

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM IN EUROPE

Edited by Katherine Kondor & Mark Littler

First published 2024

ISBN: 978-1-032-18797-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-18798-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-25689-2 (ebk)

Chapter 6

Four Cycles of the Czech Far-right's Contention

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003256892-9

The funder of the Open Access of this chapter is Univerzita
Karlova (Charles University), CZECH REPUBLIC

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FOUR CYCLES OF THE CZECH FAR RIGHT'S CONTENTION¹

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Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a systemic outline of the dynamics of the three-decade-long development of the Czech far right that emerged after 1989. To avoid the electoral bias prevalent in far-right studies, we distinguish between far-right parties, movements, and subcultures, and claim that each has a different mobilisation potential and internal dynamics. Drawing on the differences in the organisational logic and framing between different periods of the Czech far-right's existence, we argue that its development can be divided into four distinguishable periods – “origins” (1989–1998), “many paths” (1999–2014), “refugee crisis and its aftermath” (2015–2019), “COVID-19” (2020–2021) – each composed of a rise, crisis, and fall. Our distinction loosely draws on Sydney Tarrow's theory of cycles of contention. This theory originally referred to “a phase of heightened conflict across the social system, with rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilized to less mobilized sectors” (Tarrow, 1994, 2011, p. 199). Some scholars further argued for its application in the study of single-issue movements as they also exhibit cyclical behaviour. They do not completely overlap with broader society-wide cycles of contention but aggregate to form them (Tarrow, 1994, 2011). Thus, to fully understand them, we must move beyond single movements, understand far-right contention as processes, and consider dynamic interactions amongst their allies and adversaries (Koopmans, 2004). Which is exactly the approach of this chapter: we want to trace the dynamic of each cycle and focus on how organisations and authorities interacted, came into conflict, or cooperated with movements in each period.

The cycles were identified based on characteristics of their respective opportunity structures, collective action framing, new emerging actors, and organisational logic. The analysis draws on the existing literature on the given topic (see Charvát, 2007; Císař & Navrátil, 2018; Daniel, 2016; Mareš, 2003; Mazel, 1998; Prokūpková, 2018, 2021; Rataj et al., 2020) as well as on the authors' expertise and knowledge derived from their previous research of far-right politics (Charvát, 2007, 2018, 2019; Charvát & Oravcová, 2021; Slačálek, 2018; Slačálek & Charvát, 2019; Slačálek & Svobodová, 2018; Svatoňová, 2020, 2021).

In particular, the chapter seeks to address the following questions:

- 1 How did the discursive and political opportunities influence the development of the far right in Czechia?
- 2 What role do the competing organisational logics of political parties, social movements, and subculture play in the mobilisation process?
- 3 How do frames affect the dynamics of the movements/parties/subcultures?

The chapter contributes to the existing literature on the far right in two ways. Firstly, it provides a thorough diachronic analysis of the Czech far right. Secondly, it sheds light on the far right's ability to mobilise people beyond its traditional circles by paying particular attention to the role of subculture, which has been overlooked in the existing scholarship.

We start this chapter by briefly discussing the theoretical and conceptual framework. Subsequently, we present crucial aspects of each cycle. Finally, we finish this chapter by discussing our findings and the contribution of the chapter as well as proposing questions for further research.

Parties, movements, and subcultures: An analytical framework

As Pirro and Castelli Gattinara (2019) correctly stated, in contemporary far-right politics it is possible to distinguish between political parties geared towards elections and public office, social movements which aim to mobilise public opinion, and a conglomeration of groups within the subcultural environment. Despite the existence of these distinctions, an overwhelming majority of scholars studying far-right politics focus on political parties, elections, and electoral behaviour (Caiani, 2017) – leaving the link between the non-electoral and electoral articulation of far-right politics ill-defined.

Several studies attempted to bridge this gap and enriched the theory with insights from social movement studies (Caiani & Císař, 2019; Pirro & Castelli Gattinara, 2018, 2019). These studies, which focused on the interaction between parties and social movements, provided valuable insights into how to overcome electoral bias and advance the understanding of various forms of far-right politics. In the context of hybridised party and movement practices, a particularly welcome innovation was the introduction of the “movement party” concept (Caiani & Císař, 2019; Kitschelt, 2006) which our analysis applies to the Czech case. Before us, Císař and Navrátil (2018) analysed the Czech far right during the refugee crisis and concluded that we cannot speak about the party movement in Czechia because social movements are separate from party sectors. The aim of our analysis is to examine whether this thesis, formulated for the particular period, applies to the entire development of the Czech far right.

