

Red danger before elections: Trick or threat?



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ABSTRACT: Before the parliamentary election in 2006 we focused on the tendency of the Czech society and especially media to exclude one of the parliamentary parties – the Communist Party – from the government and to actively construct its status as specific. We designate this tendency as anti-communism, a word commonly used in the Czech political communication. According to our outcomes, anti-communism was a remarkable trend at the pages of at least three Czech dailies: *Mladá Fronta DNES*, *Lidové noviny* and *Hospodářské noviny*. The anti-communism as performed in their content was not only a media representation of an all-society phenomenon. It was actively constructed and supported by the journalists, editors and publicists of these dailies. Especially the two first mentioned newspapers can be perceived as actively anti-communist media both in the sense of their own involvement (the agenda setting, the content of editorials, etc.) and the manifest support of anti-communist voices (even PR information at the news pages). *Právo*, the fourth analyzed newspaper, can be by contrast characterized as anti-anticommunist or at least anti-antileftist trying to construct a more positive image of the Communist Party and challenging the anti-communist tendencies.

KEYWORDS: anti-communism, Czech newspapers, parliamentary election, specific status, qualitative analysis, Communist Party, media involvement



INTRODUCTION

Under the cover name *Red danger before elections: Trick or threat?*, we will present the results of an analysis of one type of practice that was observed in a set of selected Czech daily newspapers before the parliamentary elections in 2006. As a prologue, we will place this analysis in a wider research context. The presented case study is only one chapter in the research work of the team composed of Jan Křeček and Lenka Vochocová. The work has been carried out over the past few years within the long-term research project of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, and CEMES. We have begun with a general subject, “Media and the Communist Party,” however, the paper presented here has “Contemporary Czech anti-communism in the Media” as its subheading.

After a brief introduction, we will present and interpret the results of this particular research. We will describe the typified categories and show some examples of the qualitative textual analysis presented in an unabridged form in 2007 (Vochocová, Křeček, 2007). By way of conclusion, we will once again place the analysis in a wider context of the meta-media discourse in the Czech daily newspapers – of anti-communism as a subject of discussion on the journalists' bias.

PHASE ONE – QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSES

Several preliminary quantitative content analyses, which were focused on the (re)presentation of political parties and the access of their leaders to the media, have already alerted us to an interesting phenomenon. Regardless of the fact whether these basic, frequency analyses concentrated on the reporting attention given by the media to various (parliamentary) parties, or on the citation of the leaders, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) always came out as evidently underrepresented, i.e. significantly less often mentioned or cited. This trend was apparent in comparison with other parliamentary parties, or in proportion to the numbers of deputies and actual polls. It may be remarked, by the way, that non-parliamentary parties were almost invisible to the media in the period before the elections; the only exception being the Green Party before the 2006 elections.¹ We also found a difference between, on the one hand, the *MF DNES*, *Lidové noviny*, and *Hospodářské noviny* newspapers, and, on the other, the *Právo* daily. The difference will be further illuminated in the presented analysis.

There was, however, a correspondence across all the analyzed media in a follow-up quantitative valence analysis. We conducted it in a larger team, in conformity with the aim of the research project to map out the situation in the time of the parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic in 2006. The focus was on the media anticipation of possible government coalitions. The results, already presented, could be summed up in a conclusion that the possibility of cooperation (in government) with the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia was excluded in all the media; this denial is not usually explicated, or, when it rarely comes to it, there are no references to the election programs.

At the beginning of the next research phase, we thus introduced a special term for KSČM: party with a specific status. The term reflects the outcomes of this duality: the party is legal, registered, parliamentary (steadily the third strongest party in elections), yet it is treated on the pages of the analyzed newspapers as a party that is at odds with the legal order of the Czech Republic, or as a party that is illegitimate and different from other parliamentary parties.

¹ In the elections, the Green Party then passed the five-percent threshold required for entering the parliament. For the first time in history, the party thus gained six parliamentary seats.

There was no need to introduce the other key term: anti-communism. As we found out already in the early stages of the research, no later than in 2006 the representatives of the left-wing political parties use it to describe the practice of some media, which they understand to be discriminatory towards themselves. In some cases (not always), the term could be replaced by a narrower, albeit tongue-twisting one: “antiKSČMismus,” i.e. such media practice that operates in a different mode when (re)presenting KSČM. It proceeds according to different rules, and by different manifestations than those that apply when other, “normal” parties are considered.

