages (Ernst et al. 2017). The online environment offers new possibilities for political engagement. The way people

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<sup>34</sup> It interconnects the logic of new and old media, where the political actors do not rely on one channel only and choose various channels to meet their goals.

interact with populist messages and populist actors is often underestimated (Aalberg and de Vreese 2017: 7). Every reaction to the published posts helps politicians reach a wider audience, all beyond their own followers and friends (Blassnig et al. 2020); politicians rely on the social media to gain voters' attention (Schmuck and Hameleers 2020: 1531).

### ***Why Is It about the Social Media?***

A question arises as to whether social media (clearly suitable for the current political communication) also represents a suitable platform for populist political communication and if so, why. The rise of the new media gave the (not only) populist political actors an inexpensive, targeted, direct, personalised, and efficient way to communicate with a wider group of people (sympathising public), *i.e.*, potential voters (Ernst et al. 2017; Blassnig et al. 2020; Esser, Stepińska and Hopmann 2017) before elections and during the entire electoral period (Bobba 2018: 2). Populist political actors use the new media to bypass the established, traditional media (Esser, Stepińska and Hopmann 2017: 378; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018: 3) and strengthen the bonds with their followers.<sup>35</sup> This trend has been observed when Freedom and Direct Democracy (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, SPD) refused to communicate with Czech Television and some newspapers. Mass media consequently entered an era of reduced trust (Schmuck and Hameleers 2020: 1533).

The portrayal of populists in the media also plays a role. The elite media mostly present populist political leaders unfavourably, which also stems from the tendency of populist politicians to shame the mainstream media (Aalberg and de Vreese 2017) and from their shift to alternative platforms. Current research supports the assumption that populists and populist political communication have a fondness for social media and tend to use them (Blassnig et al. 2020: 100). Direct communication with the public increases their chances of successful self-promotion just like attracting the attention of journalists and the media by their frequently controversial posts (Schmuck and Hameleers 2020: 1533). Facebook and Twitter are media platforms, whose reach and influence compete with traditional news media. They offer not only the aforementioned closer ties among people and a direct connection to people without the interventions of journalists, but also give the users a feeling of a community, a social presence and recognition among otherwise dispersed groups (cf. Ernst et al. 2019: 5; Ernst et al. 2017: 1350).

### ***The Advantages of Internet Populist Political Communication***

Challenger parties use populist communication to generate attention (Kriesi 2014) and distribute information, advertising, or propaganda (Moffit 2018). This communication is more frequent on

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<sup>35</sup> Twitter is used by populists, for example, more as a broadcasting than interactive medium (Moffit 2018).

Facebook than on Twitter (Blasnnig et al. 2020).<sup>36</sup> Comparing the two social platforms, Facebook provides more advantages than populist communication, which is also related to the education and socio-economic status of its users and their voting preferences. We could directly list some of its advantages, such as the possibility of information exchange, the closer and higher interconnectedness of its users, and finally, Facebook does not deal with character count limits,<sup>37</sup> so its users can express themselves more efficiently, effectively, in a more comprehensive and impressive way. Facebook also provides its users with a more intense and personalised connection while Twitter allows them to stay anonymous and is considered more of a news resource (Ernst et al. 2017: 152; cf. Jacobs and Spierings 2019), although of course not exclusively. Twitter works mostly as a commentary-information channel in Czechia (Charvátová and Niklesová 2020). It should be noted that the electorate of populist political parties favour Facebook as the main source of political news while non-populist voters favour Twitter (Schulz 2019).

These characteristics of social networks play into the hands of populist actors. They use the negativity, emotionality, and cohesion of their messages to increase the success rates and reach a broader audience. Providing tools for unsatisfied people to express their views provides them with an indirect advantage, *i.e.*, creating an online community of unsatisfied people that again plays into the hands of the populist actors because they can use the potential of these partisan masses. We can consequently see posts on social networks, which politicians write to (according to their expectations) produce the most reactions,<sup>38</sup> whether as likes, retweets or user comments (Blasnnig et al. 2020). It is an indicator measuring the success and popularity of politicians. Their popularity on social networks can in the end meet with the attention of the traditional media (see Chadwick 2017), which otherwise typically ignore populist political actors as can be seen in the USA. Former US president Donald Trump used his Twitter profile to set the agenda for the traditional media (journalists used information from his social networks) which he called the “enemy of the people” and his account was also very popular among the people. Trump accepted Twitter as his primary communication tool. In Europe, social networks are used for self-representation by for example the Dutch populist politician Geert Wilders (Schmuck and Hameleers 2020).

### ***Populist Political Actors and Their Activities on Social Networks***

It can be assumed that political actors known as populists will have many populist followers, who logically tend to like, comment, and share those messages, which bear the referential features of populism (Blasnnig et al. 2020). One characteristic of the populist communication style is, for

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36 We obviously find exceptions, for example, the former American president Donald Trump, for whom Twitter became the primary communication channel with both journalists and the general public.

37 The length of each post is limited by 280 characters on Twitter.

38 Social media are built on the principle of virality.

example, a simplification of complex political questions corresponding with the media logic (Esser, Stępińska and Hopmann 2017: 370); in this case one can talk about mediatised populism (Mazzoleni 2014).

Political actors consequently convey these messages to their followers on social networks, which can be problematic because they might pose a risk to liberal democracies (Kriesi 2014). Populists use social networks to address a broader range of people and find support for issues, which could be seen as marginal or were not prevalent in political communication. Populist political actors use emotions, especially blaming attributes (such as anger, fear, etc.) and scandalising speeches. Emotionally stylised messages affect people the most (Bobba 2017). Using the very nature of social networks, populists directly and immediately address people's dissatisfaction, which they then use to their own benefit (Ernst et al. 2017). To address the highest number of people possible, populist politicians act as game changers and shift the meaning of "people" using the constructs of citizenship and democracy (Ajanovic, Mayer and Sauer 2018). The success of the populist agenda reveals a direct correlation with public opinion (Lipiński and Stępińska 2019).

The feeling of proximity to the political actor also plays a role in the success of the social platforms. Social networks increase the potential of personalisation, where political actors present themselves as public figures representing their profession and goals but also often reveal their private lives, share their feelings, emotions, and opinions. They allow people to peek "behind the curtain" (cf. Ernst et al. 2017; Jacobs and Spierings 2016).