Furthermore, we believe that the logics of political parties and social movements need to be complemented with another logic that has remained neglected by the extant research – that of subculture. Taitelbaum (2017) claimed that it was the fashion, literature, and, most importantly, the music of the skinhead subculture that inspired masses of white working-class youths around Europe to adopt a far-right ideology. Additionally, previous research proved that networks established through subcultures could lead to mobilisation processes (Johnston & Snow, 1998). Following our previous research (Charvát, 2018, 2019; Slačálek & Charvát, 2019), we argue that the far-right subculture played a crucial role especially in the first two cycles, and, thus, its role should not be overlooked.

Four cycles of the Czech far right's contention

Table 6.1 Main characteristics of the logics of political parties, social movements, and subcultures

	<i>Party</i>	<i>Movement</i>	<i>Subculture</i>
Hierarchy	Top-down	Bottom-up and top-down	Bottom-up, unstable hierarchies
Goal	Gain political power, mobilise voters	Promote political change, mobilise citizens	Live political values, perpetrate violence, produce an activist “hard core”
Means	Seats in parliament, participation in government	Full public squares, political change, change of public opinion	Intense experiences, transformation of human sensitivity, concerts

The concept of subculture serves as an analytical tool that refers to particular subcultural styles and scenes (e.g., skinheads, football hooligans, hardbass) as well as an exclusive, shared experience of certain parts of society (in this context, far-right activists). Such an experience is crucial for the creation of a dominant cultural subgroup with an identity and mentality that differs from that of the rest of the society (Borgeson & Valeri, 2019; Hall, 1975; Hebdige, 1979; Muggleton, 2000; Williams, 2011). In general, we understand all three mentioned branches of the far right as political logics with different *telos*. To position it schematically, the political party is focused on political power, a social movement is focused on political change (Diani, 1992), and a subculture places attention on living political values (Johnston & Snow, 1998). In reality, all of these logics naturally overlap. For the purpose of our analysis, however, we distinguish them as sources of internal conflicts that prevented some actors from collaborating. Furthermore, we demonstrate that the dominance of the social movement at the expense of the subculture led to an expansion of the far-right scene, mobilising people beyond the traditional far-right circles during the third and fourth cycles. Table 6.1 presents the main characteristics for distinguishing between the three phenomena in question.

The analysis will consider each cycle according to the points suggested by Tarrow. Firstly, we will examine political and discursive opportunity structures. The concept of political opportunity structure was employed to analyse what affected the emergence and impact of the far right in each cycle, taking into consideration the political context (e.g., the institutional framework, the party system, the shift in the configuration of allies and opposition, the positioning of the main established parties on certain issues, etc.) (Caiani & Císař, 2019; Mudde, 2007). The concept of discursive opportunities refers to long-term ideological positions held in a society, determine a message’s chances of diffusion in the public sphere (Koopmans & Statham, 1999) and affect the strategic use of frames by the actors (Ferree, 2003).

Secondly, we focus on the innovation of repertoires such as organisational logics, ideology, the definition of enemies, the strategic choices of the most relevant collective actors, and the alliances and conflicts within the Czech far-right milieu. In our analysis, we draw on the interactionist approach and attempt to depict the dynamics of interactions not only between the organisations themselves but also those between the political elites, the larger society, and in media. Table 6.2 presents the main actors and dominant ideologies of each cycle. The actors are divided based on the types of organisational logics. Table 6.3 presents the differences between the cycles based on the opportunity structure, the dynamics including ideological and organisational conflicts, and the reactions of Czech society.

