

When democracy is deemed vulnerable: preventing far-right extremism by curbing Roma ‘criminality and social pathologies’ in the Czech Republic

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This chapter introduces a unique case of the vulnerability-minority-extremism configuration in the context of counter-extremism policy. Virtually all studies in the field of extremism, at least in the Anglophone world, deploy the term ‘vulnerability’ to mean susceptibility to radicalisation resulting into extremism and terrorism, which overwhelmingly relates to Muslim minorities in the West. However, in the Czech Republic the official counter-extremism documents frame the democratic legal state as vulnerable to extremist forces stemming from the majority population, where terrorism is of no or little concern. This chapter demonstrates how this vulnerability of the Czech democracy has been linked to its Roma minority, whose ‘criminal and social-pathological’ behaviour is deemed to provide far-right extremists with the potential to mobilise the public and, ultimately, destroy the democratic foundations of the state. A comparison is also made to the situation in Slovakia, Hungary and Poland to highlight the reasons for the uniqueness of the Czech case. The analysis in this chapter draws on the Czech official documents dealing with the fight against extremism and interviews conducted with current and former state officials and experts in the region.

Vulnerability in the context of counter-extremism policies in the West

In the past few decades, vulnerability has been an ascending concept in both social science and government policies. Kate Brown, in her overview of the evolution and usage of the term vulnerability, identifies five different themes of its deployment (2017). She also points out how vulnerability is meshed with the concept of risk and thus carries not only a strong overtone of ‘care’ for the vulnerable individuals, but also the potential for their ‘dangerousness’.

One deployment of the term vulnerability that Brown does not explicitly discuss, but which would fall under her theme of “situational” vulnerability (2017: 28), has become integral to counterterrorism discourse and has the meaning of individual or group susceptibility to radicalisation leading to extremism and terrorism. In this case, the dual quality of care and dangerousness inherent in the term vulnerability carried over to signify individuals both ‘at risk’ of being exploited and manipulated into terrorism and ‘risky’ of committing a future attack (Heath-Kelly 2013).

The use of vulnerability in counterterrorism is relatively new and is closely related to the equally new concept of ‘radicalisation’. In the second half of the 2000s, both concepts grew out of authorities’ concerns over the so-called homegrown terrorists, who were mainly understood as the second or third generation of Muslims living in the West (Baker-Beall et al. 2016; Kundnani 2012). The stimulus for this concern was the June 2005 London terror attack, where three of the four attackers were born in the UK (the fourth being born in Jamaica), all self-proclaimed Muslims. In the aftermath of the attack, studies on recruitment to Islamist terrorism (often procured by governments) started to use the term vulnerable interchangeably with the term susceptible, *de facto* replacing the latter with the former (e.g. Choudhury 2007; Neumann and Rogers 2007). With respect to state strategies, this move took a bit longer. While the UK counterterrorism strategy from 2006 (Home Office 2006) had only nine instances of the use of the word vulnerable or its derivative and four of the word susceptible and its derivatives (both terms used mainly in the sense of potential targets of attacks), the UK counterterrorism strategy from 2009 (Home Office 2009) included sixty-seven variations on the word vulnerable and only one use of the word susceptible (both terms used overwhelmingly in the sense of weakness to radicalisation). Preventing vulnerable people from turning into terrorist thus became seen as a key component of counterterrorism and gave rise to the policy field of counter-extremism.¹

Vulnerability has now firmly established itself in the discourse of contemporary counter-extremism policies, primarily in the Anglophone world, and in scholarly production on radicalisation, extremism and terrorism. Although other forms of extremism have gained the attention of both policy-planners and academics, the concept of vulnerability is still most often deployed in connection to Muslim minority members, because Islamist terrorism is thought to represent the most immediate threat in terms of large-scale terrorist attacks in the West (Home Office 2016).

Nevertheless, zooming out from the West and especially from the UK, which is held as a pioneer of and the main source of inspiration for the contemporary counter-extremism policies around the globe, one can gain new and unexpected perspectives on the evolution and trajectories of counter-extremism

policies in general and the configuration of the vulnerability-minority nexus in particular. The case of the Czech Republic offers one such perspective.

While national policies on combating and preventing extremism came to existence in the Western countries in the second half of the 2000s at the earliest, the Czech Republic saw its first official public formulation of what could be effectively termed ‘counter-extremism strategy’ in the mid-1990s, thus preceding the developments in the West by a decade. Unlike the West, the Czech concern with extremism was not triggered by the perceived threat of homegrown (or any) terrorism or concerns over the vulnerabilities of Muslim minority members with respect to radicalisation, but by the perceived vulnerability of the democratic foundation of the state.

Vulnerable democracy and non-individualised extremism

Brown’s (2017) overview of the deployment of vulnerability is a strictly individualised conception of the term. It is particular people or groups of people who are deemed vulnerable for various reasons and with various consequences. The same individualised ontology applies to the Western counter-extremism policies, which are fixated on the image of an ordinary citizen becoming a ticking bomb due to his or her inherent (e.g. psychological) or situational vulnerabilities.

