

THE IMPACT OF SOFT TOOLS OF EU RULE OF LAW ON MEMBER STATES: THE CASE OF SPAIN

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the interaction between the European Commission and a member state, Spain, in enforcing the rule of law. The case in point is the General Council of the Judiciary (Consejo General del Poder Judicial, CGPJ), whose composition has not been renewed for five years as a result of disagreements between the main political parties, the People's Party (Partido Popular, PP) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE). This situation has raised doubts about the judicial independence in the country. In this context, the article addresses the following research questions: How has the European Commission influenced political actors to remedy the situation regarding the CGPJ? And how have Spanish political actors used EU actions in the domestic debate on the renewal and reform of the CGPJ? The Spanish case shows that in a pro-European context, political actors strategically use the EU to justify their approach in a given situation. The EU is also perceived as a safeguard against a possible deterioration of the situation. In addition, the visibility of the problem due to the involvement of the EU level makes the politicians concerned about the international image of the country.

Keywords: Rule of Law, European Commission, Judicial council, Judicial independence, Spain.

INTRODUCTION

Since the founding of the EEC, member states have been committed to the idea that the Community is based on the values of liberal democracy. The rule of law is one of the fundamental values of the EU and is essential for the functioning of the EU itself. When the rule of law is challenged in a member state, it has an impact on the enforcement of European law and on mutual trust between member states. However, over the last decade, various aspects of democracy, including the rule of law, have regressed in member states, with the most marked manifestations in Poland and Hungary. But these states are not the only ones. Other member states are also facing

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serious problems. To prevent the democratic backsliding in member states, the Commission has introduced soft tools to monitor the national level (e.g., EU Justice Scoreboard, rule of law reports) and, on that basis, identify the most important problems for member states to address.

The aim of this article is to analyse the interaction between the European Commission and a selected member state, Spain, in enforcing the rule of law. The European Commission exerts pressure on the member states to comply with the rule of law. National actors respond to EU action in different ways. In countries with strong Eurosceptic parties, EU intervention may encourage a rally-round-the-flag effect and anti-EU attitudes (see Schlipphak, Treib, 2017). In a predominantly pro-European context, however, EU intervention may be used more strategically by political and social actors to achieve their objectives. This article examines the latter case, focusing on the blocked renewal of the Spanish General Council of the Judiciary (Consejo General del Poder Judicial, CGPJ). The main research questions are: How has the European Commission influenced political actors to remedy the situation regarding the CGPJ? And how have Spanish political actors used EU actions in the domestic debate on the renewal and reform of the CGPJ?

The case of Spain was chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, the largest political parties are generally pro-European, which represents a different political context compared to member states with strong Eurosceptic parties (e.g. Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia or Austria). Secondly, the renewal of one of the main judicial bodies is the longest stalemate Spain has ever experienced (since December 2018), negatively affecting the functioning of the judiciary and questioning the country's judicial independence.

The article is based on a qualitative content analysis of the European Commission's rule of law reports (European Commission, 2020; 2021a; 2021b; 2022a; 2022b; 2022c), in particular the section on judicial systems, where references to the CGPJ were sought. It also examined the activities and statements of European Commission officials, namely Věra Jourová, Vice-President and Commissioner for Values and Transparency, and Didier Reynders, Commissioner for Justice, since they took office (in 2019). National media articles (from *El Diario*, *El Mundo* and *El País*) were also used to map their activities in Spain.

Stenographic records from the 2018-2023 parliamentary sessions on the CGPJ were used to analyse how political parties use EU actions in domestic political debates. In total, six plenary sessions of the lower house (Congreso de los Diputados 2020; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2022; 2023) and

two plenary sessions of the upper house (Senado 2021; 2022) were held on the CGPJ. National parties (PSOE, PP, Ciudadanos, Unidas Podemos, Vox) and most regional parties (EAJ-PNV, EH Bildu, ERC, JuntsxCat) took part in parliamentary debates. A total of 96 speeches were analysed. Qualitative content analysis focused on searching for statements containing the words “Unión Europea” (European Union) or “UE” (EU), “Europa” (Europe), “Bruselas” (Brussels), “Artículo 7 TUE” (Article 7 TEU) in order to identify the context in which political actors used them and how they used them in the party’s argumentation on the CGPJ. It also included references to the Council of Europe, as reports by the Venice Commission or GRECO are widely used in the field of the rule of law. A total of eleven types of EU-related statements were identified, none of which were anti-EU.

The article is structured as follows: the first part examines the state of research on the rule of law in the EU and domestic responses to EU interventions. The second part analyses in more detail the so-called soft tools at the Commission’s disposal. The third part briefly outlines the nature of the CGPJ problem, its impact on the Spanish judiciary and the position of stakeholders. The fourth part looks at how the European Commission has dealt with the case, although other institutions such as the European Parliament have also been involved, and what tools it has used in particular to press for a remedy. Finally, the fifth part looks at how Spanish political parties have dealt with EU pressure in the CGPJ debate. It will then be possible to assess the influence of EU actors in enforcing the rule of law at the national level and how political actors have used the involvement of EU institutions in domestic political struggles.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The protection of the rule of law is an area where the complexity of EU policy is evident. The focus on the EU as a multi-level system of governance is particularly appropriate given the intertwined responsibilities of the EU and the member states. This concept emphasises that EU policy-making is characterised by the collective decision making of national governments and the autonomous role of EU institutions (Hooghe, Marks, 2001, p. 2). In the words of Soós (2018, p. 197), this means that “European-level policy making competences are no longer monopolized by national governments”. Specifically, Coman (2022, p. 8) sees rule of law conflict “as a multi-level conflict over power, authority, and sovereignty”.

Rule of law has become, in recent years, a matter of increased politicization in member states. In the legal field, the term *rule of law backsliding* (e.g. Pech, Scheppele, 2017; Kochenov, Pech, 2016; Kochenov, 2017; Bárd, Śledzińska-Simon, 2019) or *rule of law crisis* (see Batory, 2016; Konstadinides, 2020) is therefore used. Political scientists use the term *democratic backsliding* (e.g. Bermeo, 2016; Gora, de Wilde, 2022) or *autocratization* (Lührmann, Lindberg, 2019), which has a broader meaning. The article draws on several strands of legal and political science research on the rule of law. First, it is legal research, drawing primarily on work on rule of law enforcement. Second, it is political science research, where the article draws primarily on work on the role of EU institutions, in particular the European Commission, and on the reactions of domestic actors to EU action.

Konstadinides (2020, p. 15) refers to the EU as “a system in which laws are applied and enforced”. The legal research focuses primarily on the EU’s rule of law instruments based on EU law and their effectiveness (see e.g. Kochenov, 2017; Kochenov, Pech, Scheppele, 2017). These so-called hard tools include Article 7 TEU, the infringement procedure and Regulation 2020/2092 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget (Coman, 2022, p. 13). First and foremost, there is the problem of the use of Article 7 TEU, which has been seen as a deterrent (“nuclear option”) for member states against possible backsliding. But why does it not work in practice? Amato, Verola (2019), Sedelmeier (2017) or Kochenov, Pech (2016) explain that its application requires a broad consensus among the EU institutions (Commission, Parliament, Council/European Council), which leads to a significant reduction of its deterrent potential. These findings are part of the explanation for the emergence of rule of law protection mechanisms outside the framework of EU primary law, the so-called soft tools, discussed later in the article.

The political science literature tends to focus on the role of the EU institutions (Commission, Council/European Council, Parliament) (e.g. Coman, 2022; Closa, 2019; Closa, 2021; Kelemen, 2017; Oliver, Stefanelli, 2016) and soft tools such as the rule of law framework (Sedelmeier, 2017), rule of law reports (Priebus, 2022) or the EU Justice Scoreboard (Dori, 2015). According to Coman (2022), dissensus is an important factor in shaping the rule of law policy and affecting the capacity of the EU institutions to act. The European Commission is the institution responsible for the monitoring of the member states, including their compliance with the rule of law. In doing so, it relies to a large extent on its power of persuasion and on soft tools, which mainly consist of shaming (Sedelmeier, 2017).

However, the Commission's authority has been limited due to a lack of support from the Council (Closa, 2019). There are different attitudes among member states, which, according to Oliver and Stefanelli (2016, p. 1081), are mainly influenced by party-political factors. Many of the ruling parties formed the same party group with Fidesz (European People's Party, EPP, now ex-member) and PiS (European Reformists and Conservatives). Other factors include sympathy for backsliding states, fear of a rebound effect or the counterproductive effect of possible sanctions. The Commission's authority could also be weakened by its tolerance of only symbolic or creative compliance by the member states, as shown by Batory (2016) in the cases of France in 2010 and Hungary in 2012-2013. The European Parliament is now seen as an ardent defender of the rule of law, but in the past partisan politics have prevented more effective action against backsliding states. Notable is the case of the EPP, which long protected Fidesz (Kelemen, 2017; Herman, Hoerner, Lacey, 2021) before finally supporting the triggering of Article 7 TEU against Hungary in 2018. It can currently be said to have done so for Bulgaria's GERB (Gherghina, Bankov, 2023).

Member states are crucial to understanding the extent to which EU intervention will be effective. This is linked to how domestic actors will respond. Understanding the different national contexts is therefore essential and much remains to be done. Research has mainly focused on Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, with Poland and Hungary dominating (see, for example, Ágh, 2019; Haglund, Schulze, Vangelov, 2022; Drinóczi, Bień-Kacała, 2022). This is understandable given the advanced autocratization and activation of Article 7 TEU for these countries. Some works compare these cases with other countries, also from CEE, such as Romania and Bulgaria (Coman, Volintiru, 2021) or the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Bakke, Sitter, 2022).

Data from the rule of law reports show that member states from other parts of the EU also deserve attention. However, there is very little work on them. A notable exception is Austria (Lachmayer, 2017), which was the first case to test the EU approach. There are also studies on France (Batory, 2016) or Malta (Lobina, 2023). In this respect, this article aims to fill a certain gap with research on Spain.

Case studies or small sample research could contribute to a deeper understanding of domestic responses to EU interventions. The EU level is another component of domestic policy debates. Some authors analyse the blame strategy, in which political actors can shift the blame to "external EU actors, such as EU institutions or foreign EU member state governments"

(Heinkelmann-Wild, Kriegmar, Rittberger, 2020, p. 85). Based on the Austrian and Hungarian cases, Schlipphak and Treib (2017) suggest that the EU should therefore think about ways of intervening that do not lead to a rally-round-the-flag effect and do not strengthen anti-EU forces in member states.

On the other hand, EU intervention can also be an opportunity for domestic actors. Wonka, Gastinger and Blauburger (2023) analysed the public debate in Hungarian and Polish newspapers about EU measures against government policies. The EU action enabled the opposition and civil society to take a stand against government backsliding measures and influence public opinion. In their view, EU intervention should be based on the argument that it serves the interests of a country's citizens, rather than on a more abstract defence of common values.

This approach is in line with research on the strategic use of the EU by political actors to pursue their political interests (Woll, Jacquot, 2010). EU intervention may be facilitated by a generally pro-European environment. But even here, EU pressure may not lead directly to a solution to the problem. However, it will not create a rally-round-the-flag effect and will not encourage anti-EU attitudes. On this basis, the article will further analyse European Commission actions and how domestic actors responded to EU pressure to unblock the CGPJ's renewal.

2 EU SOFT TOOLS TO SAFEGUARD THE RULE OF LAW

The Hungarian and Polish cases have shown that the rule of law mechanism under Article 7 TEU is completely toothless. The Commission has therefore developed mechanisms to protect the rule of law outside the framework of primary law. Coman (2016) puts their development in the context of member states' reluctance to increase the Commission's powers. They are based on persuasion, social pressure and shaming. They also reflect the Commission's long-standing preference for dialogue with the member state concerned, as it is ultimately the member state that is responsible for remedying the situation (Closa, 2019).

In 2014, the Commission launched the EU Framework for Strengthening the Rule of Law, which has so far only been applied in the case of Poland. It introduced a structured dialogue on the rule of law with the member state concerned. It seemed to be something different, but the mechanism was essentially equivalent to the preventive arm of Article 7 TEU. Dinan (2017, p. 78-79) therefore concludes that it should be viewed more as an alternative

for the Commission to deal with the lack of a majority in the Council. Expert criticism of structured dialogue points to the fact that if the government in question has chosen the path towards autocratization, dialogue only allows for time to consolidate changes (Kochenov, Pech, Scheppele, 2017; Pech, Scheppele, 2017). Therefore, the activation of Article 7(1) TEU has come too late and with little hope that it could change the course.

Since 2016, the European Parliament has been urging the European Commission to set up a more effective tool to focus on the observance of the rule of law and fundamental rights in member states (van Ballegooij, 2020, p. 4-5). Since 2013, there has been an EU Justice Scoreboard that focuses on national judiciary systems, but it is too narrow to be used for a more general assessment of whether checks and balances are weakening and fundamental values are being violated in member states (Sedelmeier, 2017, p. 347). The Juncker Commission has already started to prepare the so-called rule of law reports, introduced by the von der Leyen Commission in 2020. In addition to preventing rule of law backsliding in other member states, the rule of law reports should address the argument used by the states concerned, such as Hungary, that the EU uses a “double standard” in its dealings with member states (Pech, 2020).

The rule of law reports was issued in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. They focus on four key areas: (1) justice system, (2) anti-corruption framework, (3) media pluralism, and (4) other institutional issues related to checks and balances. Member states are involved in the elaboration of the report as Commission requires a written input from member states and effectuates country visits where its members meet national authorities and stakeholders. This information is contrasted with written contribution by the stakeholders and information produced by international organizations. From 2022, the Commission is also issuing recommendations to member states, moving from mere description to pressure for compliance. This allows the Commission to better link rule of law reports to hard tools such as infringement procedure, conditionality regulations or triggering Article 7 TEU (Maňko, 2023).

The results of this tool are perceived in different ways. On one hand, e.g., Sedelmeier (2017) thinks that monitoring of all member states together with the rule of law framework can have a potential to deal with rule of law problems, because it increases social pressures, it enables the Commission to comment regularly on the problems which can improve its argumentative consistency and make it more difficult to countries concerned to justify their backsliding measures. Another positive aspect of rule of law report consists

of giving the rule of law the same meaning across the EU. This is very important as the states concerned as Hungary try to dilute the meaning and emphasize that the EU has an obligation to respect national identity, see e.g., argumentation of the former Hungarian Minister of Justice, Varga (2019). Annual monitoring of member states also means that the Commission stopped to be indecisive regarding the content of rule of law. This can help it to determine earlier if there is a systemic threat to rule of law in a member state and gather evidence which can be used in infringement proceedings (Bárd, Śledzińska-Simon, 2019).