Hence, the task of the next research phase, whose results we will sketch out today, was to locate, describe, and classify these manifestations of specific negativity (or, alternatively, of positivity) by a qualitative approach. We should thus arrive at a list of the manifestations of the contemporary anti-communism in the media.

PHASE TWO: QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS (GROUNDED THEORY)

The authors conducted the qualitative analysis by using basic procedures of the grounded theory and the structure of results is typical in this sense. The analysis led to a grounding of the paradigmatic model, of its central categories, by means of finding and interpreting their constructive strategies. Last but not least, it led to an interpretation of their implications and context. In a set of the texts we identified two fundamental and central categories, along with their four basic construction strategies.

Threat of communism (category A) is an overarching term for an array of warnings against the increasing influence of KSČM. Their form fluctuates between implicit insinuations and fully explicit warnings on the threshold of provoking panic; between worries about the democratic system and threats of worsening living standards, isolation of the country, and harmful legislature. The threat of communism scarcely appears in a clear form – as a warning against KSČM as an isolated, self-standing danger. More often, *de facto* in majority of cases, it is expressed as a “danger from the left,” which means rapprochement of ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic party) and KSČM.

Straw man of communism (category B), on the other hand, departs from a phenomenon in the Czech society whose aim is to weaken left-wing parties (KSČM and ČSSD) from right-wing positions. This position is often named in the media (almost exclusively in *Právo*) by social-democratic politicians. Jiří Paroubek, the prime minister and the head of the social-democratic party, frequently takes this stance in self-defense and the defense of KSČM.

Paradigmatic model – Central categories: Threat vs. Straw Man

Central category – threat of communism (*Lidové noviny, Mladá fronta DNES, Hospodářské noviny*)

Strategy for constructing the central category “threat of communism”

1A) Setting agenda in reference to the historical deeds of KSČ (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) and pointing out the parallels between KSČM and KSČ.

2A) The threat of repetition of the situation in 1946 and 1948, respectively.

3A) The threat of cooperation between KSČM and ČSSD after the elections.

4A) Implicit and explicit anti-communism – ignoring the position of KSČM as a parliamentary party.

5A) Direct engagement of the medium – op-eds.

6A) Drawing attention to the anti-communist voices of the non-media subjects (PR and group anti-communist activities).

7A) Negative image of the party and constructing parallels between communism and national socialism.

Central category – straw man of communism (*Právo*)

Strategy for constructing the central category “straw man of communism”

1B) Refusing the cooperation between ČSSD and KSČM after the elections.

2B) Constructing a more positive image of KSČM (and ČSSD).

3B) Drawing attention to “real threats” (extreme right).

4B) Constructing parallels between the politics of KSČ and the contemporary anti-communism.

Context: Meta-media discourse concerning the media anti-communism.

Effect of the strategies for constructing the central categories: Extreme polarization of the media contents before the elections: red totalitarianism, or totalizing fury on the right-wing?

THREAT OF COMMUNISM

The Czech daily newspapers, with the exception of *Právo*, not only reflect the anti-communist mood of the part of the society, rather, they directly promote it in a manner that we classified into seven self-standing categories (see the paradigmatic model 1A–7A). Most of these categories mutually overlap and support each other in the individual texts.

A1) Setting agenda in reference to the historical deeds of KSČ and pointing out the parallels between KSČM and KSČ

One of the strongest message to the readers of *Hospodářské noviny*, *Lidové noviny* and *Mladá fronta DNES* is that KSČM presents a real threat to democracy because it has not yet turned away in its course from “its past,” i.e. the politics of KSČ. The parallel between KSČ and KSČM is constructed in different ways. The simple way is based on pointing out that many current KSČM members were also the former members of KSČ; or that the party has not yet settled its past, i.e. it has not suffi-

ciently condemned the political trials of 1950s. The more complicated way uses methods such as recalling historical events related to KSČ and suggesting their parallelism to contemporary or approaching events.

A2) The threat of repetition of the situation in 1946 and 1948 respectively

This strategy can be comprehended as a specific realization of the previous category. That does not come as a surprise; since we analyzed texts from the period before the 2006 elections, the parallels referring to electoral successes of the Communist Party in post-war era were so frequent and strong that they required an introduction of a self-standing category.

A3) The threat of cooperation between KSČM and ČSSD after the elections

As much as this strategy resembles a simple and logical continuation of the previous ones, it is differentiated by an inclusion of another actor – the social-democratic party. The previous strategies manifested themselves by “erasure” of the letter M in the name of the party (thus, KSČM became KSČ²). In this case, the outcome of this category can be illustrated by a frequently used abbreviation KSČSSD, which inseparably unites all the three parties. As a subheading for this strategy, we used the phrase of the media with anti-leftist engagement that “warn” or even “alert” their readership – these expression appear frequently and explicitly.