### ***Characteristic Stylistic Features of Populist Political Communication***

Looking beyond the discursive frame of what is presented on social networks, one can also observe characteristic stylistic features, which determine how the topics are presented (Schmuck and Hameleers 2020: 1532). It can be argued that populism is negative, simplifying, overdramatic, focusing on conflicts and referring to common sense (see, e.g., Mudde 2007). Populist political communication is extremely emotional (Aalberg et al. 2017), having a strong tendency towards negativity, emotionality, and sociability. Negativity typically describes society (or its members) in a negative light. Inciting hatred, using fear and anger deepens the populist dichotomy of "them against us." The anger of the common people is skilfully shifted onto pre-defined perpetrators, most often the elites or the most dangerous/excluded groups of people, using among other things exaggeration, scandalisation, threats of war and other conflicts and rhetorical intimidations describing the effects of the resulting poverty on people. If we move to the emotional level, populists skilfully use current moods and emotions, whether positive or negative. If they use positive emotions, they usually tie them to a privileged group of people, a nation and the faith in its strength, national pride, patriotism, or nostalgia. The rhetorical

style is usually simple, often vernacular, allowing them to get closer to people, be one of them, a persona fighting for their rights.<sup>39</sup> This familiarity is also illustrated by the tendency to intimacy and to defining themselves as apolitical (Ernst et al. 2019).

### ***Conclusion***

New challenger parties,<sup>40</sup> on both sides of the left-right political spectrum, have recently shown remarkable results in Europe. We should see them as a potential threat and not only for the EU. These parties raise problems, which the established parties have ignored, mobilising their voters using innovative protest communication, blaming the elites for disregarding people's needs and generally working with anti-establishment rhetoric (Kriesi 2014). Current research reveals electoral behaviour trends, where people, who mostly rely on tabloid news reporting, have a greater tendency to support populist parties. The combination of party cues, anti-immigration sentiments and anti-governmental assaults supports extreme-right populism (see Aalberg and de Vreese 2017; Sheet, Bos and Boomgaarden 2015).

### ***Recommendations:***

- We should fight populism.
- Parties have to understand the structure of the electorate and accommodate their communication strategy accordingly.
- We need to work with differentiated segments of society, react to their needs and demands and create a corresponding party programme.
- Create suitable alternatives to shortcut populist solutions and convey them to voters using high-quality political marketing.
- Offer relevant solutions to the problems that burden society and articulate them clearly.
- Actively use social networks for political communication and modify communication style so that voters feel solidarity rather than estrangement.

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<sup>39</sup> They can use even strong and vulgar language, but this usually occurs outside the social networks, being more typical of other channels.

<sup>40</sup> Challenger parties are seen as parties, which have not had the opportunity to control policy or government as yet. They have therefore not been represented in the parliament yet and one can assume that they will enter the electoral competition from outside the parliamentary arena (de Vries and Hobolt 2020).

# The COVID-19 Crisis: Business Opportunities and Risks

*Alena Zemplerová*

**Summary:** The COVID-19 crisis is unusual not only in terms of its causes but also its course and effects. The COVID-19 viral disease forced governments to take measures that should save health and lives. The subsequent economic crisis pushed the governments to adopt fiscal measures, which would mitigate its effects on the business sector and unemployment rates. The measures adopted were quite different country to country and 15 months is too short a time to assess which governments made the “right” decisions. The year 2020 was the worst for economic growth since World War II but it seems that many markets and companies were able to recover from the lockdowns relatively fast. The pandemic led to an increase in online shopping, work from home, accelerated digitalisation, innovation, and robotisation. These changes began to take place already before the pandemic, just like the related problems such as rising market concentration, share of intangible company assets and problems on the labour markets. The crisis has increased the need to protect market competition and intellectual property and enable labour force mobility between sectors and regions. These problems should not be amplified, inadequate state market interventions and subsidies that save lives and health during the pandemic should not deform markets in the times of economic growth.

**Keywords:** fiscal measures, labour market, market competition, subsidies, small businesses

## ***Introduction***

The first COVID-19 cases appeared in China in late 2019 and the disease quickly turned into a global pandemic with multiple waves and with a dramatic impact on human health and lives. The coronavirus COVID-19 and its mutations killed more than 4 million people worldwide by July 2021 (Worldometer 2021), of which more than one million were from the European Union (EU) (ECDC 2021).

The EU member states adopted measures against the spread of the epidemic as of March 2020. Their governments reacted to the pandemic in numerous ways and applied different policies from recommendations and informing the people to limiting freedom of movement and social gatherings, wearing mandatory face masks, quarantines, keeping social distance, closing services, shops, restaurants, hotels, schools, and declaring a state of emergency. The Swedish government had a preference for recommendations and information; it recommended that people maintain social distance and stay safe home in isolation. By the end of the year, it banned large gatherings and introduced

certain travel restrictions but did not introduce a nationwide quarantine. Most countries in the EU and worldwide restricted travelling, however, closed their borders and their primary policy became so-called lockdowns (isolation, restricting social contacts between people). These, however, had dramatic negative consequences for businesses and national economies.

Businesses have sought ways to survive and reorganise or ensure reliable supplies in strategic value chains. On the one hand, the volume of Internet shopping and working from home increased, state policies facilitated societies' digitalisation, stimulated innovation, robotisation and automatisisation. This led to the emergence of new sectors and markets. Many businesses in the service sector, however, suffered great losses. Some still managed to make use of the opportunity – e.g., used lowered rents to prepare for the post-COVID-19 era. Other businesses survived thanks to state aid despite the fact that they would have fallen under normal market conditions.

Governments have spent large sums of money on healthcare systems and supporting the people, employees, jobs, and businesses hit by the pandemic (KPMG 2021)<sup>41</sup>. This resulted in large public budget deficits and increasing public debt, which will inevitably affect the future development of their economies and the business sector. How extensive these debts carry for the future will depend on future economic growth, states' economic policies and monetary policy.

The academic discussions about the balanced short- and long-term effects of state policies on business have not come to a clear answer yet. It has only been 15 months since the first COVID-19 measures were adopted and it is probably too early to judge what were (and should be) the “right” measures which would have saved people's lives and health and at the same time did not cause catastrophic economic consequences for businesses and people.