The limitations of rule of law reports have been noted, for example, by Pech (2020), who argues that rule of law reports alone cannot stop autocratization if national governments choose to do so. Moreover, he considered it to be an error to compare democratic states with non-democratic regimes like Orbán's which can lead to a normalisation of non-democratic regimes in the EU. These regimes can also use the report to claim that there are plenty of problems in other member states, therefore trying to divert attention away from itself. From the European Parliament it is voiced that it is unclear what the Commission will do if the state would not treat problems and how active it would be in its follow-up of member states (Mańko, 2023, p. 1).

In the following section, the article focuses on whether the rule of law reports have any impact on member states, along with other forms of pressure from EU officials. It is important to distinguish that the chosen case is a country, Spain, where most political and social actors still consider the values of liberal democracy as fundamental in their national context. It is also a country where the main political parties positively identify with the EU. Even taking these facts into account, the impact of the EU may be limited by the logic of national politics, which is characterized by exacerbated political polarisation.

3 PROBLEM: THE CGPJ AS AN OBJECT OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE

The CGPJ is a body of judicial self-government that is to guarantee the independence of the judiciary (see Kosař, 2018). It was introduced by the 1978 Constitution, Article 122(2) and (3) (Constitución Española, 1978), as part of the democratization process, with the aim of transferring influence over the judiciary from the executive to a self-governing body. The CGPJ performs several functions, including decisions on judicial appointments, transfers, and promotions. Fundamentally, the CGPJ also proposes persons for the highest positions in the judiciary who are formally appointed by the

Minister of Justice. These are the judges of the Supreme Court (Tribunal Supremo, TS) and the presidents of its chambers. The president of the TS also presides over the CGPJ. In addition, there are the presidents of the National High Court (Audiencia Nacional, AN) and its chambers, the presidents of the highest courts of the Autonomous Communities and their chambers, and the presidents of the provincial courts (Torres Pérez, 2018, p. 1776-1777). Finally, it proposes two judges of the Constitutional Court (Tribunal Constitucional, TC).

The CGPJ is composed of 12 judicial members and 8 members from other legal professions, subject to 15 years of experience in the field. According to the Constitution, the 8 members are elected by the Parliament. The Congress of Deputies and the Senate elect four persons each by a qualified three-fifths majority. For the 12 judicial members, the Constitution does not specify how they are to be elected. Since 1985, it is the Parliament as well which designates by three-fifths majority 12 judicial members. This necessarily implies an agreement between the two largest political parties: the PP and the PSOE. The method of appointment is the major factor in the politicization of the body because political parties want to design persons who are ideologically aligned with them (Rosado Iglesias, 2022, p. 277-279).

In December 2018, the mandate of the CGPJ expired and new members were to be appointed. However, in the spring of the same year, a vote of no confidence was passed against the PP government led by Mariano Rajoy, and a new majority led by the PSOE was formed. Pedro Sánchez took the seat of Prime Minister and won the November 2019 general elections, subsequently forming the country's first coalition government with the far-left Unidas Podemos. From these moments, the blockage of the renewal of this body dates back. The fact that the renewal of a constitutional body is blocked and occurs later than it rightly should is not unusual in Spain as it already happened in 1995 and 2006. However, the duration of this situation is unusual and corresponds to a full five-year mandate at the end of 2023. The PP and the PSOE have come close to an agreement several times, but other political circumstances have usually scuppered the deal.

To understand the current state of play, it is necessary to focus on the disagreement between the PP and the PSOE (Měšťánková, 2023) and what it means for the judiciary. From the beginning, the CGPJ has pointed out that its credibility is weakening with the expiration of its mandate. After the general elections in 2019, the CGPJ temporarily stopped the process of appointments between January and May 2020 with the expectation that its renovation would be soon resolved. This did not happen, and so it returned

to making appointments. In 2021, however, the governing parties pushed for restrictions on the CGPJ's appointment powers, which affected the highest positions in the judiciary. The PSOE expected that this "pressure" would force the PP to reach an agreement, which did not happen. On the contrary, the crisis in the functioning of the judiciary was deepened, as the vacancies could not be filled. The concrete impact is that at the end of 2022, one-third of the top positions in the judiciary were vacant (Romero, 2022), with the Supreme Court being the most affected institution. There is a slowing down of judicial proceedings, thus undermining the efficiency of justice. The governing parties partially restored the appointing powers of the body in July 2022, when they allowed it to nominate its two candidates for judges of the Constitutional Court.

Another aspect that eventually stepped into the political game was the method of appointment. For a long time, the largest political parties (PP and PSOE) did not show any interest in changing the method. The PP has pushed through two reforms (2001, 2013) leading to greater involvement of judges in drawing up the lists of candidates. It was only in the 2011 parliamentary elections that the PP promised to transfer the election of 12 judicial members of CGPJ to their peers, but despite its victory and the formation of a government with an absolute majority, she did not put this promise into practice. At present, the PP states that to reach an agreement with the PSOE, it is first necessary to agree to change the method of appointment. The 12 judicial members should be elected by their peers which corresponds with recommendations of the Council of Europe and the EU (see further). However, the PSOE rejects this and insists that the appointments remain in the hands of parliament. In autumn 2020, the governing parties proposed to reduce the majority required to elect members of the CGPJ. If a three-fifths majority was not achieved in the first round, it would be reduced to an absolute majority in the second round. This was criticized not only by the opposition but also by professional organizations and the EU, leading to the withdrawal of the proposal.

The judiciary's highest officials and professional organizations have repeatedly appealed to political parties to remedy the situation. TS and CGPJ President Carlos Lesmes (who resigned in the fall of 2022) assessed the situation as unsustainable. He repeatedly called for the renewal of this body and, consequently, for a change in the system of appointing the 12 members of the judicial council (Comunicación Poder Judicial, 2022). The professional organizations, which currently comprise 56.1% of all judges out of about 5 600 (Navas, 2021), have transferred the problem

to a supranational level. In April 2021, three professional organizations (Asociación Profesional de la Magistratura, Asociación Francisco de Vitoria, Foro Judicial Independiente) sent an open letter to EU Commissioners Věra Jourová and Didier Reynders, in which they warned of the risk of breaching the rule of law in the country, namely the independence and impartiality of the judiciary. They openly denounced the politicization of this body by political parties and called on the Commission to activate the general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget and, ultimately, to activate Article 7(1) if no remedy is found (A la Comisión Europea, 2021). Clearly, the supranational level was seen as a safeguard that could prevent the situation from worsening.

Further on, conservative members of CGPJ addressed again the European Commission by sending an open letter to Didier Reynders in January 2023, complaining about the limitation of their powers. According to them, the fact that they cannot appoint judges to the highest positions seriously threatens the functioning of the Supreme Court and the military jurisdictions (Viúdez, Abad Liñán, 2023). On the other hand, in March 2023, two representatives of the progressive camp resigned from their positions, which was supported by the progressive judicial organization Juezas y Jueces para la Democracia (JJpD) as a path leading to the renewal of this body (JJpD, 2023).

4 EU LEVEL: EUROPEAN COMMISSION ACTIONS RELATED TO CGPJ

The judicial systems are one of the four key areas which are monitored by the European Commission in rule of law reports. A substantial part of the monitoring focuses on the independence of the judiciary. The Commission examines how judicial independence is perceived by the public and what systemic safeguards are in place. In this context, judicial councils are seen as important safeguards of judicial independence, which derives from Court of Justice rulings (e.g., case C-64/16, Associação Sindical dos Juízes Portugueses; C-824/18 A.B. and others v. CJEU). For these reasons, the case of CGJP has become an issue of interest to the Commission.

The case of CGPJ has regularly appeared in the Commissions' rule of law reports as a matter of urgency because the stalemate around the CGPJ has questioned the judicial independence in the country. Věra Jourová and Didier Reynders actively involved in the matter, sending letters to national authorities and stakeholders and meeting with them. In 2022 the CGPJ renovation received high relevancy which can be demonstrated on the visits which were realized by both commissioners to Spain. Jourová visited Spain

in June 2022 and Reynders in September 2022. The Commission has also heavily supported its position on the recommendations of the Council of Europe (Venice Commission and GRECO) and the national stakeholders' positions (professional organizations, president of CGPJ and Supreme Court and presidents of high courts).

The rule of law reports (2020, 2021, 2022) consistently highlight that the mandate of this key body for the functioning of the judiciary has expired and political parties have been unable to reach an agreement despite appeals from concerned stakeholders. And that the persistence of this situation undermines the credibility of the institution and shows its vulnerability to politicization. The Commission has called on the political parties to renew the institution. Addressing the opposition, the Commission said that it should not block the appointment of important state bodies where a qualified majority is required, and at a minimum, partial appointments should be possible where there is a qualified majority consensus (European Commission, 2021b, p. 3). In a letter to Carlos Lesmes, President of the CGPJ and the Supreme Court, in September 2022, Jourová insisted that state institutions cannot be prisoners of political debate (Pozas, 2022).

From 2021 the method for the appointment became a part of the reports. In 2022 in general assessment of the rule of law situation across the EU the Commission stated: "The method for the appointment of judges can have a key impact on judicial independence and public perception of independence. As established by the CJEU, in order to guarantee judicial independence, substantive conditions and procedural rules governing judicial appointments must be sufficient to prevent reasonable doubts as to the imperviousness of the judges concerned to external factors and as to their neutrality as judges" (European Commission, 2022a, p. 6).

Commission representatives, therefore, intervened when a proposal was presented in the Congress of Deputies to reduce the majority required for the appointment of CGPJ members. The proposal by the governing parties (PSOE and Unidas Podemos) was seen as further deepening the politicization of the body. After pressure from the EU and judicial stakeholders, the governing parties eventually withdrew the proposal. EU representatives urged that a compromise on reforming the method of appointment be reached between all relevant actors. The Commission then supported those proposals that sought to promote the election of judicial members of the body by their peers, backed up by the recommendations of the Council of Europe (e.g., Council of Europe, 2010) and the preferences of various national stakeholders (European Commission, 2021b, p. 3). On the other

hand, the Commission never challenged the law that limited the powers of the CGPJ after its mandate expired.

In 2022 and 2023, the Commission's involvement multiplied when, in addition to issuing the first recommendation to the country, the visits of the two Commissioners happened. The Commission's position has been established as follows: "Proceed with the renewal of the Council for the Judiciary as a matter of priority and initiate, immediately after the renewal, a process in view of adapting the appointment of its judges' members, taking into account European standards." (European Commission, 2022c, p. 9). In June 2022 Jourová on her visit to Spain stressed the urgency of the renovation and expressed a preference that judicial members of the CGPJ be appointed by their peers as a solution to the alleged politicization of the body. She also stressed that a new attempt to reduce the necessary majority for the appointments would be now considered to be an infringement of EU law (Cruz, 2022), thus increasing the pressure. In September 2022 also Reynders visited Spain on the same matter. In February 2023 the EU representatives (Jourová and Reynders) met with members of the Spanish government. They urged them to renew the CGPJ before taking the Presidency of the EU Council (Suárez-Bustamante, Jiménez, 2023), but this has not yet happened.

5 NATIONAL LEVEL: EU IN THE DISCOURSE OF POLITICAL PARTIES ON CGPJ

The situation regarding the CGPJ in 2018-2023 has been discussed several times in the Parliament. Discussions have intensified as the deadlock has lengthened, but also in the wake of criticism from EU institutions. In the following section, the article analyses how political parties used references to the EU in their arguments regarding CGPJ.

The CGPJ has been debated twice in the Parliament in conjunction with the modification of its powers. First it was a law limiting the powers of the body after its members' mandate expires. The law was discussed three times by the plenary of the lower house (15 December 2020, 28 January 2021 and 11 March 2021) and once by the plenary of the upper house (24 March 2021). The law was approved (*Ley Orgánica 4/2021*, of 29 March). Year after, the powers of CGPJ were modified again giving back the appointment of two members of the Constitutional Court to the CGPJ. The law was debated in a legislative emergency in the lower house (July 13, 2022) and the upper house (July 20, 2022), and it was also passed (*Ley Orgánica 8/2022*, of 27 July). During this period, PP also submitted twice a proposal to change the

method of appointment of the CGPJ, which was discussed by the plenary of the lower house (21 September 2021 and 16 May 2023). The Congress of Deputies rejected the proposal on both occasions. Other parliamentary groups have also tabled proposals to change the method of appointment (Ciudadanos, Vox), but these proposals did not reach the plenary.

In terms of political parties, the debate involved national parties (PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos, Unidas Podemos, Vox) and regional parties (notably the Basque parties Partido Nacionalista Vasco (EAJ-PNV) and EH Bildu, the Catalan parties JuntsxCat, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC)). In relation to the EU, it is necessary to frame the discussion in a generally pro-European environment. The EU is associated with Europe, so in many speeches, there is no distinction between the EU and Europe. The EU is conceived as an association of the most progressive countries, which Spain wants to approach. Thus, there is no advocacy of national specifics and no rallying of politicians against the EU. Thus, the rule of law reports is not seen as a way how to interfere in the internal affairs of the state. The EU is seen by politicians more as another playing field. The only party in the period under review that emphasized that the country should manage its own affairs was the far-right Vox (see below).

Let's look at how political parties refer to the EU in their arguments about the CGPJ. First, references to EU reports, reports of Council of Europe bodies (GRECO, Venice Commission), decisions of the Court of Justice of the EU, and statements by European Commissioners (Jourová, Reynders) appear most in the main opposition parties - the liberal-conservative People's Party and the liberal Ciudadanos - and to a lesser extent in the governing PSOE. Left-wing parties such as Unidas Podemos mention the EU only minimally. Of the regional parties, the separatist parties EH Bildu and ERC have been the most involved in the debate, using the situation more to promote their own causes and to demonstrate that there is no independent judiciary in the country.

The two main political parties - the PSOE and the PP - used the rule of law reports in favour of their solution to the CGPJ stalemate. The PSOE stressed that the European Commission demands the renewal of the body in the first place. Only then can the debate on changing the method of appointment begin. In this position, the governing parties has been supported by the parties that currently support them as regional parties, including separatist ones. On the contrary, the PP has given priority to changing the method of appointment of the 12 judicial members of the CGPJ. It argued that the Spanish system should be brought into line with European standards. The

liberal Ciudadanos party held similar positions, although it differed from the PP in the details of its proposal to change the CGPJ's appointment method.

The following table (Table 1) summarises the political statements on the role of the EU in resolving the stalemate on the CGPJ and the related concerns about the independence and impartiality of the judiciary in the country.