Table 6.2 Overview of most relevant actors and their ideological positions throughout the four Czech far-right cycles

<i>Cycle</i>	<i>Parties</i>	<i>Social movement</i>	<i>Subculture</i>	<i>Ideologies and positions</i>
First cycle (1989–1998)	Republican Party of Czechoslovakia (right-wing populism, election results: 1992: 6.5%, 1996: 8.01%, 1998: 3.8%)	Patriotic League (Czech nationalism) Patriotic Front (neo-fascism) Bohemia Hammer Skins (neo-Nazism) Blood and Honour (neo-Nazism)	Skinheads	Neo-Nazism Neo-fascism Czech nationalism
Second cycle (1999–2014)	Workers' Party (right-wing populism, infiltrated by neo-Nazis – 2006 election results: 0.23%; in coalition since 2010. Workers Party of Social Justice (2010 election results: 2010 1.14%; 2013: 0.86%) National Party (Czech nationalism, 2006 election results: 0.17%) Dawn of Direct Democracy (right- wing populism, Tomio Okamura, 2013 election results: 6.88%)	Patriotic Front (fascism) National Alliance (neo-Nazism) National Resistance (neo-Nazism) Action ENOUGH (conservative activism)	Skinheads Football hooligans Autonomous nationalists	Ultra-nationalism Fascism Neo-Nazism
Third cycle (2015–2019)	Freedom and Direct Democracy (right- wing populism, Tomio Okamura, 2017 election results: 10.64%) No to Brussels – National Democracy (racism, conspiracy theories, 2017 election results: 0.72%)	IVČRN (Islamophobia) Action ENOUGH (conservative activism)		Anti-Islam Anti-EU Family values
The fourth cycle (since 2020)	Freedom and Direct Democracy (2021 election results: 9.56%) Free Block (right-wing populism, 2021 election results: 1.33%)	Chcípl pes		Resistance to COVID-19 restrictions Anti-vax Individualism Anti-EU

Four cycles of the Czech far right's contention

Table 6.3 The key characteristics of the four cycles of the Czech far right

<i>Cycle</i>	<i>Opportunities and issues</i>	<i>Main ideological conflict/tension</i>	<i>Main organisational conflict/tension</i>	<i>Society's reaction(s)</i>
The First Cycle (1989–1998)	Post-revolutionary chaos Anti-communism Germany Anti-ziganism	Czech (anti-German) nationalism vs. neo-Nazism	Skinhead subculture vs. Republican Party	First openness, then closed opportunities and repression
The Second Cycle (1999–2014)	Post-revolutionary chaos Anti-communism Germany Anti-ziganism	Absent (many parallel ideological streams without significant mutual conflicts)	Subculturally informed movements vs. political parties	Repression of the extreme Right, mainstreaming of conservative activism and right-wing populism
The Third Cycle (2015–2019)	European refugee crisis	New xenophobia vs. biological racism and anti-Semitism	Single issue movements vs. populist political party	Majoritarian acceptance of the definition of the situation, reluctance towards the proposed solution and political representatives
The Fourth Cycle (since 2020)	COVID-19 pandemic	Libertarian resistance to measures (majority) vs. nationalist support to measures (minority)	Party movements vs. populist political parties	New situation, the far right only as a minority in the broader movement

The first cycle (1989–1998): Origins

Post-revolution window of opportunity

After 1989, Czech society witnessed several novel developments, the products of which contributed in part to the emergence of the Czech far right. These included a fear of post-revolutionary “chaos,” austerity, disillusionment with the results of the revolution, racism (above all, anti-ziganism), anti-communism, opposition to the political left in general (including ideas of equality and communist internationalism), and new debates about the country’s relationship to Germany (Charvát, 2007). On the one hand, the context of cultural Westernisation provided an opportunity for nationalist projects to construct a threat to national values. On the other hand, it also helped the far right to exchange ideas, styles, and discourses transnationally. During the first cycle, this resulted in the transfer of the subcultural style of skinheads. Skinheads soon became infamous for street violence and dozens of deadly attacks, mostly on

Roma people, but also foreign students and people belonging to the punk subculture – possibly due to the omnipresent ethos of the newly gained “freedom.” The police still had not recovered from the loss of legitimacy caused by the role it played during the communist dictatorship (Daniel, 2016; Prokūpková, 2021).

Ideological and organisational development

This cycle, during which key far-right organisations were established, was marked by a split between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary far right. On the one hand, part of the Czech far-right movement became institutionalised. In 1990, the Republican Party of Czechoslovakia (*Sdružení pro republiku – Republikánská strana Československa*; SPR-RSČ) was founded, establishing the foundation for the party-level far right (Mazel, 1998). During this cycle, the party celebrated some electoral success: it was part of the Czech Parliament between 1992 and 1998 with electoral gains of 5.98% and 8.01%, respectively. The party’s frames employed anti-ziganist and anti-German sentiments as well as populist rhetoric, attacking politicians as corrupted elites (Roubal, 2012). While anti-ziganism resonated with the widespread racism in Czech society, anti-German sentiments reflected the legacy of 19th-century nationalism (conserved by communist historiography) and the trauma of World War II and were reflected in the following expulsion of Sudeten Germans (re-actualised by debates about new relationships with reunified Germany). During this period, the Republicans faced discursive constraints because other political parties perceived them as extreme. As a result, the parliamentary importance of the party was significantly limited, and it had difficulties to enter any government coalition. In 1998, after two terms, it eventually lost electoral support and were unable to maintain a presence in parliament (Charvát, 2007; Rataj et al., 2020).