Politicians are currently relaxing the anti-COVID-19 measures and expect new epidemic waves and it is, thus, expedient to think about long-term structural economic changes, changes in the labour markets and how to protect competition in a market affected by state interventions caused by the pandemic. It is not possible yet to give a final answer as to what has been the best approach to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and assessing the applied state policies, but it would be a good start to describe the main characteristics of the structural transformation that is currently taking place. We can then attempt to outline recommendations for future state policies.

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<sup>41</sup> State aid programmes notified in the EU single market and recorded by the EC (European Commission 2021b).

## *Structural Changes and Economic Growth*

The governmental measures adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic caused great disturbances worldwide, on the EU single market and in Czechia. Most markets and businesses were affected by the instability brought about by the pandemic and by state policies. Businesses sought out ways to survive and restructure and address the problem of reliable supplies in strategic value chains. Many innovative businesses reacted to the new environment. Growing business sectors have experienced a rise in the number of start-up companies. At the same time, companies that would have been pushed out of the market survived thanks to state aid, which has deformed the markets.

While companies in the markets linked to information technologies, communications, finance, and health have grown during the pandemic, the greatest losses from the lockdowns were experienced by the services sector: transportation (mostly air transport), tourism, restaurants, hotels and entertainment centres. Services, which could not be transferred online, which required personal contact in a physical environment, suffered the most (Haydon and Kumar 2020). Small businesses were hit by the COVID-19 crisis far more, with bankruptcies being a genuine risk for them. The number of bankruptcies was surprisingly low in 2020 but we need to consider the governmental measures (relaxing the Insolvency Act, etc.). Small and medium-sized enterprises are not only the backbone of every economy, but also play an important role in restructuring the economies due to their high adaptability to changes (Boschmans et al. 2021). Most small businesses operate in markets with relatively low input costs. They can relatively quickly fill in the possible gaps in the market, but have to have capital and labour at their disposal.

Apart from focusing on domestic demand, we also witnessed remarkable creativity on the part of many companies. It allowed them to survive, transform and even grow during the pandemic. Many businesses saw an opportunity for expansion. Numerous markets were able to recover from the effects of the lockdowns relatively quickly and services markets, which suffered the most, are markets with relatively low entry barriers. Large multinational manufacturing corporations suffered from short-term supply deficits and interrupted production (De Vet et al. 2021: 12). The automotive industry and many other fields received massive state aid to survive the pandemic. Old monopolies will consolidate and will probably produce new monopolies, which we need to get under control using competition policy and fair taxation (as took place in the U.S. and elsewhere). Large corporations can lobby governments and the EU and receive aid from them at the expense of small businesses, which have less means, a smaller market and political power and less access to politicians and policy-makers. Large corporations with greater market power have an unfair advantage and dominance on online platforms (Szczepański 2020: 10).

Already prior to COVID-19, strong monopoly companies such as Zoom, Microsoft, Apple, and Google became even stronger because those, who could, adapted to their online activities. The increase in

Internet trading led to the closure of shops (Somanas 2020; Davies 2021). We now see, however, that customers are returning to shops. A survey conducted by SAS, a company analysing data and artificial intelligence, indicated that consumers – Czechs leading the trend – want to go back to their original shopping habits from the pre-pandemic times (Businessinfo.cz 2021).

Consumers limited their expenses during the pandemic. They made more careful decisions and hesitated about spending larger amounts of money due to the threat of rising unemployment and insecurity. Furthermore, due to limited travelling options, they spent more money locally than across borders. The COVID-19 crisis led to growing local markets and businesses, which could gain from changing consumer behaviour caused by national and EU anti-pandemic policies. We expect that after reopening the economies, voluntarily or involuntarily postponed household consumption will increase. People can spend more due to the pandemic era savings and low unemployment rates.

Restrictive state policies resulted in the slowest economic growth since World War II, yet unemployment has remained relatively low due to the adopted measures. The decline in economic activity led to reduced state income and increased state expenses spent on dealing with the pandemic, on softening its social and economic effects and on supporting the economic sphere. Governments had to take major loans to help companies and corporations that would have gone bankrupt otherwise. Real GDP declined on average in the EU (6% in 2020) but the decline was significantly different across the EU member states (Eurostat 2021b).

Unlike the 2009-2011 financial and economic crisis, the COVID-19 crisis was mostly caused by the decline in private consumption and not by limited investment activity. Public policies mitigated the negative effect on the supply side and the crisis will probably last shorter than the previous crises. International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts that the 2021 eurozone growth rate will be the highest since 2017 – 4.5% in 2021 and 3.9% in 2022 (Verwey, Licchetta and Zeana 2021), when the EU GDP level should reach the pre-COVID-19 level. Growth will not be even, however, and will depend on the member states, vaccination, the structural conditions before the crisis and on state policies (IMF 2021).

### ***Labour Markets and Capital***

The EU unemployment rate reached 7.3% (eurozone 7.9%) in the first half of 2021, which does not come close to the 2008 financial crisis (Busse et al. 2020; De Vet et al. 2021). Yet, unemployment is 16.3% in Greece and 15.6% in Spain, while Czechia and Poland have low unemployment rates of about 3%. The labour market situation has been significantly affected by state compensations paid to companies and employers. State policies like *Antivirus* limited the critical labour force movement and probably only led to lower productivity. The Czech labour market situation is, from the business

point of view, very unsatisfactory. It was difficult to find workers for some professions before COVID-19 and the situation has worsened since. When shops reopened, they found it difficult to find shop assistants, restaurants cannot find employees and the construction sector lacks manual workers. Changes in the economy have caused a big gap between the current labour supply (retail, hotels, restaurants, catering, cleaning services, etc.) and new job requirements. Predominantly qualified and specialised workers can work from home. Investment into digitalisation and automatisisation is a way in which businesses can lower their costs over the long run.

Training and requalification will play key roles in an economy changing due to the COVID-19 crisis. Companies that introduced digital training programmes before the COVID-19 pandemic gained a comparative advantage during the crisis. It is a challenge for business policies, the education system and government policies to prepare for this new and quickly changing world of digital economies. Workers need to know how to work with large databases, manage customer relations, content management systems, coding and design platforms, etc. This entails data and computer work using artificial intelligence and market operations in a digital world.