In many cases, it reaches a point where the suggested rapprochement of KSČM and ČSSD is no longer apprehended only as the cause for the rising influence of KSČM, but as the very threat to democracy. Creating an artificial border-line between rapprochement of KSČM and ČSSD as the causal condition and the central category of threat is possible; however, it is more meaningful to understand it in a gradual sense, as different dimensions of one scale. On the scale, KSČM keeps an approximately stable status (of the threat to democracy), while the status of ČSSD oscillates between democracy on the one hand, and the *de facto* communism (i.e. anti-democracy) on the other.

The scale of the A3 strategy

- a) Identity (“Those who vote for ČSSD, vote for the communists”).
- b) Attraction (“The parties belong to each other organically, they cannot be separated”).
- c) Common grounds (“Historically, it has been one party, their separation today is possible, but not automatic”).
- d) ČSSD in bad company (“The respected ČSSD in the company with the dangerous KSČM”).
- e) KSČM as the last resort for ČSSD (ČSSD is forced to enter into “an arranged marriage” on the left side of the political spectrum).

² The name of the party: KSČ (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) 1921–1990, KSČM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia) since 1990.

Rather, this strategy rests on representation of the social, i.e. non-media actors in the news. Ergo, it entails texts that are displayed on the news pages of the media; yet, these are *de facto* promotional materials of particular anti-communist initiatives or of activities of individual persons.

The span of this media promotion starts with publishing unabridged calls of certain political actors (former “students’ leaders,” the 1st of May activities of the Confederation of Political Prisoners – their action became a means for public appearance of many political parties during the election campaign). Further on, this promotion goes all the way to putting to the fore the private firms that buy in the ballots of left-wing parties, barter them for beer, or offer 20% discounts for consumer goods in exchange for them. Certain businessmen paid for billboards in which they offer their companies along with their employees for sale, should the left-wing parties win the elections. What is striking on these PR texts is the fact that they are published in the context of other texts of the “news” character warning in different ways against the “increasing influence of KSČM.”

It would, of course, be a mistake to see the contemporary Czech anti-communism and its reproduction in this strategic category solely as an activity of isolated political actors and commercial subjects. In the course of the interpretation, we do not hide in any way – on the contrary – we emphasize (in accordance with all the stakeholders in the analyzed discourse) that the contemporary Czech anti-communism is a specific cultural and social “living” phenomenon. It also takes on some traits of “social movements” and offers many “militant” as well as “entertaining” practices to the engaged activists – demonstrations, petitions, concerts. Sometime, these assume a form of direct action that is on the threshold of legality (e.g. disrupting communist actions). Other times, they take on a form of cultural and educational activities supported by the state. The latter is exemplified by the exhibition of creative designs for the campaign “T-shirt against communism” that took place in the Czech cultural center in Vienna. The event stirred a debate in all the analyzed newspapers. The most frequently mentioned design – a T-shirt with the slogan “Kill a communist to strengthen peace” – can serve us as one of many illustrations of the topic of (anti-)communism in the Czech society. In the Czech media – once again, we recall the notion of campaigning – there is the same trend: a communication that is almost regulated; not a media communication, but a mediated and medialized communication, in which the media (as was the case with the strategies A5 and A6) are nothing but the carriers of messages “on the behalf of” various social practices and actors, subjects, and simply put: a movement.

A7) Negative image of the party and constructing parallels between communism and national socialism

Alongside the strategies of direct appeals – to participation in the elections and refraining from voting KSČM (or, respectively, ČSSD); the boycott of KSČM as a parliamentary party; threats of the rule of KSČM together with ČSSD, which

would lead to worsening of the situation in the country; or warnings against the return of the historical events associated with KSČ (e.g. the election in 1946 and the subsequent February 1948) – the media also use another strategy for constructing the specific status of KSČM. This strategy is based on creating a negative image of the party. The negative, or the specific, image of the party is constructed either with regard to ideological and political tendencies of the party (the politics of KSČM is isolationist; dumb; supportive of totalitarian regimes around the world and of dictatorships; after the KSČM's ascension to power, the country will find itself in isolation; the reputation of the country will be damaged; many changes will occur that will worsen the living standards – the private ownership will be restricted, rich and educated people will be disadvantaged, etc.), or with regard to presenting the party as a one that is violent and supportive of violence, power-hungry and usurpatory, or, finally, with regard to less “rational” references – i.e. by constructing the image of a party that is “not sexy” (the party is associated with brass-bands, bratwursts, revolutionary songs, totalitarian symbols, electorate composed of retired people, etc.).