On the other hand, outside the political sphere, the musical group Orlík, which was founded just before the revolution, brought the racist skinheads’ subculture to Czechia and laid the groundwork for the subcultural far right. This was followed by the emergence of other subcultural (i.e., skinhead) groups. Some were officially registered, such as the neo-fascist organisation the Patriotic Front (*Vlastenecká fronta*, VF) and the conservative and nationalist Patriotic League (*Vlastenecká liga*, VL). Others, such as the neo-Nazi Bohemia Hammerskins (BHS), were not officially registered (Mareš, 2003). These structures primarily consisted of racist skinhead subculture, which strictly rejected party politics and focused on cultural and violent expressions. The ideological positions of the Czech skinhead subculture underwent a major development between 1990 and 1993. Within three years, it shifted from nationalism (often anti-German), anti-communism, and anti-ziganism as well as calls for a “heavy-handed government,” to open neo-Nazism. In 1993, the BHS declared its support for national socialism and became a reference group within the entire subcultural far right. When police pressure led to the dismantling of the BHS in 1995, it was immediately replaced by a new neo-Nazi organisation, Blood and Honour (Mareš, 2003). Neo-Nazism became a significant element of the extra-parliamentary far right, which remained a subculture, never evolving into a wider social movement.

Ideological cleavages and the fragmentation of the far right

The ideological positions of various participants in the far-right subculture and party-level politics during the early 1990s gradually crystallised, leading to disputes within the scene. At the beginning of the 1990s, racist skinheads supported the Republican Party, but because

of their stance against party politics, their support gradually waned. Instead, most of them concentrated on building their own subculture and focused primarily on subcultural activities, such as street violence, creating zines, organising concerts (which served as platforms for ideological fortification, networking, the establishment of general contact across the movement, and, ultimately, financial gain), and, to a limited extent, sporadic demonstrations (Mazel, 1998). Furthermore, divisions between neo-Nazism (or neo-fascism) and Czech nationalism (both populist and subcultural) emerged (Slačálek & Charvát, 2019). Other ideological disputes arose between supporters of nationalist conservatism (e.g., the Patriotic League) and open neo-Nazism (Bohemia Hammerskins). It lasted until the mid-1990s and ended with the marginalisation of the Patriotic League and the clear inclination of the vast majority of skinheads towards neo-Nazism. Blood and Honour (the successor of the BHS) continued along the same lines, rejecting political activism and focusing on subculture. However, a new effort to establish a political party based on subcultural neo-Nazi ideologies arose (influenced by the German Junge Nationaldemokraten, the German youth organisation affiliated with the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany; NPD) (Mareš, 2003). This became an important basis for the mobilisation at the beginning of the next cycle.

Reaction of political elites, media, and the public

In the early 1990s, political elites mostly ignored the problem of rising racism and far-right organisational structures. Furthermore, Czech media tended to downplay racially motivated crimes. Some journalists even covered the skinhead subculture with sympathy. The racist skinhead band, Orlík, was being both published by large music corporations and included on popular music charts.

However, due to the rise of the subculture's violence and racially motivated murders, the attitudes of both Czech elites and media changed around 1993. Under pressure both from abroad and from domestic human rights organisations, the government decided to recognise racially motivated acts as a separate part of criminal behaviour that is ideologically conditioned. In 1994, the Ministry of the Interior labelled the far right as "extremist"⁴ (Mareš, 2003). The change in these elite attitudes affected the police's approach, which began to involve systematic actions against neo-Nazi groups. While this led to the disintegration of the Bohemia Hammerskins, it did not destroy the neo-Nazi subculture (Mazel, 1998).

After 1993, Czech media started increasingly covering the far right in terms of moral panic and frequently portrayed skinheads as poorly educated young men of working-class backgrounds, who were prone to violence and had a neo-Nazi streak (the Nazi salute being a key symbol). Although the Republican Party had acquired more respect as an official political party, journalists often depicted the party as either far right, populist, scandalous, or unserious and comical.