Table 1: *The EU in the national political debate on the CGPJ*

Statement	Political Party
The EU supports the unblocking and renewal of the CGPJ in the first place	PSOE, Unidas Podemos EAJ-PNV, EH Bildu, ERC
The EU supports the change in the method of appointment of CGPJ members	PP, Ciudadanos
The EU is a safeguard against the deepening politicization of the judiciary	PP JuntsxCat
The country must approximate to European standards	PP
The international image of the country is being damaged	PSOE PP, Ciudadanos ERC
Spanish government goes against the EU	PP, Ciudadanos
The EU may activate the general conditionality regime for the protection of the Union budget against Spain	PP, Ciudadanos
EU may trigger Article 7 TEU against Spain	Ciudadanos
Spain is compared to Poland	PP, Ciudadanos
Spain is compared to Hungary	Ciudadanos
Spain should solve the problem without EU intervention	Vox

Source: Author

The EU was seen as a safeguard against the deepening politicization of the judicial council. The fact that there was no agreement between the political parties was attributed by the opposition to the government. The limitation of the powers of the body after the expiration of its mandate was

then interpreted as a step against the recommendations of the European institutions. For example, senator De Rosa Torner (PP) stated in the plenary session of the upper house on 20 July 2022: “You, ladies and gentlemen of the Socialist Group, are in rebellion against Brussels. You are in rebellion against Brussels, which has indicated that the General Council of the Judiciary must be renewed... The judicial policy of the Government worries Brussels, and you know that it can apply the conditionality mechanism, the mechanism that has been ratified by the European Court of Justice, which provides that those states that seriously endanger the rule of law may be deprived of European funds; this has happened in Poland, and this has happened in Hungary” (Senado, 2022).

Considerable attention was paid to the country’s international image. Political parties, especially mainstream ones, perceived that the impasse over the CGPJ was damaging the country’s international reputation creating a negative image within EU institutions and other European states. The opposition parties - PP and Ciudadanos - also compared the situation in the country to Poland and Hungary. At the 28 January 2021 plenary session of the lower house, Ciudadanos deputy Bal Francés said: “You pretend that my country, you pretend that Spain, resembles a country that is governed by the ultra-right [Poland] and that is an absolutely authoritarian system...” (Congreso de los Diputados, 2021a). At the plenary session of 16 May 2023, his statements escalated to: “You pretend in this to homologate with Poland or with Hungary; you prefer to homologate with Orbán than not to homologate with Macron” (Congreso de los Diputados, 2023). Addressing the PSOE at the plenary session of the upper house on July 20, 2022, senator Pradas Ten (PP) said: “Rectify, because we have a lot at stake, not only the credibility of Spanish institutions, but also our economy, the economy of the Spaniards, who are the ones out there and whom we represent.”(Senado, 2022).

National specifics or national sovereignty did not play a significant role. The only party that referred to national sovereignty with the idea that the country should solve the problem itself was the far-right Vox. Deputy Ortega Smith-Molina (Vox) said at the plenary session of the lower house on 16 May 2023: „How does the People’s Party justify returning to this issue? It says it is because the Greco group, because the Venice Commission or the Court of Justice of the European Union itself tell us that it should be done this way, but do we not believe in our own national and judicial sovereignty? Do we have to wait for the European Union or the various international organizations to tell us that we have to defend the division of powers and judicial independence?”(Congreso de los Diputados, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The CGPJ case reveals a complex matrix of relationships between the national and supranational levels in the context of safeguarding the rule of law in the EU. On the question of the Commission's influence on member states, the article supports the finding that it makes extensive use of persuasion and pressure, as remedies must be achieved at the national level. In addition to rule of law reports, interactions take the form of letters, meetings and public statements. Persuasion and pressure thus remain the Commission's main tools vis-à-vis member states.

On the national side, the article examined how political actors use EU interventions in political competition. The EU has become an integral part of the political debates on the CGPJ impasse. Judicial actors see the EU as a safeguard against further deterioration. By turning to the European Commission, they have made the issue more visible on the international stage. It can be said that they have actively sought the involvement of EU actors in finding a solution. The justice sector thus expected that EU pressure would force politicians to compromise.

Political parties on their part were highly responsive to the EU critique and admitted the problem. They did not rally against the EU and did not consider that the EU is interfering too much in domestic affairs with the only exception of the far-right Vox. They have strategically used EU reports, visits and statements to justify their position on the issue, but this has not led to any compromise. However, rule of law reports and EU interventions have raised the visibility of the problem and increased the parties' concern about the country's international image. This has had an impact at the national level. But the Spanish case has also shown that the potential loss of influence over an important institution still outweighs a country's international reputation.

To date, the situation has not changed and the renewal of the CGPJ is still blocked. This means that even in a pro-European environment, EU intervention may not lead to a remedy. On the other hand, EU involvement has prevented further politicization of the body. It has also contributed to the formulation of new proposals for the appointment of the CGPJ (PP, Ciudadanos) and prevented the reduction of the majority for the appointment of the CGPJ (withdrawal of the proposal by the government). It remains to be seen whether the current government will manage to reach an agreement with the opposition, possibly by getting the EU more involved. Further developments on this issue may follow the European Parliament elections and the formation of the new Commission.

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SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE PERIPHERY. A CASE STUDY OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN REGION¹

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Abstract

Each country has specific regions, which differ mainly in social, demographic, cultural, and economic aspects. Our subject of interest is the study of peripheral environment that has undergone several migratory transformations in the 20th century that have affected it up to the present day. For this reason, the Sudetenland has become the subject of our research interest. The paper aims to show how the selected respondents from the studied region perceive everyday life and how it influences their political attitudes by combining three steps: the theoretical definition of the periphery, specific aspects of life in the selected Central European region, and qualitative structured interviews. For this purpose, we chose respondents' experiences with the political regime until 1989, quality of life, public services, the consequences of the transformation, access to education, the functioning of the community, and their attitudes towards supporting selected political parties. The paper shows how positive experiences of the past regime, but also emotions, mainly nostalgia, frustration and anger, are interwoven into support for political parties for some of the respondents. These factors lead to the choice of populist and radical parties. The authors uniquely extend existing theories of the periphery with a political science approach.

Keywords: *Periphery, Quality of life, Electoral support, Bruntál region, Socioeconomic situation, 1989.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is focused on the study of peripheries in the Czech Republic, more precisely, the periphery, which is the territory of the Bruntál district

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(in the paper, we also use the name Bruntálsko). The paper intends to fill the research gap on peripheries in the Czech Republic, which are known to be very diverse due to their different development, development potential, level of social capital, various negative and positive influences, resettlement and depopulation, economic problems, etc. (Bernard, Šimon, 2018, p. 50-74). We chose the qualitative approach because our purpose is "to interpret reality, not to describe it correctly" (Švaříček, Šedová, 2007, p. 298). Thus, conducting representative research from which we can draw general conclusions is not essential. Instead, we want to focus on reflecting on the everyday experiences of individuals or groups (Hendl, 2012). This method of research was also chosen because we have a range of quantitative data and research, which will be presented below. However, we lack qualitative studies with conclusions that would shed more thorough light on the way the selected environment is perceived, the quality of life and the way of thinking about society and politics. In the social sciences, it is not easy to define qualitative research, as it encompasses various approaches. What they have in common is what we have already stated: understanding the issue is more important than describing it. Our method of data collection, structured interviews and data analysis, which is a single case study, are subordinate to this aim. If we want to understand the specific problems of a particular region, we cannot do with a single approach, for example, from the political science perspective alone, but we require a broader interdisciplinary approach, utilizing sociological, historical, and geographical perspectives.

The Bruntál district, located in the north-eastern part of the Czech Republic, was chosen as the territorial unit of the research. Bruntál district belongs to the border, outer periphery. It overlaps with the historical territory of the Sudetenland and is characterized by the change of population, namely its several migrations in the 20th century, as well as cultural discontinuity. (Spurný, 2011) This situation significantly impacts the development of the local society, values, economic and social situation. In 2022, the research agency STEM surveyed and issued a typology of Czech municipalities. The survey was part of the Quality of Life Database project. The main types include (a) successful municipalities, (b) settled municipalities, (c) municipalities on the edge, (d) industrial municipalities, (e) neglected municipalities and (f) complicated municipalities. According to the survey's authors, the last category carries a historical burden and includes the municipalities of the former Sudetenland. They are characterized by higher crime rates, higher numbers of executions, structural problems, poorer quality of housing stock,

low election participation, the existence of excluded localities, increased support for extremist parties, etc. (STEM, 2022).

The peripheral position of Bruntál creates a suitable space for our research. The factors that characterize the type of such a complicated municipality also represent different forms of deprivation that complement and reinforce each other. Shaw introduced the concept of deprivation, which consists of three dimensions, as summarized by Burke and Jones (2019, p. 96): “Household deprivation (such as low income), opportunity deprivation (availability of services), and mobility deprivation (barriers to transport)”. The interaction of these deprivations reinforces the peripheral position of the region. Negative factors, ranging from limited public services to loss of togetherness, lead to emotions of nostalgia (Buzalka, 2018), frustration, and grievances (Muliavka, 2021; Flinders, Hinterleitner, 2022), which are most likely to be reflected in support for populist parties (Webber, 2023). We are aware that everyday lived experiences and emotions play a significant role in supporting political parties, not just socio-economic factors (Garry, 2014; Suhay, Erisen 2018; Marandici, 2022).

Based on these facts, we formulate two research questions: (1) what views and attitudes do respondents hold about everyday life? (2) How does this experience translate into their political attitudes and voting preferences?

In the first part of the article, we discuss the literature review, which theoretically defines the issue of peripheries, as well as socio-economic characteristics and the specifics of the Sudetenland and the selected region, i.e. Bruntál. In part 2, we present the basic characteristics of voting behavior in the region. In part 3, we discuss the methodology, in particular the introduction of respondents, for the qualitative research. In part 4, we analyze the qualitative structured interviews, followed by a conclusion summarizing the research.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

As we stated in the introduction, two themes are crucial for our research: the theoretical clarification of the concept of the periphery and its concrete materialization in the literature concerning Bruntál or the Sudetenland as such.

Research on peripheries is extensive and builds on a core-periphery polarity (Musil, Müller, 2008), with peripheries being understood as areas “on the outskirts”. It also depends on which area of science the issue is viewed. From a geographical perspective, peripheries “are the result of

uneven development of society in a territory. This development is influenced by different historical, political, economic, social, cultural and natural conditions“ (Havlíček, Chromý, Jančák, Marada, 2005). The periphery depends on the center and cannot generate its resources. We particularly refer to administrative, economic, political, and cultural dependence. Social sciences have come up with other definitions. For example, Bernt and Colini (2013, p. 3) define the complex concept of the periphery as follows: „We define peripheralization as a multidimensional process which includes economic (deindustrialization, restructuring), social (impoverishment, discrimination, stigmatization) and political (exclusion from decision-making, dependence) phenomena and leads to the emergence of peripheries characterized by dependence, disconnection, poverty, and outmigration. “ In a theoretical study, Kühn (2015) shows that the increase in socio-spatial inequalities led to an increased interest in the study of peripheries and marginalized territories and that the concept builds on insights gained in the economic, political and social fields. Specifically, this means that the issue of peripheralization can be explained through three theoretical approaches: economic polarization, social inequality, and political power. In the case of power, two key factors express the relationship of the periphery to the core (center): dependency and exclusion. The study of inequalities has been noticeably affected by the financial crisis (since 2008), which has led to a further decline of the peripheries (Parker and Tsarouhas, 2018), of which the most visible is depopulation, entailing the erosion of socio-territorial cohesion, the reduction of services, the further deepening of economic and social problems, etc. (Ślusarz, 2021). The decline in the quality of life and socio-economic environment affects citizens' attitudes, including political ones. In this regard, over the last twenty years or so, political scientists have focused on populism. Populist parties and movements are also gaining strong support in peripheral areas, including those that we refer to as structurally disadvantaged (Bláha, 2023; Suchánek, Hasman, 2022; Kevický, 2022), which includes Bruntál region. Some research focuses on the shift of votes from the more traditional focal points of support for left-wing parties to populist projects and the radical right. This phenomenon is encountered across European societies, such as the German one, especially in former East Germany (Ziblatt, Hilbig, Bischof 2023), the European peripheries (Bellucci, Lobo, Lewis-Beck 2012; Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou 2023) and, of course, also in the Czech Republic (Lysek, Lebeda, 2018). Some of the research is devoted to various case studies showing the factors influencing the choice of populist parties. This could be a higher share of

Roman Catholics in the population in Slovakia (Garaj, Bardovič, Mihálik, 2021), a lack of ideology (Maškarinec 2019), economic or political crises, or a weak civil society (Guasti 2020). In terms of voting behavior, this certainly includes the concept of cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Together with the development of party systems, their erosion, and the transformation of values in society, which has undergone several crises since 2008, the pressure of globalization, etc., the influence of these lines is also evolving. While in the first transformation period after 1989 in the Czech Republic, the socio-economic line, i.e., the modified owner-worker cleavage, played an essential role (Hloušek, Kopeček 2004), in the subsequent period, the (also modified) core-periphery line is crucial for electoral behavior.

Research and literature on peripheries are well available in the Czech context, and it is crucial what properties are being investigated. These are the characteristics that we can then assess peripheries against. Bernard (2018, p. 17) focused on purely rural peripheries, which are inhabited by 10 to 20% of the population of the Czech Republic and which exhibit many negative phenomena, such as higher unemployment, precarious and semi-legal work, etc. The consensus is that most Czech peripheries are inland (Musil, Muller, 2008). Marada (2001, p. 22-23) stated that a periphery “is an area characterized by a sparser population, less progressiveness of the economic structure (associated with a lower number of entrepreneurs), as well as a lower rate of material investment, fewer secondary school facilities and a lower intensity of crime. These areas are often located at a greater distance from regional centers. “The research adds other characteristics, such as higher unemployment rates, poorer job availability, lower quality education, higher execution rates, aging, and limited cultural activities. Bernard and Šimon (2017, p. 22) point out that there is no single type of periphery; “this finding leads us to believe that a multidimensional conception of rural peripheral areas, in which we can distinguish several types of the peripheral area according to the predominant type of disadvantage, is plausible in the Czech Republic.” The authors draw attention to an important and specific circumstance that emerged in the context of the post-Soviet transformation. It “exposed several border regions with relatively unstable populations and high migration turnover due to post-war population change” (Bernard, Šimon, 2017, p. 22). Although from the point of view of the Czech Republic as a whole, the transition to a democratic regime was successful, we observe a different development in the areas where the socialist production base has not been well transformed, i.e., in the areas of coal mines, heavy industry, or some near-border areas (for example, in the Jeseníky region). The negative aspects

of this development include depopulation, higher levels of unemployment, lower incomes, leaving of younger and more educated people, the aging of the population, low intensity of housing construction, reduction of public transport, etc. (Kubeš, Kraft, 2011, p. 806). Thus, we can say that the impact of the transformation in these areas has further deepened peripheralization, which is also an important finding for our study. A multidisciplinary approach to peripheries has been taken by Jeřábek et al. (2021), who analyzed peripheries in the Czech Republic through 15 indicators, including transport accessibility, internet coverage or economic level, with findings confirming the existence of internal rather than external peripheries, i.e., peripheries at the border. From a territorial perspective, the Bruntál district is a combination of these two peripheries, external and internal.