Due to the Czech state policies, aimed at supporting employees and saving businesses, Czechia has not experienced massive bankruptcies yet. It is, however, only a postponed and slowed down process, which has to happen at a time of deep economic restructuring. We will see if the government allows the changes to take place without trying to save the businesses, bringing about deforming and unfair subsidies into the business world (Zemplerová 2010). The growth of new business types creates new demands on capital and labour. An important problem for solving involves protecting and valuing the intangible assets which would probably represent a large share of businesses investment in the post-COVID-19 era. Big businesses today fight over digital pie shares (see Epic Games versus Apple regarding App store fees, struggle over exemptions for vaccination production support at the World Health Organisation or the dispute over intellectual property rights between Siemens and BASF). These cases will probably multiply, and it would be good to have legal norms in place as part of the EU-USA deal. The increase in intangible assets, digitalisation, robotisation and automatisisation will probably eliminate many jobs. Trade unions will defend the traditional 40-hour work week and all its advantages. Businesses will promote time-limited contracts, i.e., instead of full-time workers they will try to hire independent suppliers and external workers (gig economy) and replace some positions with technology (Foroohar 2021).

Surveys have shown that regardless of regions and countries, people prefer working from home. A questionnaire survey by the insurance company Prudential showed, for example, that 87% of people would like to continue working from home even after the pandemic ends, with 42% even stating that they would look for another job if they were forced to work from office only and 79% would support legislation that would ban compulsory work from office. The result will be some type of compromise.

Both working from office and from home have their advantages; working from office is probably more productive and innovative, while working from home limits commuting, saves office costs, allows companies to hire experts abroad and gives workers an opportunity to find a job regardless of their place of residence (Economist 2021).

Unemployment will probably rise but so will demand for a labour force with modern technological skills and all that is related to IT and online shopping. Thus, requalifications and training will be necessary, but it is not certain to what extent these processes should rely on state support and to what extent it should be left to the market. Cheap lending capital will also be required. Businesses have often accumulated debts with banks or with their suppliers. Loan guarantees are possible as one type of flat support. Businesses will have to invest into software and platforms to reach markets within a larger geographical area and prepare for new COVID-19 waves, which usually do not spread evenly.

### ***State Aid, Public Debt, Taxes***

Governments have spent massive amounts of money on their healthcare systems, on their population, employees, jobs, businesses, and the economic sectors hit by the pandemic. They have also created massive public debt deficits, which had to be financed. Governments further deepened their debt. The share of public debt to GDP increased from 77.5% at the end of 2019 to 90.7% by the end of 2020 in the EU, respectively from 83.9% to 98.0% in the eurozone. The debt differences among the eurozone countries also increased, the lowest being in Estonia (18.2%) and the highest in Greece (205.6%) (Eurostat 2021a). The eurozone countries could not use monetary policies to solve their debt problems and the solution, thus, again rests with the European Central Bank (ECB). The Czech budget deficit will reach up to 500 billion crowns in 2021; GDP is estimated to drop by 5% in 2020 and will not reach the pre-crisis level before 2022. Public debt will probably increase from 38.1% in 2020 to 44.8% of the Czech GDP by the end of 2021 and to more than 48% of the Czech GDP in 2022 (Ministerstvo financi CR 2021).

The bill for the COVID-19 pandemic from the member state public budgets and the EU support has so far amounted to €3.700 billion, of which more than 80% was spent on national state aid enabled by relaxing the prohibition of state aid according to Article 107 of Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). The European Commission adopted a Temporary State Aid Framework in March 2020 allowing member states to use state funds to support businesses hit by COVID-19 up until 31 March 2021. To allow the member states to react to the economic shock, the EU introduced five types of aid: direct grants, elective tax advantages and advance payments, state guarantees for loans taken by companies from banks, subsidised public loans to companies, safeguards for banks that channel, state aid to the real economy, and short-term export credit insurance. The Commission

more or less formally approved or notified over 400 state aid programmes based on Article 107 of TFEU over a short period of time (European Commission n.d.).

Smaller amounts were provided from the EU joint funds or the eurozone – European Stability Mechanism (institutionalised during the financial crisis) provided €240 billion in member state aid during the COVID-19 crisis, European Investment Bank (EIB) provided €200 billion to finance entrepreneurship (Pan-European guarantee fund for loans to companies), fund SURE (Support to Mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency) provided €100 billion for saving jobs and helping companies facing difficulties, direct aid from the EU budget amounted to 70 billion.

The EU member states came to an agreement on common fiscal tools (OECD 2021: 4) and the COVID-19 crisis will most likely contribute to deepening European integration just like the previous crises. The new recovery fund of €750 billion (in 2018 constant prices) and of more than €800 billion in current prices was approved for the 2021-2027 period. This essentially means doubling the EU budget and its reallocation based on the solidarity principle; common fiscal rules and a larger EU budget are firm prerequisites for the EU monetary union.

The financing of the fund is important. The European Commission has in the EU's name borrowed on the financial markets and issued bonds to finance EU programmes, not only the Recovery fund but also SURE. Additional funding will most likely come from carbon tax, digital tax and financial transactions tax (Roloff 2020: 31). Public debts have increased, which always represents a threat of growing taxation, which does not stimulate business and investment activities, including the creation of new jobs and economic growth. High public debt can push out private investment as well as infrastructure investment.

## ***Conclusion***

The virus spread less in the middle of 2021, vaccination reached a critical mass, measures are being relaxed, and movement of people, goods and services increased. The future remains uncertain, however, and new epidemic waves and virus mutations are expected. Vaccinations provide people with a time limited immunity and businesses can hope for a more stable course during the future epidemic waves. The long-term indirect effects of the COVID-19 crisis on business depends on changing preferences and people's behaviour but also state policies in the post-crisis period. Facing risks and discovering market related risks are vital business principles but it is difficult to predict risks associated with state policies because it is impossible to guess whom and how much the governments will support. Governments have seemingly become used to interference with the markets, created

institutions to do so and we can, therefore, anticipate that they will not want to give up this power. Many businesspeople have become skilled in receiving subsidies instead of looking for more efficient ways to lower their costs and differentiate offers.

Government policies should generally be predictable and if possible available to everyone. They should not create unpredictable risks but provide useful information. Just as businesses need reliable information, governments also need information to make decisions. Researching the effects of government anti-COVID-19 policies also needs information to arrive at useful and appropriate conclusions. We are currently witnessing an academic discussion and analysis of the anti-COVID-19 policies and their effects; there is insecurity about the “right” decisions in terms of costs and effects and the balance between short-term aid and long-term stabilisation strategies. Such an analysis needs information to find a balance in addressing both the short- and long-term effects of the pandemic.