However, the term vulnerability is also deployed in a non-individualised meaning. One such meaning pertains to the vulnerability of the liberal democratic system. Concerns over the vulnerability of democracy are as old as the modern democracies themselves. Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) devoted a substantial part of his ‘Democracy in America’ to discussing the weaknesses (*faiblesses*) of democracy. Although he did not use the word ‘vulnerability’ in his writing, the term became affixed to it by contemporary scholars (Ostrom 1997). Periods of momentous crises of world democracies such as the 1930s generated much debate on democratic vulnerabilities. It was at that time when Karl Loewenstein coined the legal-philosophical principle of militant (defensive) democracy, which would be capable of defending the “vulnerable spots in the democratic system” (Loewenstein 1937a: 431). The literature on the vulnerability of liberal democracies has seen another spike in interest in the recent years, reflecting anxieties about the challenge of illiberal populism from the US and France to Italy and Hungary (e.g. Galston 2020; Luo and Przeworski 2019; Rak 2021; Weyland 2020).

In this literature, especially in the works of the militant democracy tradition, extremism is the main threat to democracy. However, it is not the individualised extremism manifested in terrorist attacks, although some contemporary scholars categorise counterterrorism as one of the tools of

a militant democracy (for a critical review of this tendency see Engelmann 2012). Rather, it is the extremism of organised political undemocratic movement that is the main threat. In the dominant democratic theory literature, such extremism, which is hostile to the basic framework of liberal democracy, must be either made compliant with the framework or be excluded from it (Olson 2009). This includes the ‘agonistic’ model of liberal democracy proposed by Chantal Mouffe (1999), which acknowledges the central role of conflict in the workings of a democratic polity, but aims at transforming it from an antagonistic conflict between enemies to an agonistic conflict between adversaries who share a common basic ‘ethico-political’ framework.

The two options of either excluding or transforming extremists could be broadly conceived of as options between repression and prevention. While the militant democracy literature concentrates chiefly on the former, prevention in this sense is little theorised (see the ‘social-democratic self-defence’ in Malkopoulou and Norman 2018). Prevention is necessarily future-oriented, hence the *possibility* of extremism lies at the core of its focus. The non-individualised conception of vulnerability, where the entire democratic system is deemed vulnerable, shifts the preventative attention from the possibility of the rise of an individual extremist-terrorist to the possibility of the rise of a collective extremist political movement, which would have the ability to exploit democratic vulnerabilities and undermine or even replace the liberal democratic ethico-political framework. In the Czech case, the possibility of extremism that needs to be prevented has had the form of a far-right political movement that would succeed in mobilising large sections of the ‘non-extremist’ public by skilfully exploiting the tensions between the majority and the Roma minority.

Vulnerable democracy in the context of the Czech counter-extremism policy

The modern independent Czechoslovak state was born in 1918 from the ashes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Until 1939, when it was fully occupied by Hitler’s Germany, the country was a relatively advanced democracy in almost wholly undemocratic region of Central Europe. In the 1930s, Loewenstein (1937b) even gave Czechoslovakia as the paramount example of democracy that took legal measures to defend itself against fascist subversion. After the Nazi occupation, the country barely started to consolidate a new democratic regime when it was ‘occupied’ once again through a bloodless Communist coup supported by the Soviet Union in 1948. The Communist totalitarian regime lasted until 1989 and, shortly after, in

1993, the Czech Republic became an independent country when the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic peacefully dissolved into its two constitutive units.

Thus, the country has had a strong formative experience of both being one of the champions of liberal democracy in the region (or, indeed, globally) and a victim of two totalitarian political systems. As will be demonstrated below, this experience, magnified by the challenges of building a new post-1990 democratic society, facilitated the emergence of policy documents with the focus on tackling extremism.

The term ‘vulnerable’ is almost completely missing in these texts, and when it appears it has only the meaning of the individualised care dimension; that is, describing particular individuals or groups prone to be physically or otherwise harmed. This is due to the fact that the Czech equivalent of the word vulnerable – *zranitelný* – does not have the same qualities as in English that would allow it to be applied to non-living objects. However, as becomes clear, the framing of the Czech counter-extremism documents leaves no doubt about the organising theme of vulnerable democracy, which runs through them from the 1990s until today.

The first official document tackling the issue of extremism was created in the first year of the Republic’s existence and it was published by the Ministry of Interior. It was called ‘Interethnic Conflicts: The Analysis of Clashes, in the Results of Which Attacks on the Roma and Members of Other Ethnic Groups in the Czech Republic Were Reported from January to October 1993’ (further referred to as ‘Interethnic Conflicts’).² The document was practically initiated and written by a single official at the ministry, something peculiar to the exceptional early post-revolutionary years. “Most materials are written in the way that the government tasks a minister to write them, whereas I had the opportunity to task the minister to complete and submit the material,” the official explained, and credited herself with being the initial impulse for the government to start tackling the issue of extremism (Interview 1).