A specific moment involved the reaction of the groups, who were the most frequent targets of attacks (e.g., the Vietnamese, Roma, and members of youth subcultures). In the early 1990s, Vietnamese quasi-home-defences rapidly emerged and were quite successful in resisting attacks by racist skinheads. Similar attempts occurred to a lesser extent in the Roma community in the early 1990s. The subcultural youth also eventually resorted to a similar form of self-organisation. Anti-racist demonstrations throughout the 1990s and well after were mostly organised by anarchist movements and the punk subculture (Bastl, 2011). Together with the media's equating of "skinhead" with "neo-Nazi," another media analogy was created: the "opponent of the Far Right" equals an "anarchist or punk."

The second cycle (1999–2014): Many paths

Sometimes half-open but mostly closed windows of opportunities

The second cycle can be defined as a process of stabilisation marked by the 1999 Czech entrance to NATO and the European Union in 2004. Czechia had long been consistent in its exclusion of the far right from mainstream politics, sometimes even more so than some Western countries. For instance, the Czech parliament was absent any far-right parties from 1998 to 2013, whereas the Austrian Freedom Party was in government between 2000 and 2005. Notwithstanding, some opportunities that the far-right exploited, such as radical Euroscepticism, anti-ziganism, and anti-migration, gradually spilt over into the political mainstream, including the rhetoric of presidents Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman. Moreover, the fall of the Republican Party created a space for another party actor in the far-right sector. However, the subcultural far-right faced constraints in the forms of societal condemnation and state repression. As a result, it failed to mobilise people beyond its traditional supporters and did not manage to transform its resources into a successful political party or expand into a strong social movement.

Ideological and organisational development and cleavages

During the second cycle, the Czech far-right scene underwent significant ideological development. The cycle is characterised by the coexistence of many ideological streams: populism, conservatism, ultra-nationalism, fascism, various versions of neo-Nazism, and historical revisionism.

Between 1998 and 2003, the Czech far right attempted to unify. During these years, Czechia witnessed a massive number of far-right manifestations organised by a diverse coalition consisting of Czech fascists from the Patriotic Front as well as neo-Nazis from the National Alliance (*Národní Aliance*; NA) and the National Resistance (*Národní odpor*; NO). The aim of such mobilisations, which were organised as strictly legal actions, was to gain visibility in the public space, facilitating the formation of a political party that would replace the Republicans. These attempts, which originated in the subcultural field, failed. Nevertheless, some former Republicans allied with subcultural neo-Nazis and founded the Workers' Party (*Dělnická strana*; DS) in 2002. That year, a competing project, the ultra-nationalist National Party (*Národní strana*; NS), was founded. Despite public attention, which these two parties were able to attract, they both remained marginal in terms of electoral results (Rataj et al., 2020; Smolík, 2013).

Between 2003 and 2009, the social movement arena witnessed some significant changes after new actors made ultra-conservative ideas mainstream. During this time, the new platform Action ENOUGH (Akce D.O.S.T.), inspired by the transnational New Right, emerged. It called for the defence of “traditional values” (e.g., regarding family, nation, and religion) and even received support from mainstream political party MPs and, eventually, President Klaus. Its popularity peaked in 2009 when it organised demonstrations supporting Klaus's temporary refusal to sign the Lisbon Treaty (Rataj et al., 2020). At the same time, the activities of the already established subcultural far right continued to be perceived as controversial, and they positioned themselves directly against the mainstream. For instance, the neo-Nazi part of the subcultural far right attempted to organise a march reminiscent of the infamous Kristallnacht through the Prague Jewish Quarter in 2007. The event ended in widespread arrests of members of the far-right subculture, massive civil protests, and street violence.

Eventually, members of the National Resistance and the Autonomous Nationalists (*Autonomní nacionalisté*; AN) strategically decided to work more closely with the Workers' Party. After 2007 (five years after its foundation), owing to their cooperation, the party began

to play a significant role in the far-right scene (Vejvodová, 2011). In 2009, Workers' Party activities merged with social movement activism by organising provocative "home guards" and demonstrations against the Roma in Northern Bohemia. While this brought about attention, riots, and political success in some municipalities, the period was also marked by exhaustion and a collapse in the majority of the far-right scene. In 2010, the party was banned and immediately replaced by the Workers' Party of Social Justice (*Dělnická strana sociální spravedlnosti*; DSSS).