One problem lies in the varying levels of aid in the individual member states. The prohibition of state aid to the commercial sector is an integral part of the EU competition policy. The EU competition policy should ensure that the member states and their governments provide just and non-discriminatory conditions for all businesses and not resort to protectionism. Market competition is seriously endangered if some selected companies or sectors receive state aid and others do not. Competition policy should play a fundamental role in providing equal market conditions.

Changes and innovation are good, the COVID-19 crisis made them faster but also led to growing concentration in some markets, reinforcing the already existing monopolies. Related problems such as regulation of platforms and fighting against growing monopolies existed prior to COVID-19 but might persist or even increase due to state subsidies and interventions. Businesspeople and policy-makers have to count on insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. State policies should not reinforce business insecurity by supporting state aid in the commercial sector – state aid has always been problematic for small and medium-sized enterprises because large companies have sufficient market, political, and lobbying power to change legislation and state subsidies in their favour. Structural changes in the economies began before the COVID-19 pandemic, and related problems such as the need to protect market competition and intellectual property also pre-dated the crisis. They should not, however, increase due to inadequate state market intervention.

### ***Recommendations:***

- Due to state policies supporting employment and companies, the EU and Czechia witnessed fewer bankruptcies in 2020. We expect a deep restructuralisation of the economies now that these measures are being abandoned.
- It will be important to leave restructuralisation to the market forces – without subsidies deforming market signals. It is also important to stop increasing the tax burden on businesses.
- Successful economic restructuralisation requires free movement of labour. The shortage of some professions could be caused by the COVID-19 support programmes. Market forces and not state support should be making the decisions on the labour markets.
- As part of the EU single market, the service sector was troubled by numerous barriers already before the pandemic. The service sector was extensively affected by the pandemic and it is, thus, essential that these barriers receive upmost attention. Removing regulatory hurdles and information asymmetry should encourage cross-border movement of services and positively influence the EU single market.

# Digital Technologies in Education. More or Less Social Cohesion? Irrelevant...

*Markéta Fibigerová and Markéta Tuhá*

**Summary:** Digital technologies should receive the same attention in education as they do in the modern world. Discussing whether using technologies in education will have a negative impact on students' social interactions or on other education system participants is irrelevant. We need to embrace enduring and inevitable technological progress and establish new paradigms for social relations so that they can function naturally. We have been trying to achieve this at the First IT Secondary School and want to share our real-world insights and experiences.

**Keywords:** digital competence, modern education, innovative methods, healthy lifestyles, formative assessment, AI

## *Introduction*

Due to the measures adopted to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, schools had to transfer to the online environment practically overnight, which accelerated the “digitalisation” of the Czech education system by decades. It is a positive trend and a step in the right direction. We are afraid, however, that the schools did not always comprehend that these trends 1) do not have a limited validity defined by the temporary emergence measures, 2) are not related to the adoption of specific technical skills only, and 3) cannot be sustained without progressive school management and competent teaching teams.

Digital technologies became a common feature of our lives long ago, information technologies (IT) permeate various fields of human activity and digital competence is necessary in all ordinary professions. The notion that information and communication technologies (ICT) should be a separate course, for instance one hour a week, is completely misleading and does not correspond with society's needs. New professions directly based on digital literacy will emerge in the future while the centuries-old professions that the Czech education system mostly focuses on will disappear.

Digital technologies should be integrated into all courses and the teaching methods should make maximum use of them. Given that the only certain thing about the future is that we do not know what it will look like, we should prepare our children for any kind of future. Thus, we need to primarily develop their competences, not knowledge. Apart from the competence to effectively use technologies

and acquire new skills, this involves competences relevant to understanding oneself and obtaining self-knowledge including a deeper understanding of human needs and positioning oneself in the broader human community, of human beings as creatures that form their own future.

Future generations will need far more creativeness and the ability to find solutions to completely unknown problems than the previous ones. We have to therefore support children's ability to constantly learn, educate themselves, understand the essence of a problem, assess their skills, effectively communicate across a broad range of social and professional groups and make effective decisions. This is the mission of the modern education system and digital technologies are an inseparable part of it. It is irrelevant to ask if it brings more - or less - social cohesion. Let us rather define the risks of digital technologies and let us work on them.

### ***The Leading Digital Technology Clichés***

It is quite common that Czech schools ban mobile phones, do not allow students to bring their own laptops and use them for school-work, or block Wi-Fi access, motivated by the belief that children in school should focus on studying – done in a particular way. Permission is given to use the school's computers in IT classes, once again in a predefined way. This does not correspond with the way most of the adult population operates. Most teachers will passionately argue that children using mobile phones will be “naughty” and distracted. Others add that children should be sheltered from technology. We should not be, however, protecting children, but preparing them for the reality that awaits them. If we are bothered by the fact that children do not use the technologies appropriately, we need to teach them how to do so. We also need to show them how to behave respectfully in the virtual world. Technologies are neutral, it is up to people how they use them. If we are worried that digital technologies will cause greater social isolation amongst children,<sup>42</sup> we need to teach them how to keep social relations intact disrespectful of physical contact or which communication channel they use, let us trust that they will have the natural skills to do so. If we see a risk of less physical activity, we need to ask if this is really happening or if it has to be so.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Education Made Straight for the Online World***

Dividing education into in-class and online learning and creating different rules for each is an outdated concept. Schools should operate similarly to someone, who is occasionally working from home and several times a day needs to join a meeting. All materials should be online and shared, all technology available nonstop and used in common, all know-how and procedures part of the everyday

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42 For more, see Burns 2016.

43 For discussion linking digital technologies and physical activity, see for example Lewis 2020 and Schmidt et al. 2020.

organisational mode. It is a common practice at the First IT Secondary School in Prague that students tell us in the morning if they cannot come or are late due to traffic; we have a special channel in our chat application, which is very informal. Teachers follow it and if someone says that they are sick and would like to join the class, the teachers open a video conference for them and communicate with the students as if they were in the classroom. Learning materials and classroom work are directly prepared even for students who are not physically present including teamwork, feedback, and assessment. The class is constantly in electronic contact using a platform called *Discord*. The participants themselves determine how much they want to chat after classes. Teachers are a natural factor in these groups and voice channels; the server structure is built to accommodate both the educational needs and teenagers' social communication needs. After using it for one year, it has become apparent that the cases when someone communicated over a wrong channel during classes and disturbed other students were very rare. The school strives to build an environment built on mutual respect from the very beginning and the students understand the limits extremely well. *Discord* is a highly valued tool for us as we can efficiently communicate on many levels and effectively transfer information. The platform also makes the communication very informal and warm, which contributes to a friendly and relaxed atmosphere bolstering the education process.