At that time, and similarly to the present, the Czech Republic had a homogenous population of 10 million inhabitants, roughly 2% to 3% of which comprised of the Roma minority. Almost all the members of this minority came to the country after World War II from Slovakia, because most Roma who had lived in the Czech lands before perished in the Holocaust. In the 1950s and 60s, the Communist regime of the federative state had a deliberate policy of transferring and dispersing the Roma population from Slovakia into those parts of the Czech lands that had been cleansed of their historical German inhabitants following the defeat of Nazi Germany, and which were in need of industrial workers (Jakoubek and Budilová 2014).

During communism, all citizens had a legal duty to work and a right to work, which ceased to be the case in the new capitalist society, in which the Roma were the first to lose employment, in part due to the segregationist and discriminatory policies of the past, underpinned by negative stereotypes and prejudices. Even during communism, the Roma were often labelled ‘socially inadaptable’, which became a code for the Roma after the fall of the regime, replaced in official documents by ‘socially excluded’ at the beginning of the new millennium (Malík 2011).

The author of the ‘Interethnic Conflicts’ policy document, due to her previous job as a social curator of Roma offenders, developed a deep interest in the Roma minority and its relations to the majority population, which she claimed was heading to a very dangerous course after the fall of the Communist regime (Interview 1).

The policy document opened by noting that interethnic violence and hostility against foreigners (meaning immigrants) was on the rise in Western countries, which also increased the role played by right-wing parties with racist and xenophobic accents. It stated that this problem had also been growing in the Czech Republic, only the object of hostility was the Roma minority. While the document took a firm anti-racist position, it sometimes slipped into a language reminiscent of the “reasonable anti-Gypsyism” (van Baar 2014), for example when it declared that the main cause of interethnic tensions was the “immediate cohabitation of mutually incompatible population groups with different ways of behaviour as well as cultural and value orientation” (Ministerstvo vnitra 1993: 5).

Although this document did not yet emphasise the risks posed by extremism to democracy, it underscored that one of the characteristics of extremist groups, besides having a hateful ideology directed against “inferior groups of population”, was that they “question the parliament” (p. 10). The definition of extremism offered by the document was also very vague, talking about “individuals or group of individuals who refuse to accept generally acknowledged values and norms of behaviour” (p. 9).

The material asserted that certain areas of the country experienced “serious interethnic tension” (p. 18), which created “a dangerous radicalising situation”, whereby the Roma took up weapons for self-defence and extremists became more aggressive as they felt passive support of the public (p. 19). The increasing number of attacks against the Roma was seen as the result of the public ambivalence towards the issue, caused by “a growing social distance to socially inadaptable individuals or groups, which is stereotypically generalized mainly to the entire Roma ethnic group” (p. 5). The document also warned that the problem could become more serious in the future, with the possibility of local race riots.

The material highlighted the attention of international media and observers, who were said to often cite fifteen racially motivated murders of Roma minority members – a number that the document disputed. Still, it was argued, the growing number of racially motivated incidents and the insufficient reaction to them had international political repercussions, since the international public perceived them as “manifestations of democratic immaturity” (p. 4).

Undoubtedly, the document became fundamentally important for the evolution of the Czech counter-extremism policy. In 1994, the Czech Parliament received the ‘Government Report on the Security Situation in the Czech Republic in 1993’, which was the first such annual report then newly required of the Government by the Parliamentarians.³ The report, produced by the Ministry of Interior, divided security risks to the country into two categories: “Risks with international aspects that directly relate to the *stability of the political system*” (emphasis added) and “Risks that have a direct impact on citizens’ level of awareness of the protection of their personal freedoms, health and property” (Ministerstvo vnitra 1994). The first category consisted of three risks – migration, organised crime, and racial conflicts. In the section on racial conflicts, the report directly referred to the ‘Interethnic Conflicts’ document, noting that the material was submitted to the prime minister and discussed in one of Parliament’s committees, resulting in the request for further monitoring and analyses.

A year later, in 1995, the ‘Government Report on the Security Situation in the Czech Republic in 1994’ added the word ‘extremism’ (in brackets) to the heading ‘Racial Conflicts, again categorised as a risk directly related to the stability of the political system (Ministerstvo vnitra 1995).⁴ The relevant text highlighted a growing number of crimes committed mainly by skinheads and targeting overwhelmingly the Roma. It also referred to a new document prepared by the Ministry of Interior called ‘Information on the Manifestation of Extremist Attitudes in the Czech Republic’ (further referred to as ‘Information’).⁵

The ‘Information’, which was published in 1995, was primarily composed by the same author who wrote ‘Interethnic Conflicts’, with an input from the Czech intelligence agency and criminal justice institutions. It openly stated that the model and terminology used for mapping the extremist scene were inspired by the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the domestic intelligence agency, which had published annual reports since the 1960s.⁶ These reports, however, consist mainly of (very detailed) descriptions of extremist groups, thus lacking the more strategic character of the Czech materials.⁷ As in Germany, the ‘Information’ framed extremism in terms of a threat to the democratic order, noting (ironically) that in the UK intelligence services did not use the term extremism in

principle, since it was deemed inaccurate. The document defined extremism as ideologically driven activities, which “attack the social organization, Constitutional and legal principles, parliamentary-democratic form of government and humanistic principles” (Ministerstvo vnitra 1995: 3).