Finally, the end of the cycle brought also a successful far-right populist party Dawn – National Coalition (*Úsvit – Národní koalice*), later renamed Dawn of Direct Democracy (*Úsvit přímé demokracie*) (2013–2018), founded by the Czech-Japanese political entrepreneur, Tomio Okamura. Unlike the overly ideological and discredited long-term representatives of the far right, he harvested the votes of citizens dissatisfied with austerity measures and corruption. His success brought the far right back into the parliament. His recipe for success during the 2013 election (6.88%) was far-right populism combined with nativism, xenophobia, anti-Gypsism, an emphasis on "direct democracy," and criticism of the political class (Císař & Navrátil, 2018; Maškarinec & Bláha, 2014).

During this cycle, far-right conspiracy theories began emerging. After 2001, this conspiracy scene manifested a capacity to attract a much broader audience than the classical far-right milieu. Amongst the most significant far-right promoters of conspiracy theories were Petr Hájek, president Klaus's secretary and a publisher of the far-right conspiracist website, Protiproud, and Michal Semín, a Christian fundamentalist, anti-Judaist, and leader of Action ENOUGH (Panczová & Janeček, 2015; Tarant, 2020).

As outlined above, throughout the second cycle, there was a rather broad front of collaboration between various streams of the far right. After the failure of such attempts, the different streams mostly worked in parallel. However, as with the first cycle, the movement suffered from tensions caused by conflicts between its subcultural basis and the political ambitions of the movement's leaders. While the subcultural element continued to be driven by open racism and neo-Nazism, the people engaged in Okamura's party used a pragmatic calculation and strategically created a discourse which would attract the highest number of voters. Finally, at the end of this cycle, the subcultural far right ceased its identification with skinhead culture and developed new identities through contact with other groups (e.g., football hooligans) and styles (e.g., autonomous nationalism, hip-hop, and hardbass).

Reaction of political elites, media, and the public

Similar to the first cycle, the far right was still able to exploit the xenophobia and anti-ziganism strongly present in Czech society. At the end of the second cycle, the Worker's Party of Social Justice especially managed to attract public support through their provocative demonstrations against the Roma in Northern Bohemia. Although their support was sometimes vigorous (local inhabitants in some cases helped neo-Nazis in their struggles with the police) and, in some cases, involved political support in the municipal election, it remained local.

On the other hand, anti-Semitism, as the core component of the neo-Nazi ideology, mostly created a discursive obstruction for the far right because it alienated neo-Nazis from the rest of society. Other discursive constraints were political and cultural elites who viewed neo-Nazis as a social pathology, banned the neo-Nazi Workers' Party, and encouraged the police to suppress subculture groups. As a result, the propagation of Nazism started to be intensively prosecuted. However, the new, less-subcultural nationalist projects, such as Action ENOUGH, were not as constrained as some representatives of the elites shared their beliefs.

Some Christian democrats and conservatives even signed Action ENOUGH's manifesto, supported their "defence of traditional values," and considered the National Party an alternative.

Similarly, the media's approach was much more ambivalent towards nationalists than it was towards neo-Nazis. Nationalists were sometimes mocked, but they were also considered to be a legitimate part of the political spectrum. Media also produced moral panics about Roma violence, Islam and migration, or some parts of the Left. By doing so, they contributed, at least partially, to framing the situation as opportune for the far right.

In the first period of the cycle, counter-protests were mostly organised by anarchists and radical anti-fascists. Police often defended legal far-right demonstrations and violently suppressed extra-legal anti-fascist demonstrations (Bastl, 2011). After 2007, especially, counter-actions such as these started to be organised by broader civil society coalitions as well. While the police kept on defending legal far-right protests, some exceptions occurred. In cases of strong civil society counter-mobilisations (e.g., in Brno and Prague's Jewish Quarter), intense moral scandals (e.g., in Prague's Jewish Quarter), or a heightened risk of violence (sometimes during provocation demonstrations in excluded localities), far-right demonstrations or parts of them would lose their legal status. Police would attack them but not their opponents.