The second important dimension important for our research is that Bruntál is part of the Moravian Sudetenland. The border area located in the territory of the former Sudetenland is characterized by three facts: „1. peripheral location in relation to the center; 2. specific natural and climatic conditions (predominance of higher altitude areas); 3. socio-cultural discontinuity caused by the historical development (the displacement of Germans and the subsequent resettlement of the borderlands after World War II).“ (Chromý, 2000, p. 70) These three factors are crucial for our research, especially the discontinuity that is part of qualitative interviews.

The boom in research interest in this area occurred after 1989. In this respect, social science research has focused on the region's history, especially in the 20th century. The parts of the Sudetenland lying within the territory of Bohemia and Moravia are very well reflected in the scientific and expert literature; see in particular the books *Proměny sudetské krajiny* ("The Changes of Sudetenland landscape," Spurný, 2006), *Zmizelé Sudety* ("The Lost Sudetenland," Mikšíček, 2006) or the monograph devoted to minorities in the borderlands after 1945 (Spurný, 2011). Spurný has defined the Sudetenland as a region that distinguishes itself primarily on three levels: "The first is the specificity given by its particular geography, especially its mountainous terrain, and the particular history shaped by the Germans there. We, therefore, speak, for example, of a Sudeten type of settlement. The second layer is the specificity given by expulsion, rapid settlement, demolition, neglect, uprootedness, abandonment, inhospitality, Sudeten homelessness (...) And the third is the aforementioned power and the revival of the Sudetenland inspired by it, which has become one of the great themes of contemporary Czech society, especially among the younger generation." (Spurný, 2006, p. 12). All these aspects are reflected in life in

the Bruntál region, as evidenced by Karel's historical syntheses, especially *Příběh lesů a lidí Rýmařovska* ("The Story of the Forests and People of the Rýmařov Region", Karel, 2008) and the monumental book *Rýmařov v dějinách* ("Rýmařov in History", Karel, 2021). Nature, landscapes and their use by people, migration, often documented by the stories of individual people, and the slow revival of society after 1989 are prominent aspects of Karel's books and smaller studies. Migration, in turn, influences the formation of social capital and local or regional identity. The dimension of such regional identity is crucial regarding individuals' values, as it is the basis for forming and functioning communities. Individual identity can be understood as "the result of social interaction between the individual and the society." In contrast, regional identity is understood as "a constructed concept based on historical consciousness, the existence of values, norms by which an individual identifies with a given territory and local group" (Cejpová, Šimáková, 2021, p. 102, 103). Similarly, Fialová and Vágner (2012, p. 124) reflect that "(i)dentitý is a process of changing the state in which we define who we are and who we become by our choices." If identity results from commonly shared values, it is also essential in forming belonging and communities. The theory of belonging works with this idea and talks about the various bonds that create belongingness, which can positively affect attitudes toward democracy (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

In line with what has already been mentioned, border regions, which are the outer peripheries, are characterized by many negative phenomena, ranging from higher unemployment, a higher number of executions, a lower share of university graduates in the population, lower performance of primary school students, and lower life expectancy than in places with a higher standard of living (Grossmann, Jurajda, Zapletalová, 2023). The interconnections and contexts of some of these phenomena have been traced by Prokop (2019) in his book *Slepé skvrny* ("Blind Spots"), where he has pointed out, among other things, the considerable regional differences in Czech society, with the inner peripheries (among the Czech regions) and border areas being particularly disadvantaged, where the level of education is lower than the average for the population as a whole: "The offsprings of less educated parents are also significantly more likely to fall into execution or be long-term unemployed." (Prokop, 2019, p. 72) These individuals are then less supportive of democracy and tend to be more supportive of authoritarianism (Šaradín et al., 2021). The above-mentioned negative phenomena, which are interrelated, have an impact, for example, on voter participation (Linek, Lyons 2007, pp. 63-85), which is lower here than in

the average population, or on support for extremist, radical, and populist parties. The latter is higher in peripheral areas than the average gains of these subjects in the whole country. Petr Daněk has shown, using data from the 1990s, that “the differences between continuously settled and under-settled places remain significant” (Daněk, 2000, p. 60), especially regarding the electoral results of some parties. Based on the three parliamentary elections in the border areas, he already observed higher support for Sládek’s Republicans, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and the left as such (especially the ČSSD, Czech Social Democratic Party). The spatial analysis of the Czech party system was the focus of Kouba (2007). In the case of the Sudetenland, “(h)istorical reasons for the above-average identification with the Communist Party in the former German-populated borderlands seem to lie in the post-war involvement of the Communist Party in the expulsion of the German population and the subsequent confiscation and redistribution of German property” (Kouba, 2007, p. 1032). The Sudeten regions also determined the outcome of the presidential elections held in both 2013 and 2018: “(T)he largest mobilization effect took place on the internal borders of the regions, especially in the Ústí nad Labem, Karlovy Vary and Pilsen regions. Therefore, these areas, which partly resemble the historical Sudetenland, decided the election” (Lysek, Lebeda, 2018). The electoral situation in the former Sudetenland is perceived in this way by the national media, as evidenced by headlines such as “Economist: the Sudetenland votes differently. Lower education, fewer jobs, and fear for property are to blame” (Hronová, 2021), “Post-war expulsion of Germans still directly influences the political map of Sudetenland, says scientist” (Musil, 2021), “Lessons from the election: will loving care for Sudetenland fix it?” (Zámečník, 2018), “The Sudeten curse of Czech democracy continues. Whoever breaks this will win.” (Jandourek, 2021).

An interesting study was published by Guzi, Herber, and Mikula (2021) in which they concluded that population change in areas formerly inhabited by Germans has a long-lasting effect. These areas are characterized by lower social capital that results in more frequent migration, less participation in local associations, and fewer social gatherings. Researchers from the IDEA think tank have examined the impact of liberation involving either the Soviet or the US military. Grossmann and Jurajda (2022) showed that more Sudeten Germans remained in the parts of the Sudetenland liberated by the American army, which resulted in higher voter support for the Communist Party of the Czech Republic. In the communities in these areas, citizens also held more left-wing attitudes than in those liberated by the Soviets.

There are studies depicting the historical, demographic (Hlavienka, 2020; Niesner, 2015), social (Stanoev, 2018), cultural (Bielešová, 2016), and economic development of Bruntál (Bartoš 1994; Karel 2008), which show its peripheral position. Data and forecasts point to a further gradual decline of the population, which is ultimately expected to be substantial (Tvrđý, 2009). However, more recent research on the area is lacking. Still, we have no information on how people perceive life in Bruntál and how this translates into their voting preferences.

The literature conceptualizes the former Sudetenland as a “(l)aboratory, which to this day makes it possible to observe the consequences of such a drastic change very clearly - the fundamental transformation of the landscape, including the not sporadic disappearance of villages, extensive and largely persistent social, national and religious heterogeneity of the new population or the specific (and again largely heterogeneous) identity of these people and the related ambivalent relationship to the places of memory of the original German population“ (Stočes, Váně, 2017, p. 41). This perceived laboratory of change, which began with the breakup of Czechoslovakia and the forced flight or expulsion of “160-170,000 Czechs, Jews, and of course Sudeten Germans from their homes to the inland“(Kural, 2002, p. 110), continued through the post-war displacement of the German population to several waves of varying degrees of resettlement in the borderlands. We can say that “cultural-historical regions exist only insofar as they exist in the consciousness of the inhabitants, and when the inhabitants forget their existence, the regions effectively disappear“ (Siwek, Bogdová 2007, p. 1041). As we have stated, the socio-economic situation in the territories of the former Sudetenland has its specificities, which are also manifested in other areas, such as voters’ political preferences.

2 MAIN ELECTORAL TRENDS

In the previous text, we mentioned some specific features of voting behavior in the Bruntál region. The basic socio-demographic characteristics include an increase in the proportion of elderly residents, a higher proportion of unemployed, a lower proportion of people with a university degree, a higher proportion of people with foreclosures, a population decline (by 15% in the last 20 years), etc. (Český statistický úřad, 2022) These are features that correspond to the periphery as presented in the theoretical framework above. Due to the socio-economic characteristics of the population and the social structure, left-wing parties have been dominant here since the first

parliamentary elections in 1990 (Kouba, 2007), which were later replaced by populist parties (see Table 1).

Table 1: Electoral support of selected parties (in %)

	1996		1998		2002		2006		2010		2013		2017		2021	
	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ
ČSSD		26.4	43.2	32.3	33.5	30.2	39.1	32.3	28.8	22.1	26.1	20.5	8.5	7.3	5.0	4.6
KSČM	12.2	10.3	14.8	11.0	27.9	18.5	18.4	12.8	17.1	11.3	22.1	14.9	12.0	7.8	5.5	3.6
ANO	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18.4	18.6	36.6	29.6	36.2	27.1
SPD	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9.9	6.9	15.1	10.6	15.5	9.6

Source: Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ). Note: BR – Bruntál region, CZ – The Czech Republic.

In 2013, the entity led by Tomio Okamura ran under the name Úsvit, and since 2015, it has run under the name Svoboda a přímá demokracie (SPD).

Looking at the support for political parties in the parliamentary elections in Bruntál district, there is a noticeable inclination first to left-wing parties and later to more populist and radical parties. Direct presidential elections have been held in the Czech Republic since 2013, and the Bruntál district is characterized by a strong anti-liberal orientation, manifested by the strong support of Miloš Zeman and Andrej Babiš (Table 2).

Table 2: Second round of the presidential election

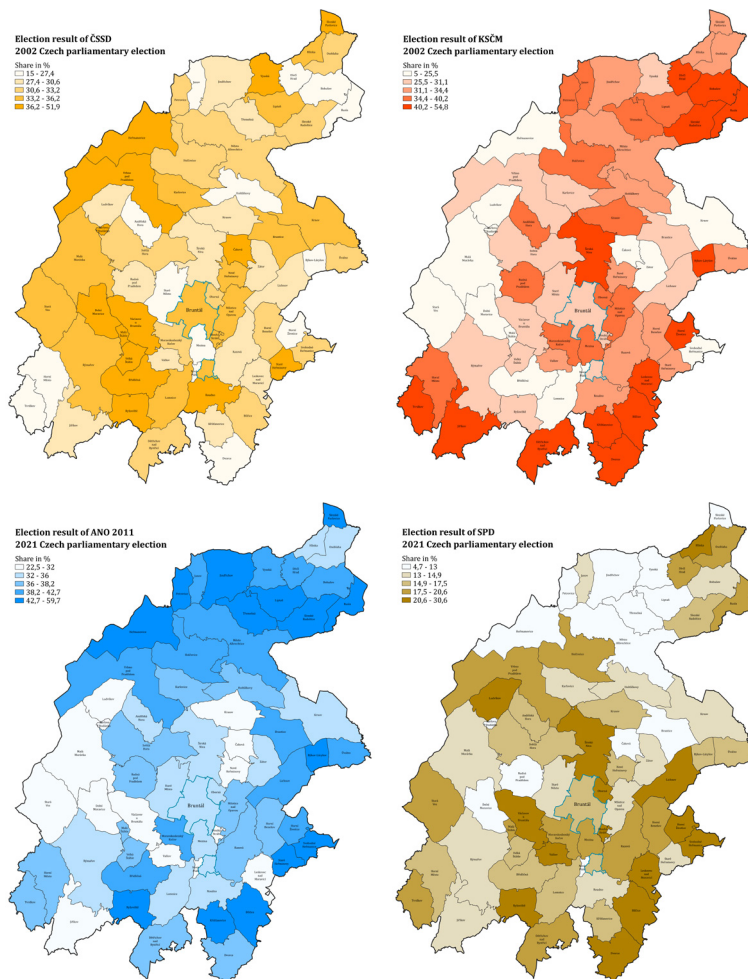
	2013		2018		2023	
	BR	CZ	BR	CZ	BR	CZ
Miloš Zeman	73.9	54.8	-	-	-	-
Karel Schwarzenberg	26.1	45.2	-	-	-	-
Miloš Zeman	-	-	68.6	51.4	-	-
Jiří Drahoš	-	-	31.4	48.6	-	-
Andrej Babiš	-	-	-	-	60.3	41.7
Petr Pavel	-	-	-	-	39.7	58.3

Source: Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ). Note: BR – Bruntál region, CZ – The Czech Republic.

The trend of strengthening the radical right and political populism at the expense of the left, especially in its original bastions, can be observed in various parts of Europe (Berman, Snegovaya, 2019). It is also true that in peripheries like Bruntál, some social factors are stronger, for example due to significant transition costs after 1989. One of the main consequences was high unemployment. For many, the past regime represented security, functioning services and employment. (Kunštát, 2013, pp. 171-180). This may justify the strong position of the Communist Party of the Czechoslovak Republic and the support for the social policy of the ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party). Table 1 shows the gains made by the left from the first parliamentary elections in the independent Czech Republic to the most recent ones. Adding up the votes for the Communists and the Social Democrats, the strongest support for the left was in 2002, with a total of 61.4% of the vote. In the last parliamentary elections (2021), which were already dominated by the populists (ANO) and the radical populist right (SPD), the gain for both left parties was only 10.5% of the vote. The weakening of the left in less than twenty years is extreme, especially in the Bruntál district itself. The KSČM (Communist Party) has weakened by 24%, and the ČSSD even by 28% of the vote in two decades. There is an important note to the results. The Czech party system underwent a major electoral break in 2010, which is also partly evident in Table 2. At that time, the traditional parliamentary parties declined, which also affected the left—the year 2010 also marked the emergence of new political parties and movements. The parliamentary elections confirmed this trend of their strengthening in 2017 and 2021.

Maps 1-4 show the voter support in the individual municipalities of Bruntál district in 2002 for the ČSSD and KSČM, and then in 2021 for ANO and SPD. This study does not aim to track vote shifts between parties, but the overlay shows the similarity of the maps with support for ČSSD and ANO on the one hand and KSČM and SPD on the other. The gains for ANO in some municipalities in 2021 were enormous, reaching up to the 60% mark. In 2002, the KSČM and ČSSD could gain at most slightly more than 50% of the vote in some municipalities.

Maps 1-4: Support for ČSSD and KSČM (2002) and ANO and SPD (2021) in municipalities



Source: Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ), made by Jakub Janega.