The main thrust of the material was again on the activities of the far right, whose supporters were estimated to number about 7,000 individuals, and whose victims were predominantly the Roma. The ‘Information’ proposed that extremism had three stages. The first stage was said to be characterised by irrationality and impulsiveness and the lack of strategic planning. The second stage was distinguished by deliberate efforts to partially or fully overhaul the existing social and political order. The final and the highest stage of extremism was the formation of a political party with the aim of seizing power. The ‘Information’ clearly expressed the worry that public indifference or even passive support for the far-right actions against the Roma could create a potential “stratum of voters” of extremist parties and lead to “social conflicts and political destabilization”, if the “initially individualistic and chaotic extremism spreads, gradually organizes, and politicizes” (p. 5). The document further reiterated that while extremist crimes made up only a fraction of the total number of crimes, the issue attracted a lot of attention inside and outside the country.

The next strategic document entitled ‘Extremism: Report on the Action of Public Authorities in Prosecuting Crimes Motivated by Racism and Xenophobia (1997)’ set off a “bureaucratic tradition” (Interview 2) of annually published materials on extremism, which had a character of counter-extremism strategies. At their core, they would always include a definition of extremism, a discussion of why extremism was a problem, a description of the extremist scene, an overview of existing counter-extremism activities, and proposals for further measures.

The report on 1997 underscored “significant latency” of extremism as a major problem. Societal passivity or even silent support of attacks on the Roma and the related under-reporting of such attacks was seen as potentially paving the way for an organised extremist political movement that would skilfully use the anti-Roma sentiments to disrupt the Czech democracy:

These [extremist] scenes are, without difference, dangerous for the democratic foundations of the state. Underestimating the punishment of extremist activities could open the door to building well-structured organizations capable of carrying out large-scale violent, well-planned and organized action. This could destabilize the security situation in a region or even the whole country. The issue of extremism as a whole must therefore not be underestimated or schematically narrowed down only to manifestations of racism in society and racially motivated crime. [emphasis in the original] (Ministerstvo vnitra 1998: Section 6)

As in the previous materials, worries were expressed about the country's image abroad, especially in light of the accession negotiations with the European Union. The country's prestige was also seen as being threatened by an increasing number of Roma asylum-seekers and racist attacks against foreign students. The importance of the country's democratic reputation abroad was underscored by the addition in the following year's report of sections on the evaluation of the Czech Republic in the international forum and on the measures taken or to be taken by individual ministries relevant to the fight against extremism. This structure was kept until 2008.

The report on 1998 made concerns about the vulnerability of the Czech democracy absolutely clear. Its chapter 'Trends and Characteristics of the Extremist Scene in 1998' was introduced by two lengthy quotes by Joseph Goebbels, chief propagandist of Adolf Hitler. In both quotes, Goebbels derides the impotence of the democratic system in preventing the Nazis from seizing power and its easy instrumentalisation towards its own destruction. In the quotes, Goebbels also notes how the entire Nazi movement could have been easily eliminated from the beginning if their opponents had recognised the true intentions and the danger that the Nazis represented.

It is in the context of these quotes and worries about the vulnerability of democracy to an organised extremist takeover that the report argued for including in its remit registered organisations "in whose case, for various reasons, it can be assumed that their real focus or objectives may not always be fully in line with democratic principles" (Ministerstvo vnitra 1999: Section 2.2.1), and not only brutal attackers who "without doubts [...] do not create the ideological base for the enforcement of the neo-Nazi and fascist ideas" (Section 2.2.1). Germany is, again, cited as an example worth emulating with respect to listing such political organisations in the reports on extremism. The document even attached a translated excerpt from the 1998 German report.

The report on 1999 maintained the definition of extremism as activities attacking "democratic principles and the social organisation" (Ministerstvo vnitra 2000: Section 2). In a likely unintended nod to the Mouffean concept of destructive antagonism, the document added that extremism

was a common term for extremely heightened attitudes hostile to the democratic system, which turn into activities that act, directly or in the long run, destructively to the existing democratic political-economic system, i.e., trying to replace the democratic system with an antagonistic system (totalitarian regime, dictatorship, anarchy). The report is therefore based on a unified conception of extremism as activities aimed against the Constitutional system and the values it protects. (Ministerstvo vnitra 2000: Section 2)

The report on 2001, while keeping this definition, explicitly listed the democratic principles threatened by extremism, linking each to a specific article of the Constitution. Among the principles listed were the existence of sovereign, unitary and democratic legal state, the immutability of the essentials of a democratic rule of law and the competition between political parties respecting basic democratic principles and rejecting violence as a means of promoting their interests.