### ***A Proficient Team***

To create such an educational environment and conditions, the school needs to have a highly proficient team of teachers. A teacher is a choreographer, who ensures that the work is like the hustle and bustle around an anthill, naturally organised and highly efficient. The structure of the teaching team is flat and democratic. They should flexibly coordinate learning objectives and come up with innovative approaches. Teachers prepare tandem classes and regularly join other classes. They naturally share know-how and provide consultations with one another. Such a team can only emerge if it is built, from the beginning, with highly motivated, caring people with interdisciplinary skills. An important aspect of the team's work is cooperation with the outside world and links to the real work environment such as companies, big business, science and academia and cooperation with experts from multiple fields. They should invite guests to their classes. English language skills are a must since it is taken for granted by today's teenagers. English is not an isolated course but is used any time when necessary. The feeling of necessity is enhanced by the constant presence of a native speaker or foreign students who arrive as part of international education and exchange programmes.

## ***Innovative Methods***

Innovative methods are “useless” if you do not have innovative people, who have a pro-growth mindset and are naturally inclined to employ “out of the box thinking.” If the educators themselves are not able to learn new things, it will be extremely difficult to teach it to the students. Innovative methods themselves are secondary, there are many resources – online or in print - to use, just like good practice examples. We can find inspiration across fields, attend adventure pedagogy training courses, and use company management as a source of inspiration. The know-how receiver must be someone who can assess what to use, what to combine with what, what is suited for whom, what can be used generally or on an individual basis; there are many determinant factors. It has to be an extremely competent person, who is enlightened and creative.

## ***Artificial Intelligence***

AI (artificial intelligence) is an abbreviation and often also a magic formula that many use, lately also in education, in order to look progressive. It is far more difficult to correctly describe what it really entails and to see the possibilities that open up to humankind in the near future. It requires genuine insight. The First IT Secondary School teaches about AI from many perspectives and across courses. First, it is important to define what artificial intelligence is, to apply it to real life examples and things of daily use and to distinguish between a simple algorithm in a mobile application and a true AI. We start with the first-year students. We find the Finnish government programme *Elements of AI* translated into Czech by local experts very helpful.<sup>44</sup>

Czechia is among the leading countries in AI research (Úšela 2019) and implements it in real life. Thus, we do the simplest possible thing, we invite experts such as the mastermind from the Digital philosopher and Digital writer projects, Jan Tyl, who is a prominent AI developer. The neural network using GPT2 and GPT3 (Open AI) libraries wrote stories for the Czech public radio station Český rozhlas and was able to reply to questions as the former president Václav Havel, as the science fiction writer and journalist Ondřej Neff and as the economist Tomáš Sedláček would. The problem of a text written by artificial intelligence, when people cannot understand if the author is a human being, or a neural network, is a very complex problem. We worked on the topic for an extended period of time as the students had to study the problem first. Given that the First IT Secondary School students program in their classes, they can go into the technical details such as the source code. Another inspiring guest that talked about artificial intelligence and its use in medicine was the medical doctor Tomáš Šebek, known in Czechia for his work with Doctors without Borders and as the founder of the web portal uLekare.cz, the biggest Czech online medical consultancy service working with GPs and specialists.

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<sup>44</sup> Full-text available at <https://www.elementsofai.cz>

## ***Digital Technologies in Sports***

The idea that children using computers do not move and do less sports does not tell the full story. Let us examine it in a more complex way. If a student sits several hours a day at the desk and their only workout is changing classrooms, going to the bathroom and the canteen, and exercising in the scheduled gym classes (usually two hours a week), remote learning does not alter all that much the extent of their regular physical activity. If we compare physical activity between in-class learning and the unexpected start of COVID-19 remote learning, the students have lost the activity related to their arrival to school, which can be contested as a significant number of students come to school by car or use public transportation. A negligible number of children come to school on foot or by bike. The students have lost their scheduled gym classes if the schools cancelled them and movement around the school building, which is very likely much larger than their flats and houses. The time spent in front of the monitor is practically equal to the time the students spent at their desks at school except for the gym classes. One can argue that it became more obvious to the families at home than when the students sit through on average six 45-min-classes behind the school walls.

The First IT Secondary School students regularly exercised in front of their cameras during the COVID-19 pandemic online classes. The current online options allowed us to easily prepare a high-quality one hour “workout” focused on any area or type of exercise. It was complicated and capacity-intensive to ensure that the students exercised well as we could not fully ensure that they had the right posture or used the required muscles over a webcam. The students also received individual activities checked using tracking applications every week. The assignments included walking, running, biking and many more often creatively suggested by the students such as dancing, chopping wood or motocross training. Physical activities were further combined with geography assignments developing their cartography skills and work with resources because the assignments involved tasks were linked to learning about local landmarks and important places.

The long-term goal was to teach the students to have regular and conscious physical activity, which they could autonomously and efficiently include in their daily programme, ideally choosing something they enjoyed. The added value of releasing a healthy surge of hormones (their chemical composition is covered by the Science course) increases the chances that they will seek out healthy physical activity in their adulthood. They will most likely have a sedentary job, but they will be able to look at their daily rhythm through a different lens and will be able to consciously balance their work load and sports.

## ***Evaluation***

Evaluation, let us call it feedback, is an important element in the learning process. Without high-quality feedback, it might not even be a learning process regardless if it is digital or ‘analogue’ learning. As mentioned above, in order to use innovative methods, you need high-quality teachers, and need them even more to provide continuous formative evaluation. A teacher, who can keep an effective distance, can sensibly describe to the students their abilities, skills and knowledge while also attentively describing their weaknesses. It is a teacher, whose personality and actions can become a natural inspiration and motivation.