3 METHODOLOGY

The primary field information collection methods we have chosen fall within the broad field of oral history recording. Qualitative research is based on structured interviews with open-ended questions. The range of

topics followed the broader framework of everyday life that developed in the study region in 1989. Demographically, it is an intricately composed unit with the potential for different social interactions in the respective social strata assumed. The questions related to the past before 1989 as well as to the new living, social and cultural situation in the Bruntál region after 1990. Respondents were selected via purposive sampling, where we anticipated interviewing information-rich cases. Respondents were selected to be familiar with the environment and showed a deeper insight and interest in the region. Therefore, we selected respondents from the local government sector, historians and respondents who had experience with the situation before 1989. We supplemented these with younger respondents with experience mainly with the post-Soviet situation. We worked with a structured set of questions, assuming the acquisition of original, historically interesting information (primary source material), which, unlike free-flowing and uncorrected personal memories, is targeted at the range of topics that we subsequently discuss with other respondents. This method of analysis allows us to confirm theoretical assumptions about social aspects of life in the periphery, highlight selected themes and specify them. Of course, it also allows both research questions to be answered. The responses were analyzed through open coding, axial coding and selective coding, which allowed us to grasp the overall results.

Throughout the research, we worked with 23 respondents selected to achieve theoretical saturation in the responses and to obtain conclusive findings. We consider the number of respondents to be sufficient and consistent with our previous research (Lebeda, Kubátová, Šaradín, Hojgrová, 2021). The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The selection of respondents considered geographical, social, age, cultural, gender, and political diversity. Although the accounts of respondents in the over-60 category are crucial for our research, we were also interested in the experience of younger respondents. According to age, we therefore use three age categories: 60+, 40 to 59, and 39 and below.

The purpose of dividing the respondents into these three age categories is to support the aim of the article, i.e. to find out the opinions on the above-mentioned issues of people who experienced the period before 1989 and the subsequent social changes in their fully productive age (60+), partially (40-59) and who do not fully remember it or are not burdened by it (<39 years). It is not our aim to compare these age groups, but age serves the reader to understand the respondent's statements. The interviews took place between 2020 and 2022.

Table 3: Respondents and their basic characteristics

Participant number	Gender	Position in the research	Age category
1	Woman	Mayor	60+
2	Man	Mayor	60+
3	Woman	Vice-mayor	40-59
4	Man	Mayor	40-59
5	Woman	Mayor	60+
6	Man	Former employee of a state farm	60+
7	Woman	Former employee of a state farm	60+
8	Man	Former state farm employee and national committee worker	60+
9	Man	Former employee of a state farm	60+
10	Man	Historian	60+
11	Man	Historian	60+
12	Woman	Historian	40-59
13	Woman	Representative of the resettled population	60+
14	Woman	Representative of the resettled population	60+
15	Man	Representative of the resettled population	60+
16	Woman	Representative of the resettled population	60+
17	Man	Representative of amenity migration	40-59
18	Woman	Representative of amenity migration	40-59
19	Man	Representative of amenity migration	40-59
20	Woman	Representative of a vacation homeowner	40-59
21	Man	Representative of amenity migration	Under 39
22	Woman	Daughter of a representative of the resettled population	Under 39
23	Woman	Daughter of a representative of the resettled population	Under 39

The range of topics followed the issues of everyday life that has evolved in the region over the last 30 years. As already mentioned, demographically, it is an intricately composed entity with the assumed potential for different social interactions in the corresponding social strata. Our interest was mainly in the findings based on the theoretical concept of the periphery and in findings with specific subjective experiences of the periphery. We decided to go beyond statistical data and focus on interpreting experiences, prioritizing understanding rather than explanation. We emphasize that this type of research does not allow for generalizations that would hold for all peripheries in the Czech Republic. Still, it is a deeper probe into understanding issues with political implications and seeing specific voting behavior. To appropriately target the everyday life experience in the region, core themes included questions related to perceptions of the consequences of transition, access to education, community functioning, and attitudes towards support for political parties. These themes (e.g. infrastructure, transport, etc.) are pursued in the theoretical concepts of periphery, as discussed in Part 1 of the article. The basis for selecting themes was a document on relevant indicators of quality of life in the country (Maussen 2018). Our interviews also included the topic of experience with the past regime. Questions related to the participants' recollections were asked only the respondents who had experienced the past regime.

4 EVERYDAY LIFE AND PERCEPTION OF SOCIETY

In this section, we analyze factors related to quality of life as presented above, the social climate of the past and present and political attitudes. Based on the preceding information, we can conclude that Bruntál, as a peripheral area, is, to a large extent, a relatively isolated region, which may be reflected, for example, in the inaccessibility of some public services. From the responses recorded, it emerged that the region's transport and public transport services are generally very poor. The Bruntál district is located on the border of the Olomouc and Moravian-Silesian regions. This generates a significant communication mismatch and poorly set up logistics of transport connections between the two areas. The complexity of transport is illustrated by the testimony of respondent 5, who has served as mayor of the municipality for many years: *"Many connections are not connected to each other because of how the regions were created. The line from the Moravian-Silesian region actually runs into the Olomouc region, so the transport infrastructure, both to work and to schools, is quite difficult."*

The state of the railway connection and its (im)possible development in the future is illustrated by the statement of a historian who has experience of the whole region in the context of his profession (respondent 11): *“The railway line that is here is over 100 years old and, unfortunately, it is built in such a way that it cannot be made double-tracked, so getting to Olomouc or Ostrava is a problem.”*

In the interviews, nostalgia emerges not only for the system of former district authorities, which primarily provided essential public services, but also for functional transport. Citizens see the integration of the whole area into the Moravian-Silesian Region as one of the biggest problems. They are very critical of the (lack of) interest of the regional representatives in the life and needs of the villages in the Bruntál district. From Ruda, which belongs to the municipality of Tvrdkov, the distance to the regional city of Ostrava is 110 kilometers, and to the neighboring regional city of Olomouc is 36 kilometers. From Sovinec, it is only 33 kilometers to Olomouc. Citizens compare the level of care for the municipalities in both regions daily. Respondent No. 11, who is a historian by profession, did not hide his disillusionment and compared the situation: *“When we were the Olomouc district or the Olomouc region, and I have experienced it, it seems to me that the Olomouc region has been so much more accommodating to people until today. Here, as far as the Moravian-Silesian Region is concerned, it seems to me that way, and they sometimes indicate that way; it ends somewhere behind Opava.”* Respondent No. 12, a representative of the younger generation and also the director of one of the cultural institutions in the Bruntál region, critically described the low interest of the region in the studied area: *“...we are a locality that is affected by the fact that we fall under the Moravian-Silesian Region. Whenever anything has been addressed, Rýmařov has always been at the tail end of the region.”* Respondent 1 summed up the situation, the status, and self-assessment of the municipalities in the former Bruntál district very critically: *“People are still aware of what was here. For example, when we tell them the post office is about to be shut down, they feel we can put these municipalities in the muck.”* Respondents confirmed the experience of peripheral areas, i.e., increasingly reduced public transport, but added their experience of public administration reform. Indeed, according to respondents, dysfunctional public services resulted from a poorly executed public administration reform in 2000, which established self-governing regions. Many municipalities in the southern Bruntál district considered referendums on joining the Olomouc region, but the referenda were not held. The administration of the

Moravian-Silesian Region assured the affected municipalities that it would assist them financially and otherwise.

Similarly, the lack of shops in the countryside and the absence of regular and locally available health care are painfully felt by the citizens, to which respondent 5 added a comment about the state of health care in the 1980s in Lomnice: *“At that time there was a health center here, with a doctor for adults once a week and a doctor for children once a week. There used to be a gynecological outpatient clinic and a dental clinic here.”* The situation was similar in Huzová: *“Everything was there, the doctor was there twice a week. There was everything we needed to live”*, confirm the memories of respondent 6.

In the theoretical part, we argued that the post-Soviet economic transformation in the peripheral areas caused considerable social and economic problems, which impacted the closure of institutions and traditional workshops, farms, and factories. In the case of Bruntál, the consequences of the transformation were fatal. Even today, basic infrastructure is missing, causing further underdevelopment. These include poor cellular connections and the cancellation of telephone lines. Sometimes, only expensive satellite equipment is available, and there is no internet connection in some parts of the region. Not everyone can afford it, and it certainly does not add to the region's attractiveness, which is battling the fact that young people tend to leave. A 90-year-old woman (respondent 14) speaks critically about the current opportunities for young people: *“There are no jobs here, where are these people supposed to go to work? I have a son in Rýmařov; he has children in Brno, and they don't even want the house here. Well, what about here? Nothing! There's not even a shop here.”*

Respondent 4, who has experience as a deputy mayor and a mayor, has been trying to fight the migration of young people and the labor force throughout his term of office. He was aware of the region's limits in both capacities: *“We are still in the borderlands, where people have been moving out for a long time, fleeing. Especially young people are fleeing to bigger cities like Olomouc, Brno, and Prague to find work.”* Respondent 3, a city councilor at the time of the interview, specified the situation by saying: *“The problem is that we are on the periphery, that people here don't have jobs like they used to. The big factories that used to employ hundreds of people no longer exist today. People have to commute for work.”* Respondent 4 also complained about the low supply of skilled jobs: *“Long-term unemployment rate is high here, and the supply of jobs and highly skilled jobs here is lower than in the big cities.”* Respondent 17 also confirmed this specific situation: *“There are no*

job opportunities in Sovinec today unless you work from home via computer; you have nothing here. The nearest are Unex and Miele in Uničov. In Rýmařov and the Bruntál district, the job situation is bad."

The current situation has been gradually and over the long term compared to the massive supply of work before 1989, although previously, it was mainly in working-class occupations. The inhabitants of the Bruntál district experience the disappearance of traditional agriculture as a great pain. Until 1990, traditional agriculture was guaranteed on a large territorial scale by the State Farm Břidličná, with the largest branches in Huzová, Rýžoviště and other villages. The structure of the farm was described by respondent No. 7, who worked in the management of the farm: *"The State Farm Břidličná was comprised of perhaps ten villages. We had about 600 workers and 8,500 hectares of land."* The farm's focus was then described by respondent 8: *"Everything from grain to potatoes was grown here."* His testimony was again elaborated by respondent 8: *"Then there was a whole industry of flax growing. And there were two factories where flax was taken for processing, Čemolen Malá Štáhle and Čemolen Stará Libavá; it was labor intensive."* It must be added that the flax industry, not only here but also in the whole country, gradually disappeared during the 1990s, and with it, the employment opportunities. Both enterprises no longer exist today.

Milk production was another domain of local agriculture. Respondent 9, a former state farm employee, precisely one of its branches, insightfully spoke: *"When we worked in that large capacity cowshed, we focused on quality milk. And if it weren't for 1989, we would have been producing powdered milk for children."* Respondent 9 also criticizes the situation after 1989, when the farm was closed, and expresses his resentment towards the subsidy system, *"After 1989, the private sector took over, and they mostly went to the meat industry and subsidies at any cost. They're not as committed to work anymore because, after all, before 1989, you didn't see uncut meadows here, and now the land is not as farmed as it was."* Respondent 2 added to the picture of the transition period of the late 1990s and early 2000s with its many ills: *"Until 89, the state farm was where most people were employed. Then, there was a sawmill in Těchanov, where people from Jiříkov and the surrounding area were employed. When it all ended, there was a big increase in unemployment rate."* Respondent 9 said, *"As long as the state farm existed here, as long as Hedva existed here, there was employment for young people."*

Respondent 6 described the current situation on the farm in Huzová: *"Today, as far as the farm is concerned, about ten percent of the people who worked here before work here now. Nowadays, the only thing being done here*

from the original agricultural production is cattle breeding on green areas or meat cattle breeding." Based on his experience, Respondent 9 added and assessed the situation in agriculture, "There is not even that agriculture here anymore because whoever is doing agriculture here is only doing it as meadows for hay and cows."

In principle, the residents of Bruntál often compare the situation now with the case before 1989, and they tend to displace negative memories and argue with selectively chosen facts: "After the revolution, everything fell down here... Whether it was supply, transport, medical care... so I think it was better then," Respondent 2 added.

We also include the accessibility of schools, i.e., education, in the sphere of amenities. In the interviews, respondents were very sensitive to this issue. Respondent 5 described the system of clustering school facilities within several neighboring villages, which she said had been in operation from the 1970s until the early 1990s: "There was always a nine-year school here and children from neighboring villages, from Dětřichov and Valšov, came to us for the secondary level." Respondent 6's children had a similar experience, "They went to school here in Lomnica because it was a full nine-year school. I have to say that it makes me very sad that the school has disappeared. There is only a small kindergarten here, only the first to the fourth year. Otherwise, the children go to Bruntál." The situation in Jiříkov was described by respondent 2: "Well, the school ended in 1998, there were not enough children here." He also added that the disappearance of the school had an impact on other areas of social life: "At the same time, the kindergarten, which at that time belonged to the state farm Jiříkov or Huzová, was operating alongside the school. There was also after-school care. There was also a cooking for children and pensioners." As mentioned by respondent 2, the problem was and still is in many places, the lack of children. Respondent 17 recalled how, in the 1970s and 1980s, there were enough children in Sovinec and Jiříkov and compared this situation with the present situation: "There were children here, too. Nowadays, no children here are obliged to go to school." Interviewee 16 from Ruda described a similar experience: "But I remember when there were a lot of people and a lot of children."

Respondent 6 described the problem of the region's aging and the difficult conditions for the upcoming generations in a very suggestive way: "As far as the relationship to the village is concerned, I miss the education of children to be patriotic and to know where they belong. The kids aged six to ten go to Bruntál, spend their free time on the bus, and then don't know where they belong. I always say that we have euro windows, euros, and euro kids."

In this section, we have only discussed the accessibility of schools, leaving aside the quality of teaching, which is lower in peripheral areas than in the rest of the country (Prokop, 2019).