Another milestone in the development of the Czech counter-extremism policy came in 2008. In that year, the far-right Workers' Party staged several demonstrations in the city of Litvinov, which had been experiencing tensions between its Roma community and the majority population. The extremists skilfully used the tensions and, in combination with a smart framing and organisation of the protest event, they managed, for the first time, to secure the participation and active support of several hundred local inhabitants who were not affiliated with any extremist organisations. The demonstrations culminated on 17 November, when several hundred extremists tried to march into the area mainly inhabited by the local Roma and clashed with the police. A three-hour battle ensued, resulting in fourteen injuries (half of them in the police force). The support provided by the local ethnic majority was regarded as a great victory by the extremists, who declared on their website: "Today it finally began! After all these years of talking – and nothing but talking – we have finally taken our first action. We are at war with the System, and it is no longer a war of words" (Poláková and Čápková 1999). Tellingly, this was a direct quote from the first sentence of the infamous Turner Diaries written by "America's most important neo-Nazi" William Pierce (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.).

A month earlier, increased visibility of the Workers' Party earned it almost 1% of votes in the regional elections (almost 29,000 votes), which laid the foundation for the party to unite almost all smaller far-right groups under its banner. An official at the Ministry of Interior recalled the impact of the rise of the Workers' Party:

Since 2008, we take it that these groups are in some way a threat to the entire state, to democracy in this country. That it cannot be regarded as only a problem of skinheads and the Roma, that it concerns the entire society, the entire system of liberal democracy. From Germany, we took the concept of defending democracy. That we simply cannot only observe, monitor or punish individual criminal acts, but that democracy must use multiple tools, or the state must use multiple tools, which it has at its disposal in order to defend against this and prevent it. (Interview 3)

In response to the turbulent year of 2008, the annual document published by the Ministry of Interior was renamed to ‘Strategy for Combating Extremism’. The Strategy declared that:

The fact that the support of right-wing extremists by part of the Czech public increased in 2008 can be perceived as the greatest security risk. [...] While it may seem like an imaginary threat to democratic institutions, it [extremism] cannot be underestimated in any way. As is well known from a number of academic studies and can be deduced from historical experience, extremist ideologies can benefit from social and economic crises [...]. Whether we like it or not, it is at a time of such crises that populism and ideologies that identify the so-called ‘enemies and perpetrators of all bad things and evil’ in society tend to find fertile soil. (Ministerstvo vnitra 2009: 21)

The annually published documents would now consist of three parts: the report on extremism for the past year, the evaluation of the so-called ‘conception for combating extremism’ for the past year, and the ‘conception for combating extremism’ for the upcoming year. The conception for combating extremism was organised around five pillars: 1) Communication against Demagogy, 2) Knowledge against Totalitarians, 3) United Anti-Extremist Platform, 4) Expertise and Immunity, and 5) Effectively and Correctly against Violence. As it is already noticeable from the titles of the pillars, the fixation on individualised extremism leading to terrorism that was emerging around that time in the West was absent in the Czech conceptions. Rather, the fixation was on organised political extremism leading to totalitarianism.

The vulnerability of the democratic system remained the overarching concern in subsequent reports, which would remind the reader that “extremism in any form always carries a potential threat to democracy” (Ministerstvo vnitra 2010: 41) and that the Workers’ Party “reached the stage when it can represent an acute risk for democracy” (Ministerstvo vnitra 2011: 66).⁸ In an unequivocal example of the concern for democracy, the report on 2011 quoted at length the reasoning of the Constitutional Court that rejected an appeal of several extremist leaders sentenced for, essentially, extremist speech at one rally in 2007. The quote opened as follows:

The Constitutional Court identifies with the principles of defending democracy, the legal application of which is justified, taking into account the historical experience of Nazi and Communist totalitarianism not only in our state, but also in the European context. If opponents of democracy and the values on which democracy stands are prepared to attack it, the democratic regime must also be prepared to defend itself against these attacks. (Ministerstvo vnitra: 2012 83)

Anti-Roma demonstrations and marches by the far right culminated in 2013. The report on 2014 noted that the far right started to emphasise

Muslims rather than the Roma as the main enemy. The concern also started to shift from the visibly neo-Nazi and fascist groups to other entities, sometimes termed populist, which spread prejudicial hatred and use extremist themes to score political success. Together with the spread of the so-called alternative media and online manifestations of hatred, the worry became that even if these entities do not “explicitly call for the overthrow of the system of liberal democracy and its replacement with a totalitarian system [...] they gradually weaken it” (Ministerstvo vnitra 2019: 5) was seen in the potential emergence of a charismatic leader who would be able to unite the extremist scene and seriously threaten the democratic foundation of the country. Although the objects of fear and hatred shifted to Muslims, the reports warned that the “Roma card” could be played again at any opportune moment (Ministerstvo vnitra 2018: 7)

A last overhaul of the Czech strategic documents on extremism occurred in 2021 with the publishing of the first long-term ‘Conception for Combating Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred 2021–2026’. The ‘Conception’ now consists of three action plans, each designed for two years. It declares:

In its modern history, the Czech Republic has managed to resist manifestations of extremism and prejudiced hatred. Various hate groups [...] have not yet been able to gain the power and influence to pose a threat to the foundations of democracy. [...] At the beginning of the existence of the Czech Republic, [counter-extremism activities were] perceived by the prism of the experience of the 20th century, when extremists gained power in the state. These extreme experiences, which affected all citizens of the state, are now losing their relevance. Understanding the dangers of extremists and xenophobic populist politicians on the one hand and understanding the benefits of liberal democracy on the other is a prerequisite for the success of state policy against the manifestation of hate. (Ministerstvo vnitra 2021: 8)

The five pillars of the past conceptions were now reorganised into three strategic goals of the new conception: 1) Protection of Crime Victims, 2) Protection of Democracy, and 3) Transparency and Comprehensible Strengthening of Trust in Democracy. Once again, concerns over extremism *qua* terrorism feature only minimally in the new strategic document, while the main thrust is on defending liberal democracy against those who, in Mouffe’s terms, partake in antagonistic conflict with the democratic ethico-political framework.