One of the greatest challenges in our digital age is to prepare a written formative assessment that is easily digestible to the students and the parents and does not waste hundreds of hours of time. We developed our own evaluation sheets based on Google API, where we tried to combine the requirement of quick and coherent feedback from the teachers with providing clear and individualised learning progress for every student and his/her parents. Every teacher would confirm that he/she spends most of their time grading and as mentioned above, learning is not first-class and efficient without good feedback. Its functionality has to be constantly validated. It is important to have an evaluation system, where the teacher can easily change the grading scale and criteria or can individually amend them based on the student’s personality and studying motivation. The highest goal in the evaluation process is achieved when the students can assess themselves, are able to determine their own partial goals, forms and study methods, and the teacher is involved in this entire learning process - including evaluation -only as a supportive mentor.

## ***Questionnaire Survey***

During the second term of the 2020/2021 school year, that is several months into remote learning, we conducted a questionnaire survey in the two first-year classes (N = 31) of the First IT Secondary School. We followed the three main risk factors identified from the day the government prohibited in-person attendance at secondary school classes on 5 October 2020. We were interested in 1) comparing remote and in-class learning in terms of understanding the subject matter covered in the individual courses; 2) comparing the level of social interaction among classmates between the online and in-class environments; and 3) comparing the frequency of sport or any other physical activities.

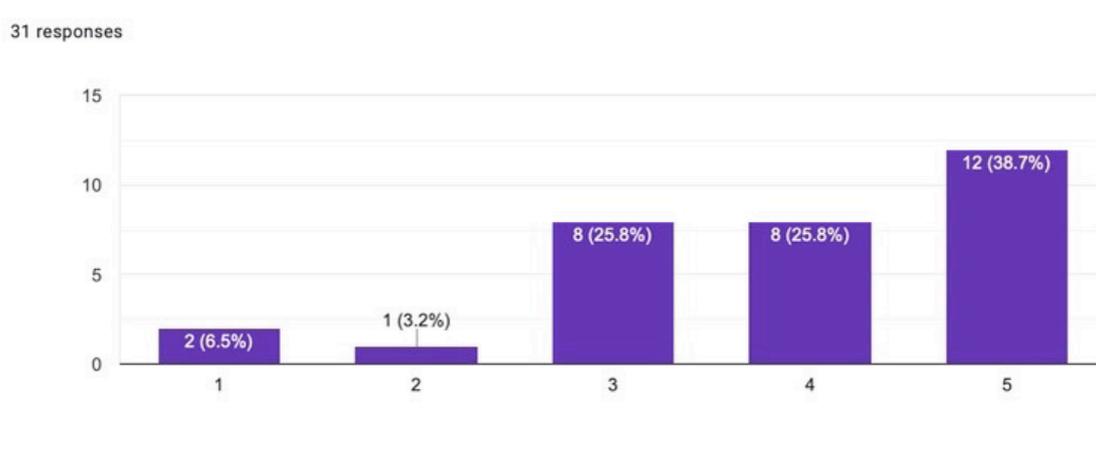
Our objectives were to:

- determine the knowledge, skills and competences obtained by the students;
- determine if our teaching methods work well in the online environment;
- ensure that social interactions are preserved, and we stimulate their development, especially preventing social isolation of individual students;
- keep and develop any form of students' physical activity as a compensation for long sitting sessions;
- focus on maintaining a healthy daily regime including diet and sufficient sleep.

The questionnaire survey revealed that students did not perceive much difference between in-class and remote learning in courses, which were based on intensive interaction between teacher and student; in our school it applied to language instruction (English, Spanish) and the humanities (integrated course of Czech language, history and social sciences). They stated that their understanding of the learning matter was practically identical. The students gave a higher understanding assessment for the online version of the course developing their information competences because it used highly individualised instruction. The course called Science (integrating physics, chemistry and biology) was the only course with a lower understanding assessment for online than in-class instruction. We believe that this was caused by the frontal style instruction with limited research-oriented activities, thus, they could not maintain sufficient topic concentration levels.

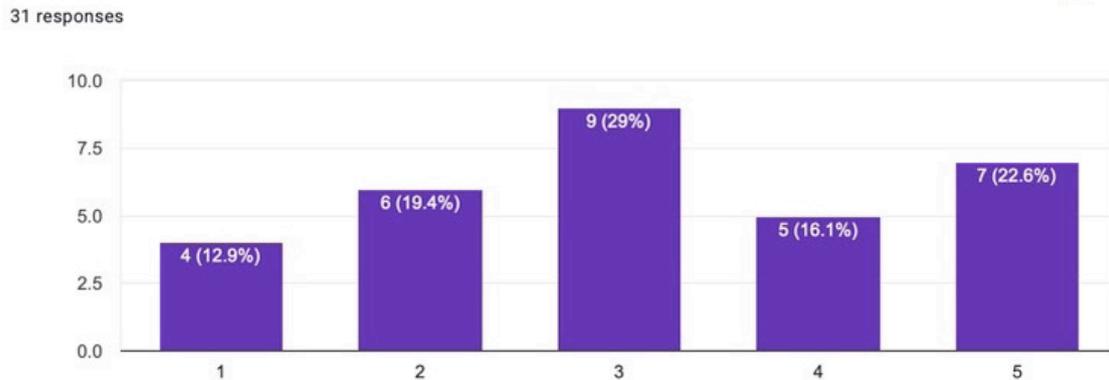
Our survey also asked how the students would assess the level of their mutual interaction (“I talk to my classmates”) on the scale from 1 to 5 (1 was the lowest and 5 the highest). As figures 1 and 2 indicate, it was possible to maintain social communication between classmates although it is a great challenge for any form of remote learning.