STRAW MAN OF COMMUNISM

We have already stated that while the previous central category, the “threat of communism,” found its space of realization in the *Lidové noviny*, *Mladá fronta DNES* and *Hospodářské noviny* newspapers, the texts and fragments constituting the oppositional central category can only be located (with a few exceptions) in the *Právo* daily.

In it, we also discovered the name for this category – the term “straw man of communism” was “in-vivo” code in our analysis. In the Czech language, straw man connotes something that is not in fact dangerous; a threat that can scare away only fools (birds). A straw man – *strašák* – also resembles a specter *strašidlo*, i.e. the term from the opening lines of the *Communist Manifesto*.

Although we paid only peripheral attention to the construction of the oppositional central category in comparison with the category of the threat, we have nonetheless identified its four basic strategies.

B1) Refusing the cooperation between ČSSD and KSČM after the elections

The strategy, whose texts refuse the cooperation (in a coalition) between ČSSD and KSČM, is a very defensive and reactive one. The refusal may be based on the reference to a valid resolution of the ČSSD convention, which banned the leadership to enter such cooperation. It may also use citations of the top leaders of ČSSD, who, during the pre-election period, repeatedly refused such cooperation.

B2) Constructing a more positive image of KSČM (and ČSSD)

Realization of a more active strategy is found in those texts of the *Právo* newspaper that, on their own accord, construct a positive image of KSČM. This is

achieved primarily by the positive representation of the party's leaders, or by presenting KSČM as a party with a clear program, which aims e.g. at supporting higher employment rates, eliminating poverty, etc.

The two following B strategies are oppositional variants of the A7 strategy, i.e. the construction of parallels between communism and national socialism.³

B3) Drawing attention to “real threats”

The texts that appeared after the 1st of May, when Prague witnessed public actions of both the anti-communist initiatives and the declared neo-nazi groups, used this coincidence as an impetus. Their authors designate the “communist threat” as a mere straw man and the anti-communist actions make no sense in this respect. The participation of the leading right-wing politicians in these actions is considered to be a pure calculation.

Against this communist threat, which they consider to be construed, they evoke the real threat, which they see to be coming from the movements of the extreme right. Since their demonstration passed without any attention being paid to them from the politicians, the authors of the texts go as far as to suggest that a possible bonding between the extreme and the “not-yet-extreme” right is being built. Such a bond could even lead to emergence of a “totalizing fury on the right-wing” that could, in the future, target also other political actors rather than just the present-day communists.

In the course of our analysis, we were surprised to see how few texts ponder over the term of communism itself. The question deals with the semantic aptitude of signifying with very same term once a political-philosophical ideal, once a form of the ruling regime in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989, and, last but not least, the politics and the politicians (the “communists”) of KSČM in 2006.

We found the only remark on this issue in the form of a note on the difference between “communism” and the “bureaucratic state-socialism with repressive political regime that was imposed in the former Soviet empire and in its satellites.” In

³ The recurrent use of the term “parallel” and our concentration on this aspect is entirely purposeful. After the quantitative and the qualitative content analyses, our next research chapter will consist of the research on anti-communism as a “specific” discourse. For this purpose, we intend to turn to the program of the critical discourse analysis (CDA) inspired by Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. According to them, the political discourses are marked by the existence of empty (emptied, floating) signifiers and by competing logics of equivalence and difference. The empty signifiers designate “big,” vague and general terms (such as freedom, democracy, order) that can be filled with various and often conflicting meanings. This filling takes a form of a “chain of equivalents” – i.e. the assignment of particular and more concretely meaningful elements of signification that represent norms, values, and events. A signifier thus filled then represents the entire chain. Both the signifier and the related chain are in opposition to the antagonistic signifier (and chain) on the other side of the antagonism's limits. If we continue to consider some of the key terms of our analysis (e.g. democracy, communism, anti-communism, etc.) as empty signifiers, and if we exchange the word “equivalence” for the word “parallel,” the advantages and the relevance of this model of CDA become apparent.

contrast, we found quite a lot of textual realizations of the last textual strategy. That one leaves the word “communism” with an unambiguously negative meaning, and then proceeds as follows:

B4) Constructing parallels between the politics of KSČ and contemporary anti-communism

The last strategy of “unveiling” the communist threat as a straw man uses a construction of parallels between the politics of KSČ and the contemporary anti-communism. The authors of these texts deliberately employ the self-representational vocabulary of the pre-1989 political power (striking and mass-communicated resolve, meetings with emphasized party affiliation, propaganda, background checks) in order to sustain an illusion of the proximity and identity of the “communists” and the “anti-communists.”