The role of the Roma minority in the prevention of extremism

The ‘Interethnic Conflicts’ policy document from 1993 proposed to deal with extremism by preventing hatred, xenophobia, and racism in the

framework of (social) crime prevention and other preventative and educative activities. Such policies were presumably to be addressed to those who could become (far-right) extremists and victimise, among others, members of the Roma minority. However, later documents postulated a twist on this straightforward relationship between prevention and extremism.

The 1997 report flagged as a major contribution to the prevention of extremism the activities of the Republic Committee for Crime Prevention (established in 1993) and its main instrument for crime prevention on the local level – the Comprehensive Cooperation Program for Crime Prevention (KSP), which provided funding and methodological support to participating cities. Preference was given to those cities with high incidents of crime and “socially pathological phenomena” indicated by a high number of social benefits recipients (Ministerstvo vnitra 1998: Section 5.5.1), later replaced by the term “socially excluded areas”, both code words for the Roma minority. The report further highlighted that KSP supports projects aimed at:

Improving the social situation of socially deprived Roma communities, especially in the areas of education, employment, leisure and crime. (*Premise: The social handicaps of the Roma often lead to antisocial behaviour, and subsequently to a sharpening of interethnic relations and manifestations of ethnically justified intolerance*). [emphasis in the original] (Ministerstvo vnitra 1998: Section 5.5.1)

This was the first instance where a pseudo-causal relationship was asserted between the perceived ‘socially pathological’ behaviour of the Roma and far-right extremism, which in one form or another would be maintained until the present time.⁹ In so doing, a range of social policies aimed at solving ‘the Roma problem’ would gain an extra perk of simultaneously having counter-extremism value. Such merging of social policies and security policies attest to the analyses that portray welfare measures as devices of national security (e.g. Neocleous 2006). Ironically, in the Czech Republic, social policies aimed at the Roma were not supposed to secure the state against Roma extremism, which has been the case with the Muslim minority in the West, but against far-right extremism.

The full deployment of social policies in the service of security is evident in the 1999 report, which described a new methodology for the “implementation of projects supporting deprived Roma communities and the creation of positive interethnic relations” within the KSP (Ministerstvo vnitra 1999: Section 7.2). The methodology was “based on the assumption that overcoming prejudices, reducing xenophobia, tolerance and patience on the part of the majority and *emancipation, education, finding one’s place in society on the part of the Roma will lead to a reduction in racist crimes and a more conflict-free coexistence*” (Section 7.2, emphasis added).

In the next year, the report stated that the authorities supported those crime prevention projects, through which it is possible to “systematically improve interethnic relations, improve the unfavourable social situation of some Roma communities and positively emancipate individual Roma at the local level and so act preventatively against xenophobic attitudes and extremist manifestations at the local level” (Ministerstvo vnitra 2000: Section 7.2). Similarly, the link between improving the Roma position in the society and reducing far-right extremism was asserted in the 2002 report, which noted that “one of the main goals of [social crime prevention] projects aimed at the Roma minority is to reduce the risk of social exclusion, which results in an increased risk of racial and extremist sentiments” (Ministerstvo vnitra 2002: 89).

From 2003, the term ‘socially excluded areas’ has become used in the reports in the context of crime and extremism prevention. Socially excluded areas are spatially or symbolically delimited localities occupied by twenty or more people who live in inadequate conditions (are recipients of subsistence allowance) and who often face severe social, economic and political exclusion (Čada et al. 2015). It was estimated that 60,000 to 80,000 people lived in 310 such localities in 2006, the majority of them members of the Roma minority (Čada et al. 2015). In 2016, the number of socially excluded areas doubled and the number of people living in them increased by roughly 50% (Čada et al. 2015). The funding for crime prevention projects, which arguably had a preventative effect on far-right extremism, was in the 2003 report prioritised for cities that had “socially excluded Roma areas” (Ministerstvo vnitra 2003: 20).

In the 2008 Strategy, crime prevention stood separately from the newly formulated five pillars of combating extremism. It featured in the section on the “most significant activities” of individual ministries under the activities managed by the Ministry of Interior. It still maintained that the aim of the crime prevention projects was to “eliminate or alleviate the social exclusion of Roma communities, which also results in an increased risk of racial and extremist sentiments” (Ministerstvo vnitra 2009: Appendix 1, p. 2). From 2013, however, preventative projects in socially excluded areas were included in the third pillar of the strategy (United Anti-Extremist Platform), which was understood as activities by the regional and local administration in support of the national policy. The justification of the pillar’s strategic goal read: “Extremists, among other things, abuse the feeling of threat within the public. The state needs to sponsor crime prevention activities, especially in relation to socially excluded localities, and integration activities for minorities and foreigners” (Ministerstvo vnitra 2013: 12).