Another set of questions concerned social activities, community belonging, and local identity. Responses relating to community gatherings were often centered on the problems of demolishing community centers and mainly pubs. The lack of social activities was succinctly summed up by respondent 7: *"I think this village used to have quite a social life; I miss that now."* Closing shops, schools, and pubs have substantially affected or dampened the opportunities for social activities, especially in small villages the size of Jiříkov, Sovinec, or Těchanov. According to the respondents, the loss of community is one of the most painful experiences and reinforces negative attitudes towards the center (the capital city of Prague). Respondent 2, for example, commented on the reduction of social life: *"The shop has been closed, the pub as well, so it's not like it used to be... There was also a hospitality industry, but that ended because there was no spending capacity."* Respondent No. 17 also negatively evaluated the disappearance of the pub: *"There was a nice pub here. There were parties there: hunting parties, firefighters' parties and ROH (Communist trade unions). The barber used to go there every Friday; everybody used to meet there, locals and people from the cottages, and everything was handled there."* The futile efforts of the municipal politician to stir up the village community were approximated by Respondent no. 1: *"People at home sit in front of the TV and don't come out, even though it's free, that's a group of people who just aren't interested, who are comfortable like that. And that's all."* Respondent 2 specified the problem in the sports area: *"There used to be sportsmen, hunters, the Red Cross, all of that fell apart when the National Front broke up. Now, there is not even any fun here."* Respondent 17 further clarified the local situation: *"The only thing to do in Jiříkov is to get together on the playground and eat mackerel."*

Respondent 18, who came to Rýžoviště in the early 1980s and spoke enthusiastically about the village's amenities in the past, added another memory: *"They had a theatre group here, so they used to do theatre, so that was great. They used to do all kinds of dances and a lot of (events) for people."* The contemporary witness of a sports club, respondent no. 9, evaluated the current situation very skeptically: *"The young people are not so attracted, and they don't understand that there was a tradition here, that somehow people would get together, have fun... There were football players, firefighters, and then people like that who had no problem helping or doing something for the village, and the fun was worth it. Those people were able and willing to*

have fun.“ Almost two generations younger, respondent 19 also concluded the debate about sport in the village with some very alarming words: *“The times are such that people are no longer interested in anything. Football has been here for fifty years, and they suddenly have a problem getting together.”*

Even the question of whether there is any local identity did not evoke positive emotions among the respondents. Many respondents, not only respondent 1, have been missing *“...the village togetherness, for the people to live together, to be able to talk, even dance and solve their problems.”* Respondent 8 attempted to comment directly on identity: *“It’s the identity of the village, the folklore and what the village used to be about that has been lost.”* In this context, Respondent 4 recalled the issue of post-war displacement and resettlement, which brought people to the region without a closer connection to it: *“The place is still looking for its generational roots.”* He cited a relatively simple indicator of how one can examine rootedness in a place, *“My dad and I used to joke that when you visit the graves during All Saints’ Day, we go all the way to Kyjov. The other part of our family is in Kostelec nad Černými Lesy, and part of our family is in Mníšek pod Brdy. ...(But) when our descendants come to all the graves here (to Bruntál), they will be rooted here. Until then, it’s not a complete connection with this place.”* In addition, respondent 6 stressed the importance of generational relationships and reflection on the past, *“We need to perceive that this is something that those ancestors left us here. We need to maintain it so that it will serve the generations to come.”* Historian - respondent 10, who has spent his entire professional life researching the Bruntál region, emphasized the constant population change, which hinders the connection with the landscape and identity formation. Not only the end of the 1930s, the post-war displacement, and settlement until the beginning of the 1950s, but also the subsequent demands of businesses influence further migration. In the 1960s, some factories were closing down; from the 1970s onwards, the plastics factory started production, which required other professions: *“Again, a new wave of people, and I know many of the people from all these waves here and I know that they don’t say that this is the city that has grown close to their hearts. It’s only maybe now, the youngest generation, after the ‘90s, so it’s starting to look slightly different”.* A certain optimism about a new regional identity, to which the younger generation, who are connected to the place and are organizing themselves civically, could relate, also appeared among other respondents.

Many respondents tried to suggest ways to build and strengthen their relationship with the region. Respondent 12 has worked in the cultural sector for a long time, dealing with the history of a place: *“You always build*

that identity in that place. It's all about the environment you live in and the experiences you get... We try to educate the younger generation from schools and kindergartens; we put on workshops, programs, museum nights, city tours; I think we try to do many things like that to attract the younger generation here."

Respondent 3, however, did not see the situation as dire. Like many other municipal politicians, she tried and still tries to rehabilitate the region, *"People might be interested in looking at what it looks like today, that in some ways the life has certainly moved on, that, of course, the landscape and other things have changed because life here in our region was hard, that those people had to struggle, that it was a hard slogging work day in and day out. And if that brings those people in, we'll be glad."* The people who will move to Bruntál will likely do so because the landscape and history of the place somehow appeal to them. They are and will be able to move despite the lower service offer. The area's hope lies in their ability to qualitatively change the landscape and settlements to come together and bring in a higher social capital.

The conclusion of the interviews focused on political preferences. Respondent No. 18 commented on the evaluation of society in Bruntál: *"When I came here, I was pleasantly surprised. Everything was here. There was a bank and savings and loans office, and all the doctors were here, from the dentist to the pediatrician, gynecologist, or obstetrician. There was a clothing store, a drugstore, a butcher shop, a bakery, Jednota [grocery store], housewares, a post office, everything, in fact. It was totally awesome."* She concluded her testimony by saying that these certainties led her to vote for parties where she felt they could provide society security and stability. Respondent 23, who is still studying at university, adds to the political situation: *"The people I meet are disappointed that no one has helped them. That is why they vote for Okamura and Babiš. And maybe they don't care whether they promise or actually do something. All they need is a protest because they are angry with the whole system."* The respondents' statements led us to believe that many consider their neighborhood frustrating, disappointing and angry. These feelings are mainly directed towards the government; however, respondent 21, also a younger generation member, feels that sometimes the same criticisms are made of the mayor: *"When they criticize, they criticize everybody. They criticize the government and the mayor, even though he's doing his best here."* When people are deprived and unwell, they often blame the government for their failure. Respondents also identified with the perception of Bruntál as a periphery because services do not work and the

state forgets about the residents. Respondent no. 13 believes that people like ANO because Andrej Babiš is the only one who thinks about ordinary people: *“People believe that when he comes back as a prime minister, he will give them something again.”* The interviews also revealed that, in the end, it is the best if people take care of themselves because their problems are not visible from Prague. Thus, the electoral support that went from the left to the populists resulted from the costs of transformation, loneliness (no one is helping the region), nostalgia for security, and anger at the ruling elites. What is particularly strong, it is the image of disappearing living standards, which was visible in 1989 and then disappeared. The disappearance of public services, the weakening of social life, the loss of jobs, and the decline of schools and population lead to a rather strong frustration and anger among many.

CONCLUSION

The article aimed to find out how the respondents perceive the functioning of public services, the consequences of the transformation, the availability of education, the functioning of the community, and what attitudes they have towards supporting political parties according to their everyday life experiences. We focused on explaining the issues from the perspective of the periphery. We formulated two research questions. First, what views and attitudes do respondents hold about everyday life?

The analysis showed that from the point of view of most respondents, or those who had lived through the previous regime, the year 1989 was a turning point. They do not mention the political situation of the pre-1989 period but focus on the quality of life, opportunities, and conditions they had. Jobs were plentiful and services were functioning, which was especially evident in the functional transport mentioned several times. There were schools and shops in the villages, the doctor was available, as was the post office, social events were held and children played sports. The land served the farmers and was cultivated. The situation has been different since the beginning of the 1990s, and according to the respondents' accounts, it has been generally worse. The former agricultural landscape is now used only for livestock farming, schools have closed in many villages, there are no shops or post offices, and people are moving away for work. During the 1990s, industrial production declined, and unemployment increased compared to the national average. The service system has broken down, transport is not working, and services are less frequent. In some places, there is no cellular

signal and no landline. According to respondents, the disappearance of district authorities, the territorial reform of the Czech Republic, and the creation of regions may have contributed to many problems, especially in public administration.

A probe into the lives of the inhabitants of the Bruntál district, or rather their everyday lived experience, reveals that they perceive their surroundings as problematic, they are aware of the peripheral position of the Bruntál district, they feel deprived in terms of social, economic and quality of life. Some respondents also believe that people lack a relationship with the land and have not formed a more robust social bond or identity. The majority of respondents declared a lack of togetherness.

Therefore, a second research question was formulated: how does this experience translate into political attitudes and choices? In particular, older respondents who had experienced the past regime in their working age recall the certainties mentioned earlier and, from their perspective, the fulfilling conditions for a good life. They are critical of politics, especially concerning the government. They initially projected their hopes onto left-wing parties that guaranteed them the necessary certainties, but eventually, they associated their hopes with populist politicians. In many ways, they are influenced by emotions, especially frustration and anger. In many ways, they are influenced by emotions, especially frustration and anger which are the emotions that lead to support for populist parties. The abandonment of the left by these voters is precisely because it has not been able to provide them with certainty and an improved life. In this, our findings coincide with other research (Berman, Snegovaya, 2019; Bandau, 2023).

Thus, the analysis of the responses showed that the respondents are aware of the peripheral position of the region not only in terms of distance from the capital city but also through the lower quality of life, which is, among other things, a consequence of the lack of available services. The Czech Republic has a set way of measuring quality of life, the so-called Indicator Framework for Measuring Quality of Life (Maussen 2018), which served as a basis for developing questions for qualitative interviews and as a document for the analysis of the responses. The findings of the interviews show that older respondents would like to combine the past certainties with the freedoms we can enjoy in the post-Soviet regime.

The qualitative approach proved beneficial because it can capture the respondents' actual mindset and how they understand politics. This is where our research is unique. This probe in one of the peripheral regions shows that dissatisfaction with the functioning of the state (dysfunctional

services) is also a cause. The research also has a significant social benefit, as it shows, through specific testimonies, the problems that significantly reduce the quality of life in the region (for example, no telephone connections).

Qualitative research cannot be expected to replicate the results, but rather to confirm and especially deepen existing theories of the periphery, where sociological and geographical approaches are predominant. Respondents confirm in their statements that they consider their neighbourhood to be a periphery, but we tried to go further, by adding a political dimension. We complement the theoretical concept of periphery with the ways in which older voters in particular express their dissatisfaction, especially through negative emotions. According to some respondents, the social and economic transformation has meant an unnecessary loss of social security, also recorded by electoral support, first for left-wing and later for populist parties. Thus, it appears that enriching existing theories of the periphery with a political science approach can be very beneficial.

The limitation of the study is its narrow territorial validity, as it focuses on a specific periphery, and its conclusions are difficult to transfer. On the other hand, it deepens our knowledge of Bruntál and its inhabitants and goes beyond the existing findings, which are mainly based on quantitative research (Kouba 2007; Tvrđý 2009, Ptáček et al., 2015) or are purely historical (Hlavienka, 2020; Karel, 2008, 2021). More recent and analytical studies of this area are absent.

Future research should focus on how residents perceive security and stability associated with the past regime, especially according to the older people. It would be interesting to examine the extent to which security is a matter of feelings or material security. In the latter case, there is a difference between the demand for direct transfers of money (benefits) and the demand for quality and accessible public services. However, this probably has to do with how we perceive politics and the possibilities we see in it. The research subject could be the peripheral rural areas in the Bruntál region, which have their specificities. Some villages in the Bruntál district are an hour's drive from the district town and are thus among the most remote in the country.

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COVID-19 PANDEMIC – BATTLE OF NARRATIVES: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AS A DEFENCE MECHANISM

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Abstract

The article analyses the development of the COVID-19 pandemic situation in Slovakia, Czechia and Slovenia in the frame of expert, political and administrative narratives. The argumentative part mainly focuses on the development of the narrative in Slovenia and uses the examples from the Czech Republic and Slovakia as the reference frame. Information was collected from the various national media outlets and organized into the comparative time frames and compared with the epidemiological data. Slovenian inconsistencies in communication patterns developed into the complete disintegration of the pandemic crisis management and into the struggle for the supremacy of personal political agenda. As a case study, the article shows the constructivist relativism through the comparison of data and government-media narrative. Thus, the article addresses the issues of relativism on the one hand and of narrative absolutism on the other. The main aim is a critical presentation of “a crisis event” in connection to the government authorities spin on an event according to their political goals. The given case, due to a rather short period, strong media coverage and high data availability, shows inconsistencies of epidemiological data interpretation, resulting in multiple realities, causing multiple responses that paralysed effective decision-making as well as effective policy measures.

Keywords: *Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia, COVID-19, Social constructivism, Social relativism.*

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, SARS-CoV2 (from here on COVID-19, as it is commonly known) pandemics was an interesting “curiosity” that became a modern nightmare, which reduced the 2015 migration crisis, war in Syria and 2008 economic crisis into the oblivion. It hit globally and personally, and it showed us a

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civilizational mirror in many different ways. Despite historical understanding of a pandemic, world was absolutely unprepared for anything that we saw. However, history of pandemics shows that COVID-19 is a rather natural element comparable with the Asian flu of 1957-58 and the Hong Kong flu of 1968-70, both claiming between 1-4 million lives, not to mention the Spanish flu of 1918-20, claiming up to 100 million lives. We are skipping out less deadly epidemics and those which are not spreadable without human contact (e.g. HIV/AIDS). As well we will try to completely ignore that according to the World Food Programme (WFP, 2021), 9 million people die each year due to starvation. But, in average, western and developed world perspective “it does not happen to us. It does not happen to young, beautiful, successful people (even if this means being 85+ retired blue-collar worker)” prevails. This was visible at the outbreak COVID-19 in China, when it was treated as “people are blowing noses in China”, “just another flu”, etc. It happened in a relative silence, away from cameras, media and politicians. At this point the COVID-19 became a simple question of a narrative (Barreneche, 2020), different normalities and political power-play. When COVID-19 spread outside China, it became treated more and more seriously up to the point when WHO declared a pandemic. At this point a new reality frame was created to test everyone.

In the article we are trying to show the fluidity of the narrative (see: Barreneche, 2020) surrounding the COVID-19 responses. Perception and interpretation of what COVID-19 is, what are its effects, consequences and scenarios of the future were changing in different ways according to the interpretations of various involved stakeholders, taking into account their public and private or hidden interests. In 2023, in the case of Slovenia (where Constitutional Court of Republic of Slovenia post festum reversed most of the government rulings including return of the COVID-19 related fines), one can see that truth was of only secondary importance to those interests. The major premises are that any phenomenon that includes people is automatically a social phenomenon, even when based on health, safety, or engineering. A phenomenon, that requires decisions taken by politicians, is a political phenomenon. And any phenomenon that requires a scientific approach is a victim of a scientific method. Modern science is a victim of the specialisation, which gives the comfort of in-depth understanding of the specific aspect and dismisses as irrelevant other aspects. However, every phenomenon has simultaneously all the dimensions (even those overlooked, or purposefully ignored) and it acts in all its potential. At the same time human perception strongly depends on individual’s interests. The same is valid for the COVID-19

outbreak (e.g. Balanzá-Martínez et al., 2021; Buzzi et al., 2020; González-Sanguino et al., 2020); it is not only a medical phenomenon, but it has legal, economic, psychological, political, agricultural, and even architectural and artistic component (e.g. Matthewman, Huppatz, 2020; Naumann et al., 2020). And based on ones' specialisation and interests, individuals will focus on those and other elements and interpret them accordingly. In this manner COVID-19 as a new reality is not only a medical condition but it becomes a social phenomenon, open for interpretation (Barreneche, 2020). And this interpretation will define the response. Social constructivism does not necessarily oppose functionalism, but it subdues it. A case of COVID-19 is one of the best cases in modern history, due to the fact that it includes all and everyone. In the article, we will try to show how change in the narrative (Barreneche, 2020), as a result of re-conceptualisation of COVID-19, created different responses to COVID-19 pandemic over the time, and how these responses influenced the development of the basic societal situation. The general limitation of the real time development is that no previous decision can be reversed, which means that we are unable to play scenarios and test them before the implementation, and that every adjustment is not adjustment of the situation from the past, but it is the adjustment to the new situation.