Figure 1: “I communicate with my classmates during in-class learning”



Source: own data

Figure 2: “I communicate with my classmates during remote learning”

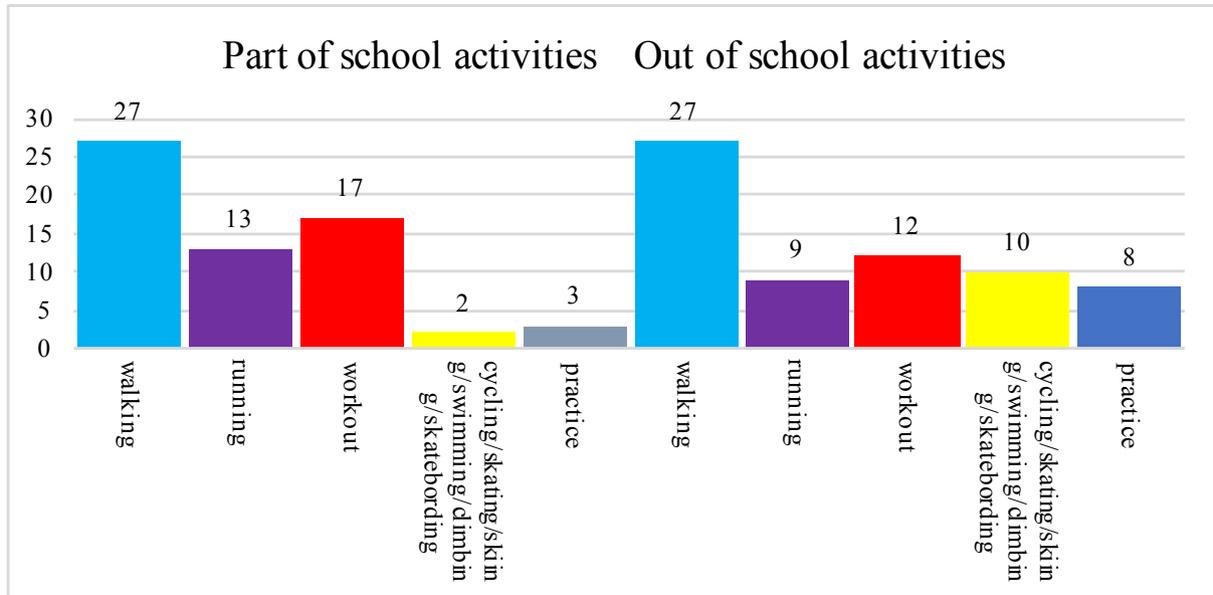


Source: own data

Physical activity is a very interesting topic for us. The answers showed (see figures 3 and 4) that the students had the same share of physical activity regardless of whether their education was online or in class. We consider it a success that we were able to maintain the students' physical activity at the same level even in the COVID-19 and online learning period. The problems we encountered were most often related to their daily regimes after classes. Thus, it required insertion of activities that

would ensure appropriate mental hygiene. We had long discussions about their inability to go to sleep before midnight and how they get up ten minutes before their online classes started. We discussed the possible ways of organising their day even during the harshest anti-COVID measures. It was proven best to offer potential scenarios, let them keep and document their scheduled time regimes all week and come up with their own ideas to improve it. Yet, we several times came across limitations stemming from the parents’ decisions, which did not exactly support healthy lifestyles.<sup>45</sup>

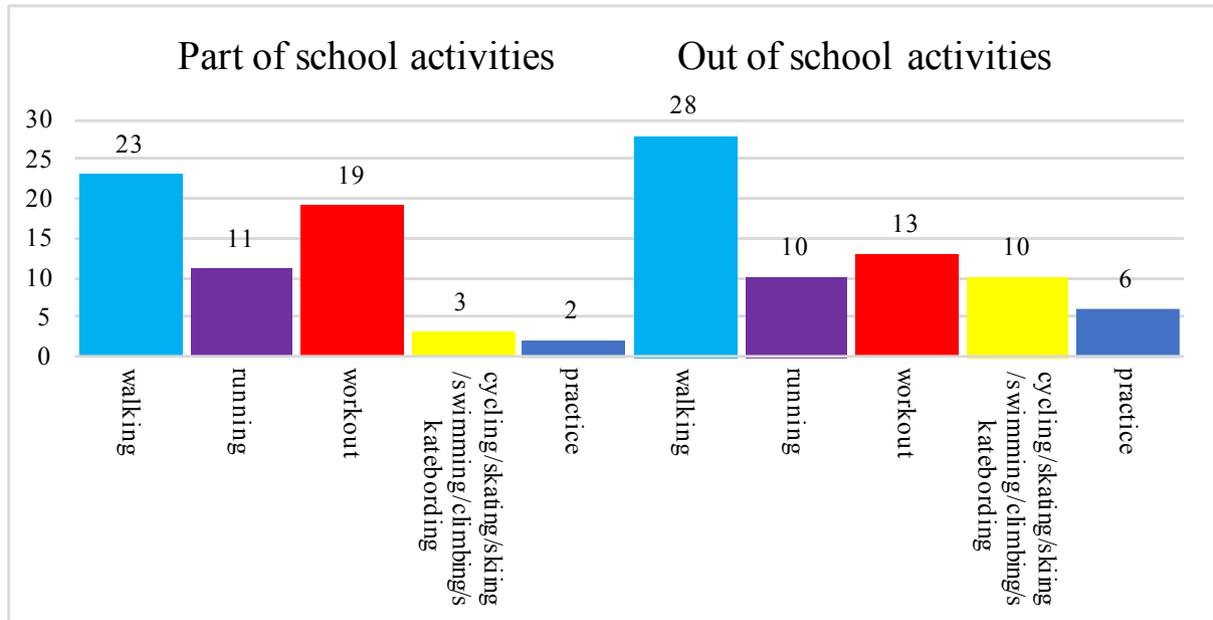
Figure 3: “I have regular physical activity during in-class learning”



Source: own data

<sup>45</sup> The case of a student, whose parents banned him from leaving the flat for six months, was extreme. We were shocked to learn about it the very first week – when carrying out the assigned task for the course Sports and health, he tracked the 2 km walk around their flat.

Figure 4: “I have regular physical activity during remote learning”



Source: own data

### ***Conclusion***

Digital education is part of modern education. It is crucial to develop key student competences such as independence, the ability to address an unknown issue and competences related to self-knowledge. Innovative methods require teachers capable of all of this and also personalities with high expertise and a caring approach; people able to work in a team and enrich one another. The teaching material should be directly designed for the online environment just as is the case for all school processes. Grading is not an educational goal, instead a formative assessment is an effective tool for healthy feedback and a path to one’s own self-reflection.

It is not true that remote learning equals a zero level of mutual communication between students and that there is no space for its development. It is not true that digital education automatically equals less physical activity. Modern education should not protect children from technologies, but should teach them how to use them. Technology is neutral, how people use it is up to them.

***Recommendations:***

- Build schools for the online environment; the applied processes should not distinguish between in-class and remote teaching.
- Use modern technologies naturally and in all courses.
- Follow technological trends.
- Cooperate with people from the “real world.”
- Introduce formative assessment.
- Focus on physical activity and a healthy lifestyle.

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