In the years of increased far-right mobilisation centred on anti-Roma demonstrations and marches, the reports pointed out that the only unifying

factor and a rallying point for far-right extremists was the problematic coexistence between the majority and the Roma minority. Solving the problem of socially excluded areas and integrating the Roma was thus perceived as a way to remove far-right justification for mobilisation and its appeal to the non-extremist part of the majority. An official at the Ministry of Interior described the logic of the preventative programmes in the socially excluded areas in these words: “If the situation in socially excluded areas is being calmed down, and our programs help that, I don’t want to say that extremists can’t get hold of anything, but the edges become blunter and the communities as well as external environment is less prone to some extreme solutions” (Interview 4). His colleague underscored the concern about the spread of extremism to the general public: “We understand that certain group of extremists will always be here [...] but we are rather focused on not having non-extremist people joining them and to succeed in protecting the Roma and providing them security” (Interview 3).

The flagship device of the Ministry of Interior for addressing the situation in the socially excluded areas – ‘Crime and Extremism Prevention Program – DAWN’, was initiated in 2009. DAWN is a collection of various projects, the most important of which is called ‘Crime Prevention Assistant’ – a brainchild of the author of the ‘Interethnic Conflicts’ document (Interview 1). Crime Prevention Assistants are employed by the municipality and part of the local police force. They are recruited preferably from the Roma minority among the long-term unemployed individuals with the knowledge of the local community. Their mission is to prevent conflicts through dialogue, offering the police an “effective way to regulate the behaviour of the inhabitants of the excluded area in a ‘non-repressive way’” (Ministerstvo vnitra 2018: 189). Another goal of the Assistants is to change the majority public perception of the Roma community by showing the Roma “working not only for the benefit of the public, the majority, but for the local area” (Interview 1). At the end of 2017, around 500 Assistants were employed in the country, about half of them Roma (Ministerstvo vnitra 2018: 26).

Finally, in 2021, when new long-term conception on combating extremism replaced the five-pillar structure with the three goals, the last of these goals (Transparency and Comprehensible Strengthening of Trust in Democracy) included as specific measures preventative programmes in socially excluded areas as well as the integration of minorities and immigrants. Hence, the vulnerability postulate that linked the defence of democracy against right-wing extremism to the prevention of Roma ‘criminality and socially pathological’ behaviour has been preserved from the early policy documents of the 1990s.

However, besides crime prevention, any other measures or activities deemed to support the integration of the Roma into the majority society

were listed in the Czech counter-extremism documents too. Thus, a broad range of educational, social and cultural programmes aimed at the Roma minority were implicitly presented as reducing the appeal of far-right extremism, from funding a museum of Roma culture to stipends for Roma high-school students.

The Czech counter-extremism approach in the context of Central Europe

Interestingly, both the age and the framing of the Czech counter-extremism policies are unique in the context of the Central European states, which otherwise share many similarities with respect to the development of the extremist scene after the fall of their Communist regimes. Specifically, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland all witnessed the rise of far-right, mainly skinhead, movements and the associated violence in the 1990s. They are also home to Roma communities, which were often the target of this violence. Yet, neither Hungary nor Poland have published official documents similar to those in the Czech Republic and do not have any counter-extremism policies at the time of writing. Slovakia published the first Conception on Combating Extremism only in 2006 and this document, as well as its subsequent updates, directly mentioned the Roma marginally if at all, making no relation between crime prevention in their communities and the far-right threat to the democratic foundations of the country.

There are likely several factors that caused the Czech government to make early advancement in the field of counter-extremism in comparison to the country's post-Communist neighbours. First, while the majority population in the above-mentioned countries harboured decisively negative sentiments about the Roma, and anti-Roma discrimination was rampant, the number of attacks resulting in serious injuries or fatalities seems to have been the highest in the Czech Republic in the 1990s (Interviews 5, 6 and 8).

Second, these attacks appear to have drawn much more international attention than in the rest of the countries and were often reported together with other instances of institutional discrimination of the Roma. Entire sections in the strategic documents review above, which were devoted to the analysis of the country's evaluation by the international society with respect to the situation of the Roma, testify to the sensitivity of the Czech government to international criticism. Apart from active efforts by Czech non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to problematise the situation of the Roma minority (Interview 1), higher scrutiny of the international media and observers could have been caused by the contrasting positive reputation of the country's liberalism and peacefulness, personified by President Vaclav

Havel and symbolised by the bloodless Velvet Revolution and dissolution of Czechoslovakia (Fawn 2001).

Third, as was partially demonstrated in this chapter, much of the activity against extremism in the Czech Republic was initiated by a handful of activist bureaucrats. Apart from the author of 'Interethnic Conflicts', who authored the first documents on extremism and stayed in influential positions at the Ministry of Interior for more than twenty years, another key official at the Ministry who took over the drafting of the annual counter-extremism documents in the late 1990s (and remained in his position for more than seven years), assumed his job after he wrote a thesis on right-wing extremism at the university (Interview 2). This signals his long-time interest and investment in the issue, which he then further developed in a key ministerial position.