Methodologically we will compare epidemiological data between beginning of the epidemic in (February) 2020 to the introduction of a vaccine, corresponding to the end of the third wave (December 2021) from a reliable source, covering in the same manner all three selected countries (the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia) in order to reduce the potential discrepancies in reporting of COVID-19 data. These epidemiological data are representing the "objective frame" within which the societal actors functioned. In this manner we will further compare aforementioned states (based on national data from news portals siol.net, dennikn.cz and sme.sk) regarding the main COVID-19 related events and measures. Unless otherwise quoted further in the article, information is taken from siol.net for Slovenia. We will pay some additional attention to the case of Slovenia (due to data availability) and analyse discrepancies between development of epidemiological situation, its medical and political interpretation and upon that based protective measures.

1 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE REALITY OF COVID-19

Social constructivism assumes that the individual as well as the social reality is based on individual and social perception of the reality, and thus

depending on one's identity as well as personal characteristics (e.g. Kim, 2001; Kukla, 2000).

In this perspective it means that there is no single pandemic of COVID-19, but they are as many of them as there are individuals and different possible combinations of relations (from being a leader or employee of the government, to being a member of healthcare personnel to being in retirement home or a small business owner) that these individuals enter into (Venuleo, Gelo, Salvatore, 2020, also Naumann et al., 2020; Toleikiene et al., 2020). At the same time each of these interpretations is functional for itself, in many cases being unable to recognise the equally legitimate opposite functional reality in another frame, due to lack of our mental ability to process the multiple realities (on multiple realities see: Ayaß, 2017) and non-binary results. The main problem arising from this situation is that, in the world of binary truth (simultaneously assuming that each person believes that (s)he is either right or wrong), all these interpretations affect each other in many cases in profound way.

A side effect of social constructivism, based on explanation above, is that one needs to doubt that there is anything like conspiracy theory. It is only different interpretation of the reality, that is considered to be powerful enough to attract attention and harmful to the predominant interpretation of the reality (on epistemic perspective of conspiracy theories see Douglas et al., 2017). In some cases, we are able to disprove certain theories (flatness of the earth), while in other cases this is impossible (e.g. existence of the deity). In case of COVID-19, so called conspiracy theories are in many cases what Descartes (1850) calls "Cartesian doubt", when he in search of the truth, reduces everything to the level of "I think, thus I exist" and further constructs re-construct his reality accordingly (it is necessary to understand that each thinking being has different capacity and interest of processing the reality through the methodical doubt as a tool to discover the "truth"). On the other hand, conspiracy theories tend to simplify and establish the logic in information-overburdened world (e.g. Douglas et al., 2017; Prooijen, Jostmann, 2013). However, this approach does not always result in understanding of the reality as it is seen by others. Thus, conspiracies and discreditations become part of the normality that surround a pandemic.

2 LINK BETWEEN ABSTRACT AND REAL: SOCIAL ACTORS

The theoretical frame of the reality provides a frame of the reasoning processes and motives surrounding the pandemics, but it maintains

distance between the reality and its understanding and interpretation. In order to bind both pieces together, it is requested that we understand who the affected society is. In the policy context (Naumann et al., 2020) one would deal with policy actors, but since we need to understand the situation in a broader context, we will prefer to use a term like social actors, since many of the relations do not necessarily happen on the level of policy but on the political or social level. And only in understanding the motivation of social actors one can understand the complexity of the problem that was globally unveiled with the COVID-19. Among the most common and general groups of social actors we can indicate individuals, interest groups, businesses, researchers, pharmaceutical industry, healthcare institutions, media, political parties, state structures or governments. Some of the social actors are very generalized while others are rather specific. Each of these actors has a different life role (parent, partner, employee, owner, etc.), which in many cases creates an internal conflict, regarding the situation, and depends on the mood and the external stimulus. At the same time each of the actors has different motives for interpretation of the reality and actions that follow (assuming premeditated behaviour). In general, on the level of social actors we can see two sets of motives, based on declared interests and those that are usually hidden. In some cases, both categories of motives overlap, but in many cases they do not. Hidden motives might have much more Machiavellian foundation. We further mark as Machiavellian principles those that are following the logic: “the end justifies the means” (for further reference see: Femia, 1998). The Table 1 below represents the correspondence between various social actors (stakeholders) and their motives. We argue that according to different authors (e.g. Arendt, 2003; Bloch, 2023; Pinterič, 2022) through history there is established split between declared (legitimate) motives/interests and those which are not proclaimed but they exist as true motives of certain behaviour and which we describe as Machiavellian, as being true but masked into the narrative of legitimate motives. This way we are able to assess the reality (which is of utmost importance in the time of fake news hysteria).

Table 1: *Social actors and their motives*

Social actor	Legitimate motive	Machiavellian motive
Individuals	Personal well-being	Maximisation of comfort
Interest groups	Representation of the interests	Maximisation of social power

Businesses	Economic development	Maximisation of profits
Researchers	Advancement of science	Maximisation of funding
Pharmaceutical industry	Health protection	Maximisation of profit
Healthcare institutions	Health protection	Maximisation of profit
Media	Information dissemination	Maximisation of profit/ influence
Political parties	Representation of people	Maximisation of social power
State structures/ governments	Providing stable social environment	Maximisation of control over the state and people.

Source: Author's analysis

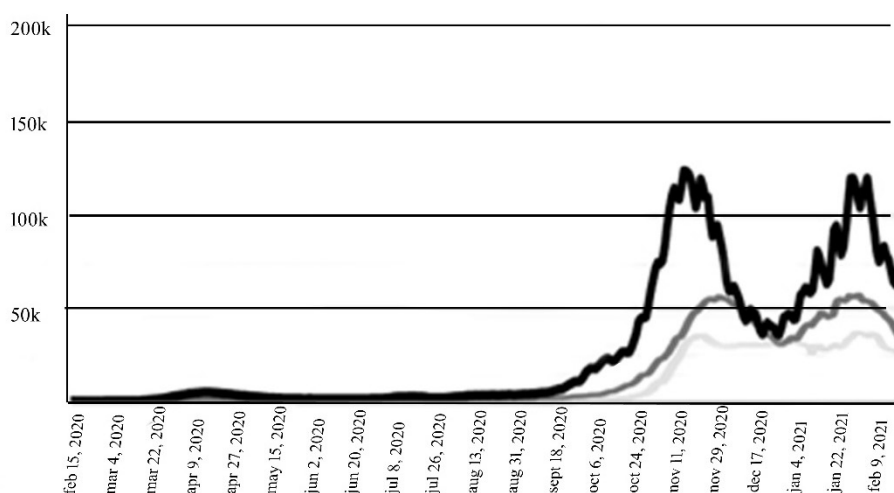
Obviously, the Table 1 is simplified and there are differences in the perception that one cannot deny. Comfort depends on personal definition, as well as social power or influence. Also, one cannot deny that there is research also within healthcare institutions, or pharmaceutical industry, so the social actors do overlap, which makes reality more complicated. However, this is important in order to understand the complexity that happened within an extremely short period of time on the global scale. Living in a world of multiple realities, where research gives different and often contradicting results, influences our ability to establish the truth which leads into the simplification and development of self-fulfilling prophecy theory in action (see: Pinterič, 2022). In these conditions one's believe what is real causes his reaction to be the consequence of such believe, even when it is objectively false (see: Merton, 1948; Wiley, 2003). This, in the perspective of Table 1 results in persons believing in either legitimate motive or Machiavellian motive to be true (with different variations to both). Each person, being also a social actor, establishes its own interpretation (either through educational process, personal experience or social interaction) of the reality, takes the stance of the truth (own construction of the reality) and acts accordingly (see: Naumann et al., 2020).

3 COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NUMBERS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, SLOVAKIA AND SLOVENIA

It is impossible to indicate every small detail of the development of the COVID-19 pandemic for each individual country. But it is possible to see the

main characteristics on few cases that can on one hand reveal the important differences in narratives, in connection to the pandemic. As comparative cases we can take into the consideration the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. It can be done so just for the sake of argument, that these three countries are often mashed together as Central European Countries, Slavic countries, post-communist countries (see: Klimovský, Risteska, Jüptner, 2014). Regardless of different reasons, they have one rather defining similarity: all three countries were run in the COVID-19 era by right-wing populist governments³, which would indicate the ideological necessity for rather similar responses in dealing with the health crisis. Slovenia changed the government from the centre-left to right wing populist in the first days of the pandemic. At the same time, all three countries do have one or another form of post-socialist predominantly public healthcare system, which would also indicate a similar response at this level. These two similarities are important in the perspective of the development of the COVID-19 pandemics in each of the countries.

Graph 1: *Development of the COVID-19 (active cases in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia in absolute numbers)**



*Black line: the Czech Republic, dark grey: Slovakia, light grey line: Slovenia.

Source: Worldometers, 2021; Authors' modification: merging country reports into a single graph.

³ Slovakia was run by the conservative and populist OĽaNO led coalition most of the COVID-19 period. Slovenia was run by conservative populist coalition under SDS and the Czech Republic was run by the ANO led coalition, while ANO party is again marked as conservative and populist.

Graph 1 shows several things. First, there is the difference between a number of active cases for individual countries. The second thing one can observe is rather different distributions of active cases between countries.

Based on the same source (e.g. Worldometers, 2021), we could observe also different distribution of deaths. In the Czech Republic in the same period, deaths are following the pattern of active cases (in waves) in Slovakia, deaths peaked and are maintaining certain stagnation, while in Slovenia after the peak the deaths were significantly reduced and are kept at the rather low daily number after January 2021. However, for the understanding of the broader perspective, the pandemic data on daily active cases should be sufficient to assume that countries had different developments of the pandemic. Additional information that helps to put the Graph 1 into the perspective, the countries were 3rd, 6th and 29th most infected (no. of cases per 1 million people) in the world (for comparison Germany was at the 72nd position). All of them are in the similar positions also regarding the number of deaths per one million people; 3rd, 7th and 13th respectively and Germany 43rd (Worldometers, 2021). These numbers are dynamic and all three countries were doing rather well in the first wave in spring 2020, which can be seen in Graph 1 as almost invisible bump in the curves in April 2020. It means that the ranking itself has additional value other than putting the cases in the global context of the moment. General fact is that all three countries managed the first wave rather well while they all failed after the summer 2020. All three countries have also higher death rates per one million and the Czech Republic and Slovenia also higher number of cases per one million than Sweden (Worldometers, 2021), which was generally strongly criticised by authorities and analysts (e.g. Bjorklund, Ewing, 2020; Norberg, 2023; Ahlander, Polland, 2022) for its approach to the COVID-19 pandemic management.

Based on these, rather limited comparable data, we can see aforementioned results differ among countries, which would suggest that approaches were slightly different. Based on the Graph 1, one can see that also the Czech Republic and Slovakia had different development between second and third and third and fourth wave. Between the second and third wave, the Czech Republic managed to significantly decrease the number of active cases in mid-December 2020 while Slovakia achieved the decrease only partially. And the opposite is valid for the decrease between the third and fourth wave in February 2021, when Slovakia did much better and the Czech Republic only slightly decreased the number of active cases before the fourth wave. At the same time, Slovenia started the second wave

with a short delay and then stagnated since the end of October 2020 until February 2021.

4 COVID-19 IN THE NARRATIVE AND THE EFFECT OF THE ANTI-COVID-19 MEASURES

A general narrative, promoted also in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia was changing over time, from “we are monitoring the situation” through “it might be dangerous”, “we need to flatten the curve”, to “there will be the second wave”, “we are monitoring the situation” and “vaccination is a solution”. All these basic slogans were used in different forms, not only in the states in focus but generally around the world. The ones which are usually left out are the voices of the sceptical part of the society, explaining about being just a cold, nothing big to bit more down to earth explanation of virus induced pneumonia that spreads like flu. Regardless of the medical aspects, the pandemic changed the societies to the extent that the medical part became unimportant (e.g. Apostolidis, Santos, Kalampalikis, 2020; Vaslavskaya, Vaslavskiy, 2021; Pinterič, 2022). Based on the last used data from January 2021 world was, despite all efforts (vaccination pressure and societal closure), going into the third wave, new virus strains were reducing the vaccine potency, and measures had only a limited effect of keeping the healthcare systems minimally functional. In the meantime, social, economic, fiscal and political damage was increasing.

Despite the general information available for Slovenia shows a slow increase in the growth of economic subjects, the insight in the structure, shows that there is 5% decrease in newly established personal business with 20% increase in their closures (Grgič, 2021). In between March 2020 and February 2021, the unemployment increased from 7.9% to 9.4% in Slovenia. Unemployment increased also in Slovakia from 5.2% to 7.9% as well as in the Czech Republic from 3 to 4.3% (Tradingeconomics, 2021). On the fiscal level, public debt increased in all three countries. According to the available data regarding the period between early 2020 and last available information, the public debt in the Czech Republic increased for about 6 percentage points, in Slovakia for 10 percentage points and in Slovenia for about 15 percentage points. This indicates the power of the economic shock by the epidemic measures in individual countries, as well as the level of the involvement of the state (by restrictions as well as with mitigating measures). Both bits of money and economy related information show the different economic consequences of COVID-19 in the selected countries,

despite all three countries had in general very similar strategies in fighting the pandemic. This indicates different interest levels of governments for economic sustainability in the time of crisis, which seem to be the strongest in the Czech Republic and weakest in Slovenia (similar would be suggested by the second wave development as indicated in Graph 1).