I would like to remark that, at this point, we have for the first time encountered the echo of a “neighborly” political communication. A quote from Adam Michnik – “In contemporary Poland, we have two kinds of communism – communism and anti-communism” – that was published in the *Právo* daily, is an example of it.

CONTEXT

Metamedia discourse in the Czech daily newspapers: Anti-communism as a subject of discussion on the journalists’ bias

As we suggested in the “Introduction,” it was not very daring or surprising to dub this research chapter, right from the beginning, an analysis of the contemporary anti-communism (in the media, or media in adjectival form). Over the last couple of years, there could not be any doubt of the existence of anti-communism in the contemporary Czech Republic. The controversy (and not solely the one between the “communists” and the “anti-communists”) concerns only the question of whether the anti-communism means strengthening, or weakening of the democracy. In effect, this controversy mirrors the duality of communism as a “threat” or a “straw man.”

In the era of medialized politics, this social context is naturally also an effect of the practises which we observed and analyzed. If, however, we will now speak of the media and the metamedia contexts, we can trace in them a controversy on the active participation of the media in the contemporary anti-communism. Subsequently, we can link this controversy to a normative debate on the impartiality or, respectively, bias of the contemporary Czech press.

Although some texts regularly appear in the newspapers that explicitly work with negative connotation of KSČM or the left-wing politics in general, and although, on many levels, a warning is delivered even in the meta-media discussion in the Czech press that forestalls cooperation between ČSSD and KSČM, the media

professionals nonetheless object to being accused of partisanship or bias. They insist that their political reporting is “objective” and they label its critique (e.g. from the ranks of the social-democratic politicians) as paranoid.

What is substantive of the metamedia discussion on the anti-communist tendency of the media, is, from the standpoint of media studies, namely a normative background that shapes the Czech media discourse. It seems as if this background was channeling many of the “defensive” arguments of the media themselves. With regard to the status of the Czech daily newspapers, which are privately owned, it actually should not be too surprising that these media have a political orientation, a political opinion, and that they communicate it openly to their readers. In the contemporary practice of the media, this happens not only by means of op-ed texts, but also by selecting and processing the news topics.

It is clear from the texts that the media deny any bias or political tendency. They consider any accusation of this sort to be a manifestation of hostile intentions directed against them. However, from our analysis of the Czech newspapers, their political tendentiousness is evident. With the exception of the *Právo* daily, this inclination is markedly anti-communist and, to a large extent, generally anti-leftist. The question, which the scholars of media can thus ask, is: Why do not the media stand up openly for their (otherwise unreservedly declared) opinions even when they are explicitly designated as media with a clear political viewpoint? Why do they maintain the semblance of being apolitical in principal, despite engaging actively in politics?⁴

THE EFFECT

Extreme polarization of the media contents before the elections: red totalitarianism, or a totalizing fury on the right-wing?

After the overview of the news in the daily press, we gain an image of the pre-election situation in which, on the one hand, the voters are threatened by a “red totality” (represented either by KSČM itself, or by cooperation of the leftwing parties, KSČM and ČSSD) and, on the other, warnings are issued against the attitudes of the extreme right, summed up as “a totalizing fury on the right-wing.” The Czech dailies thus use exactly the same model of the “threat of a totality” that varies only in dependence on the right- or left-wing preferences of the given media.

If the media context could be also described as an “end of illusions about the possibility of impartial press,” then, as the effects of our paradigmatic model, we can

⁴ The point may be very well illustrated by the following observation: during the entire pre-election period, the right-wing media object the charges of “partisanship” and “anti-communism.” However, on the day before the elections, the editors-in-chief use the space of the editorials to give an advice on how to vote – or, rather, whom not to vote for. They emphasize that this year, for the first time, the entire left including the social-democrats is a wrong choice.

identify an increase of polarization, expressivity, negativity and defamation, and of campaigning in the media sphere. The debate about the extreme wings of the Czech politics illustrates, in its turn, how important the images of a threat or of a totality became in the Czech pre-election discussion. It matters little whether these images are evoked on the left- or the right-side of the political spectrum.

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