However, such bureaucratic activism would not have been possible if the political context was not positively inclined towards it, which is the fourth possible reason for the Czech pioneering role in countering extremism in Central Europe. Vaclav Havel, who carried a strong political influence, was an outspoken defender of the Roma civil rights and liberal civil society in general. Jan Ruml, who was Minister of Interior during the key years of the formulation of the Czech counter-extremism approach, was a former fellow dissident of Havel and a signatory of Charter 77, which was a human rights declaration regarded as one of the most important political acts of resistance to the Communist regime. The publishing of reports, information and strategies on combating extremism was itself the manifestation of the political recognition of the problem and the willingness to address it (Interview 2), which cannot be entirely credited to international scrutiny. Such recognition, willingness and feeling of urgency was markedly missing in the political context of Hungary, Poland and Slovakia in the 1990s (Interviews 5, 6, and 7).

An additional two factors that played a role in the development of the Czech counter-extremism policies were the country's historical orientation towards Germany and its tradition of defending democracy. German-speaking countries have always been a source of inspiration for the Czech state institutions, not least because the country itself had been for hundreds of years a part of the Austrian Empire. After 1989, Germany as the most advanced economy in Europe and a country that took an active role in stabilising and developing its post-Communist neighbours and offered exchange programmes and training to Czech officials, including in the field of extremism (Interview 2).

The two countries also share the political-legal tradition of militant democracy, which is actually older in the Czech Republic and could be traced

even throughout its Communist period (Mareš 2012). However, Poland is also categorised as a militant democracy (Moroska-Bonkiewicz and Bourne 2020) and both Hungary and Slovakia have provisions enabling banning of political parties deemed dangerous to the political system (Bourne and Casal Bértoa 2017). The unique Czech history as the sole functioning democracy in the region in the inter-war period, whose eventual breakdown was in large part due to internal extremist forces, might have played an important role in sensitising the post-Communist political elite to the threat of domestic far-right extremism, unlike in the other three countries, which saw exacerbated nationalism and ethno-centrism as a less of a problem.

Conclusion

The Czech counter-extremism policy reveals a different configuration of the vulnerability-minority-extremism nexus to the one dominant in Western policies. While the latter treat vulnerability in terms of individual susceptibility to violence, which is mostly juxtaposed with Muslim minorities, the former frames the entire democratic political system as vulnerable to far-right extremism, in which it indirectly implicates the Roma minority. In the West, the overriding concern is not the survival of democracy, which can hardly be affected by activities of Muslim minority members, but physical security threatened by terrorism.

However, the two ontologies of vulnerability and counter-extremism have been converging. On the one hand, the Western countries have become more concerned about right-wing extremism, populism, conspiracy theories, fake news and polarisation – all perceived as damaging liberal democracy and to some extent deliberately fanned by undemocratic powers. On the other hand, countries such as the Czech Republic take more and more interest in individualised vulnerability via the concept of radicalisation.

Notes

- 1 Various names are used interchangeably of this policy field, including counter-radicalisation or preventing and countering radicalisation leading to extremism and terrorism.
- 2 In the original: 'Interetnické konflikty (Rozbor střetů, v jejichž důsledku bylo hlášeno napadení Romů a členů jiných etnických skupin v České republice od ledna do října 1993)'. A copy of the document was kindly provided to the author by Prof. Miroslav Mareš.
- 3 https://public.psp.cz/eknih/1993ps/tisky/t0959_01.htm

- 4 www.psp.cz/eknih/1993ps/tisky/t1735_01.htm
- 5 In the original: 'Informace o projevech extrémistickým postojů v České republice'. A copy of the document was kindly provided to the author by Prof. Miroslav Mareš.
- 6 <https://verfassungsschutzberichte.de/berichte>
- 7 The first German counter-extremism strategy was published in 2016.
- 8 In the 2009 European elections the Workers' Party received over 1% of the votes, which qualified it financial contribution for the state. The party was eventually dissolved in 2010 by the ruling of the Supreme Administrative Court on the instigation of the government.
- 9 Such causal relationship was also noted in a study written in Czech, which analysed the construction of the meaning of security with respect to the Roma in Czech and Slovak strategic documents from the mid-2010s (Walach 2016).

Interviews

- Interview 1: Czech Former State Official 1, 30 September 2021, video call.
 Interview 2: Czech Political Science Scholar, 27 September 2021, video call.
 Interview 3: Czech State Official 1, 5 October 2021, video call.
 Interview 4: Czech State Official 2, 4 October 2021, video call.
 Interview 5: Slovak State Official 1, 8 October 2021, video call.
 Interview 6: Hungarian NGO Representative, 5 October 2021, video call.
 Interview 7: Hungarian Academic Expert, 15–31 October 2021, email correspondence.
 Interview 8: Hungarian State Official, 7 October 2021, video call.

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