Table 2: *Distribution of the measures between countries (March 2020 – January 2021)*

	The Czech Republic	Slovakia	Slovenia
March 2020	<p>1.3. first cases</p> <p>4.3. management of public gatherings</p> <p>7.3. suspension of flights to certain areas (some of these measures were taken already before march), self-quarantining if coming from endangered regions, random health check at the borders</p> <p>10.3. schools closed</p> <p>12.3. state of emergency</p> <p>13.3. complete border closure</p> <p>14.3. economy closed</p> <p>15.3. curfew</p> <p>16. 3. national quarantine</p> <p>17.3. ban of export of medications (some similar bans applicable already earlier)</p> <p>18.3. face masks mandatory</p> <p>19.3. contact tracing via mobile phone (still in power after a year)</p> <p>23.3. all public gatherings banned</p> <p>30.3. military deployed to support medical personnel; regional quarantine lifted</p>	<p>6.3. - first case</p> <p>10.3.-selective quarantine</p> <p>15.3. state of emergency.</p> <p>16.3. closed schools, economic restrictions</p> <p>21.3. new government</p> <p>25.3. face masks, social distancing required</p>	<p>4.3. first case</p> <p>7.3. public gatherings limited to less than 500 people</p> <p>9.3. public gatherings further limited, schools as well</p> <p>10.3. partial closure of the borders for the risky destinations</p> <p>12.3. epidemics declared, limitation of travel for medical personnel, epidemic action plan invoked, closure of the schools declared for 16.3.</p> <p>13.3. new government,</p> <p>13.3. limitation of workers' rights to medical personnel</p> <p>14.3. government claims control over the medical equipment prices</p> <p>16.3. all public life closes. Open are only necessary services (post, gas stations, agricultural and food stores, pharmacies), with limitations.</p> <p>17.3. borders close, reduction of work hours for the open facilities.</p> <p>18.3. due to general panic, there is no face masks available (also in state reserve)</p> <p>19.3. launch of the propaganda action to enact the rules "together we can"</p> <p>20.3. all gatherings with and movement are forbidden with exception of necessary life activities and work.</p> <p>23. 3. government cancels the crisis management team, assuming that all ministries got functional in new situation and appoints COVID-19 government speaker.</p> <p>25.3. medical experts recommend use of face masks (initially they were dismissing this form of protection)</p> <p>30.3. restriction of movement to the municipalities, and mandatory use of face masks and hand gloves in closed public spaces</p>

April 2020	6.4. quarantine for foreigners 13.4. reopening borders 24.4. curfew revoked.	22.4. relaxation of protective measures starts.	18.4. government allows the movement between municipalities for maintaining the personal property in another municipality. 29.4. reopening of museums and libraries. 29.4. restriction of movement is lifted
May 2020	11.5. economy reopening. 17.5. state of emergency revoked, as well as most restrictions and extreme measures. 25.5. face masks mandatory only in special cases	Relaxation of measures, 22.5. face masks are not mandatory	4.5. partial opening of the economic activities, including outdoors dining facilities (special conditions applied) 11.5. restart of public transportation 15. 5. end of epidemics declared
June 2020	1.6. gatherings up to 500 people are allowed, most restrictions are lifted	14.6. state of emergency lifted.	30.6. Minister of interior resigns (partially due to alleged political involvement in police investigation regarding the medical equipment business in March 2020), prime minister accepts his resignation.
July 2020	23. 7. introduction of traffic light system to control pandemics.		15.7. Partial reintroduction of face masks in closed public spaces
August 2020	27.8. face masks are needed only in few exceptions	11-14.8 preparation for second wave, traffic light strategy.	
September 2020	1.9. face masks mandatory in most of public settings 21.9. health minister resigns in the light of increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases.	3.9. two counties are marked red code 22.9. new daily record of infections	4.9. full reintroduction of face mask in closed public spaces 15.9. introduction of mandatory face masks in crowded open public spaces 21.9. limitation of business hours for dining facilities at 22h 22.9. Minister of interior remains in the position despite his resignation in June 2020

October 2020	<p>5.10 state of emergency declared, limitations of public gatherings are put in the place, borders remain open.</p> <p>9.10. further restrictions of public life and gatherings. Parts of education system are closing.</p> <p>13.10. closure of dining facilities, schools temporary closed.</p> <p>Demands for mandatory masks are including more and more cases with each update of measures in October.</p> <p>21. 10.general lock-down – closure of public life.</p> <p>28.10. curfew</p>	<p>1.10. emergency state declared; public life closed.</p> <p>12.10. schools closed</p> <p>24.10. movement restrictions</p> <p>28.10. Curfew</p> <p>29.10. start of mass testing</p>	<p>14.10. Government divides country in regions to monitor the pandemic situation.</p> <p>16.10 mandatory wearing face masks outdoors, gathering limited to 10 people, restriction of all public gatherings.</p> <p>17.10. schools closed, limitation of business activities, limitation of movement between (closure of) “red regions”</p> <p>18.10 – declaration of 30 days epidemics.</p> <p>20.10. curfew</p> <p>24.10 further limitation of economic activities, reduction of public transport,</p> <p>27.10. restriction of movement to the municipalities, with work related exceptions.</p>
November 2020	<p>18.11. partial reopening of primary schools.</p>	<p>16.11. opening of certain sport, cultural activities.</p>	<p>13.11. prohibition of any gatherings with exception of members of the same household.</p> <p>16. 11. closure of public life. Partial closure of the borders.</p>
December 2020	<p>27.12. the restrictions are increased to minimal activities needed for life.</p> <p>Vaccination started</p>	<p>19.12. reintroduction of restrictions regarding public life with the family and religious gatherings exceptions</p> <p>26.12. first vaccines delivered</p> <p>29.12. second prolongation of the 1.10 state of emergency</p>	<p>13.12. partial liberation of certain unnecessary economic activities (e.g. cosmetic salons).</p> <p>In safer regions stores with wardrobe are opened as well.</p> <p>Introduction of contact tracing mobile application as token of right to pass municipal borders (still within the region).</p> <p>Tighter restrictions regarding face masks (only face masks are allowed and no other face-covering options – previously scarf covering nose and mouth was permitted).</p> <p>Between 24.12 from noon to 25.12. 8PM people can leave the municipality to meet within two families and six people (children under 15 are not counted in the quota), same rules apply for New Year Eve.</p> <p>22.12. start of quick testing</p> <p>26.12. first transport of vaccines is delivered</p>
January 2021		<p>1.1. reintroduction of restrictions regarding public life that was lifted on 19.12.</p> <p>1.1. Government orders work from home for all cases when possible.</p>	<p>13. 1. epidemics state of emergency prolonged for 60 days.</p> <p>25.1. primary schools reopened for 1-3 year</p>

Sources: *siol.net, denikn.cz and sme.sk*

Table 2 should be read in the combination with the Graph 1. In this manner we can see certain correspondence (or lack of it) between development of the pandemic and governmental measures. Based on these two elements, we can see two strong similarities. First, all three countries reacted decisively in the first wave. Even if in two of them government has been changed in early stage of the pandemic (see: Nemeč, 2020; Fink-Hafner, 2020). Secondly, all three countries let the infections spread (despite better understanding of the virus, especially after seeing Bergamo case of Italy in spring 2020) in the second wave, and introduced the measures at a very late stage when the numbers of infected and dead were already exponentially growing. Additionally, all three countries secured their borders in a first wave much better than they did it in the second wave. Until the late winter 2021, the Czech Republic and Slovenia discovered COVID-19 infection in approximately 10% of population while Slovakia it had officially infected about 6.5% of population (calculation based on Worldometrics, 2021). Share of vaccinated people is not even remotely significant to change a curve of spread of the virus. The Slovenian spring 2020 research⁴ indicates that numbers of actually infected people are possibly five times bigger (due to asymptomatic development of illness) than discovered and the Czech Republic reports a significant number of re-infections (e.g. Fabiánová et al., 2021) of people, who officially were already officially cured from COVID-19 (which indicates no long-term immunity⁵).

In the light of all these external elements, we need to analyse the narrative of those who are preparing the bases for policy measures and those who are responsible for adopting the plan of actions. As Naumann et al. (2020) indicate, a proper narrative is of a vital importance for compliance with the policy measures taken in place. And the narrative for the general public is organized by the mass media, which are under high pressure in the COVID-19 period, when people requested transparency and truth from the governments (Luengo, García-Marín, 2020). In the legitimate public demand for transparency the Slovenian case shows negative effects of mixed legitimate and Machiavellian interests, lack of transparency and epidemiological development. Hafner-Fink and Uhan (2021) indicate this as the issue of trust that has personal as well as collective and institutional

⁴ Slovenia conducted national research regarding COVID-19 in spring 2020 in order to assess the development of the first wave of covid. Research was considered important to reduce the restrictive measures (see: Nacionalna raziskava o razširjenosti COVID-19, 2020).

⁵ Which is also not granted by vaccination. Some countries are already declaring second re-vaccination in the autumn for those who already got two pharmaceutically prescribed shots.

component. In their research they establish that, in the case of Slovenia, next to general distrust in institutional system and government, the change of government in the early phase of the pandemic, additionally contributed to lack of trust that potentially resulted in negative perception of undertaken policy measures. Fink-Hafner (2020) at the same time indicates that the undemocratic tendencies of the Janša lead government took a new opportunity in the conditions of the pandemic. This corresponds with the idea that public health issue was becoming increasingly political over time. Both parts (Fink-Hafner, 2020; Hafner-Fink, Uhan, 2021) of the argument contribute to the government inability to avoid the independent realities, which additionally undermine a state authority in the management of the pandemic in the country. However, such development is not without the evidence-based reality in some major political events.

According to Table 2, the omnipotence of the Slovenian Prime minister and the government team became more and more evident over time, as well as their lack of consistency and responsibility (see also Pinterič, 2023). If the first period was not overly popular, and was marked with lack of the consistency, predictability and information, the development of the events led towards political appropriation of the epidemic, neglect of the experts and buying social peace with financial subsidies that will burden the future generations. In this perspective we can see the cases from Table 2 that the same expert changed his mind on situation in retirement homes within few days, or minister of Interior, Hojs, opposing the opinion of the ministry he led (see: Pinterič, 2023). We can also see cases when the officials from the National Institute of Public Health (NIPH) do not know their own recommendations at the press briefing (and they respond with arrogance), when the expert groups use a populist rhetoric instead of trying to explain the situation (e.g. Krek on multiple occasions) (see: Pinterič, 2023). In the course of the epidemic, the government COVID-19 speaker, Kacin, was on multiple occasions using an insensitive language (as well as others), and overtaking the role of the interpreter of the reality, even when he did not have sufficient information which led him into the conflicts with journalists as well as with members of the government on behalf of whom he should have been informing the public (see: Pinterič, 2023). Despite she was publicly often perceived as a defender of hard restrictions, Beović (head of government COVID-19 task force) in retrospective often indicated the main issues of the development of epidemic was too soft measures, but when it came to decisive moments, she as well as the rest of the experts suggested softer measures, which lead to the second wave that was not contained

until the early 2021 (see Pinterič, 2023). The most evident case happened in the light of introduction of curfew, where government and ministers declared that they acted based on the opinion of experts, while individual experts as well as Beović later argued that they never recommended curfew as a justifiable measure. After this and similar disagreement on different measures in public, Government office for communication at few occasions banned presence of certain ministers (e.g. minister of Education) and different experts (including Beović and Krek) to be guests in national daily news (M.Z., G.C., 2021; Pinterič, 2023).

Fast changes of the measures, without proper explanation (e.g. switch from “masks useless” to “masks mandatory”) created lots of distrusts in the public, mixed with anger due to disruption in life patterns and lack of clear and consistent information. This culminated in the protest movement that started when government mistreatment of the public procurement procedures became evident in combination with quality issues of the equipment. Protest movement was active predominantly from early May 2020 until summer, and it became an additional political tool for Janša’s fight with political opponents and mass media. In this perspective public health challenge became a political crisis which led into few attempts of interpellations of different ministers, resignation of one minister, and destabilisation of the governing coalition. Fink-Hafner (2020) marks all these processes as the deconsolidation of democracy and autocratisation tendency in Slovenia.

Epidemiological data for Slovenia and early warnings from the experts (despite the differentiation of opinions), as well as the decisive action of the government in the first wave show that the second wave in Slovenia (and potentially in many other European countries) could have been preventable with the second hard lock down including closure of the borders in mid-August 2020. A political decision for catching the balance between open economy and hospital capacities caused thousands of deaths in Slovenia as well as in other countries. If one of important points of expert-political unity was that fast and firm reaction in many countries in spring 2020 prevented devastating results, lack of speed and firmness in the same countries caused extreme loss of human life, health as well as economic opportunities, since the limitations of economy and society are already lasting longer than in the second wave. Nemeč et al. (2020) already provided an issue of pandemic inconsistency and partial response to it.

CONCLUSION

As indicated in the introduction, the analysis of the COVID-19 development and the response patterns in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia show the fluidity of the narrative and interpretation, despite the fact that development line remains rather stable. Thus, we can further argue that it is well visible that social and political aspects of the analysed situation prevail at the end over the other (in this particular case medical) aspects. Dominant interpretation will define the response. Social constructivism does not necessary oppose functionalism, but it subdues it, as it was stated already in the introduction. In the article, we tried to show how the changes in the narrative, as a result of re-conceptualisation of COVID-19, created different responses to it over the time, and how these responses influenced the development of the basic societal situation. As it was showed by the media analysis of the Slovenian case of public communication, the narrative was shifting over the time and created various understandings of the medical situation. Construction of the public reality as it was presented by the authorities went from denial (of a problem) to reduction of the importance of the issue towards the state of panic and overall blaming of everything and everybody in order to avoid admitting inner inconsistencies in the narrative. Despite the desire to speak with one voice, authorities in Slovenia had different understanding how the voice should sound (corresponding to the Table 1).

COVID-19 pandemic was initially a public healthcare crisis. However, within a year, it managed to be, through shifting narrative, reshaped in every other possible type of crisis, with no long-term medical solutions⁶. This might be marked also as a lack of time for a proper development of effective policies. However, it is hard to accept this argument, knowing that the Slovenian medical doctrine is in many cases still using 1980s base, as well as for the fact that COVID-19 was not a regular policy outcome but extreme situation. Thus, it only unveiled the significant incompetence of relevant

⁶ In this manner, it seized to be a medical crisis and became a societal crisis that is reshaping the general perception of the modern society. In many ways it is drill exercise in information society/smart society in which the unquestioned political structure will dictate and control predominantly jobless population on minimal allowances. With the development of smart technologies, legitimate concerns were raised regarding the reduced number of productive workforce. There were long term speculations that within few decades less than 50% of work-ready population would be employable. Governments around the world can use the current situation as future experience in all the necessary aspects in order to prevent social restoration of pre-technological social patterns.

institutions to function in crisis situations effectively. On the response level (from the functionalist perspective) governments of many (not only analysed) countries failed in crisis management of irregular events⁷.

Social constructivism leads us towards the dangerous field of systematic rejection any objective truth and gives us the power to establish individual truths, which are not absolute, even when the individual believes in them as in objective truths. The main argument to support social constructivism as a valid method of understanding the analysed case of pandemic is in the fact that not only there is limited amount of undisputed medical information on COVID-19, but also, and mainly, due to the fact that medical experts, as well as politicians, did not interpret the same medical situations in a same manner over the time. In other words, they were “re-constructing” the objective value of any given “fact” according to their daily political needs and context. At least at the level of the European Union, we can argue, that different interpretation of the numbers in the late summer 2020, directly caused the second wave with all the consequences, which would have been preventable or less severe if the governments would have acted in late August 2020 as they acted in mid-March 2020. In other words, constructivist approach of the European governments (in general and not only those of Slovenia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic) to the political COVID-19 narrative indirectly killed thousands of people, while reducing the levels of political freedoms, even those, which did not pose danger to public health.

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⁷ This suggests that another health crisis within the next 40 years would be dealt with less chaotically, due to “fresh” knowledge regarding the procedures, while later on this knowledge would be lost due to generational change and society would be condemned to “repeat the history”.

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