Third cycle (2015–2019): The refugee crisis and its aftermath

The refugee crisis as a new political and discursive opportunity

The 2015 European refugee crisis provided the far right with a new opportunity structure. Although Czechia had accepted only a limited number of refugees, the issue of incoming refugees preoccupied most of the political elites, and the media largely portrayed the new influx of refugees as a threat to the Czech nation and the West (Císař & Navrátil, 2018). Consequently, this led to a rise in the significance of some anti-Islam groups such as We Do Not Want Islam in the Czech Republic (*Islám v ČR nechceme*, IVČRN), which was founded in 2009 but had been operating only on online debate platforms until 2014. Additionally, other existing projects, such as Okamura's most recent political party, Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*; SPD), redirected their focus almost exclusively onto the securitisation of Islam. However, the structure of the political opportunities was ambivalent. The majority of the Czech population shared the basic demand of Islamophobes (69% of the population asked not to accept any refugees; CVVM, 2017), and the established political parties were responsive to this demand. Thus, while there was significant space for anti-Islamic attitudes, only limited space remained for the new political initiatives of Islamophobes. Finally, the increased usage of social media opened an opportunity to appeal to wider circles.

Ideological and organisational development

Shortly before this period, far-right parties and organisations established in the 1990s and 2000s became marginalised. Nevertheless, new projects were emerging or becoming more visible. On the grassroots level, the most visible initiative was IVČRN. At one point, the initiative unsuccessfully attempted to turn itself into a political party under the name, The Bloc Against Islam (*Blok proti Islámu*; BPI) and even attempted to establish a Czech version of the German political network, PEGIDA.

On the party level, it was businessman Okamura's SPD project: After he was expelled from his original party (ÚPD), he launched a new far-right populist party. In the 2017 Czech legislative election, in which the party campaigned with the slogan "No to Islam, No to terrorists,"

SPD won 10.64% of the votes. While other political forces tried to exploit the widely shared anti-Islam positions, their attempts failed after the majority of the “anti-Islam” votes were swallowed by the SPD.

Nationalist populism was the dominant ideological stream of this cycle. The far right re-articulated who its ultimate enemy was: refugees and EU elites (often signified as “evil Brussels”). Anti-Islam and anti-EU positions were connected with hatred towards liberal, anti-racist, and feminist NGOs, which were blamed for promoting the “decadence of the West” (Prokúpková, 2018, Slačálek & Svobodová, 2018; Svatoňová, 2020). These newly articulated threats to national values, economy, and sovereignty replaced former enemies, such as Jews or the Roma people. This discursive manoeuvre allowed the new far right to distance themselves from racism and claim that they oppose religious and ideological (neo-Marxist) fundamentalism. This helped them to attract new supporters.

Along with the topic of the refugee crisis, other issues gained in importance. Such issues allowed parts of both the parliamentary and the extra-parliamentary far right (including the conspiracist scene) to ally with the ultra-conservative representatives of the Catholic Church. An issue that gained particular attention was the issue of “gender ideology.” The religiously informed grassroots organisations connected through professional and personal links to SPD, Action ENOUGH, and other far-right activists ran campaigns against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and same-sex marriage.

Frequent targets were members of the LGBTQIA+ minority and activists, gender studies scholars, and feminist activists. The main narrative of the far-right’s discursive strategy emphasised the need to protect the “traditional family” and the “silent majority” from attacks and oppression by radical “genderists” as well as to establish a defence against Western decadence (Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Svatoňová, 2021). Often, these narratives were influenced by tropes that originated in pro-Russian online spaces and constructed the idea that the citizens of European countries were under the threat of a “great replacement” (Önnerfors & Krouwel, 2021). These ideas brought the far right close to some other actors, including former President Klaus, President Zeman and Archbishop Dominik Duka. Some prominent figures belonging to the circles surrounding President Klaus and Archbishop Duka even joined Okamura’s party. Klaus even published a book promoting the great replacement conspiracy theory (Klaus & Weigel, 2015), while Zeman gave a speech at a demonstration organised by the Block Against Islam.

The main fault line in the third cycle existed between the new mainstream xenophobia (Barša, 2006), represented by the anti-Islamist movement (*IvČRN*, BPI), and the more radical minority of the movement around Adam B. Bartoš’s National Democracy. Spokespersons of mainstream Islamophobia, Martin Konvička and Petr Hampl, promoted a hard-line, essentialist anti-Islam and anti-EU rhetoric (including a ban on Islam and support for Cxexit, sometimes demanding the sinking of refugee boats approaching European shores and concentration camps for Muslims) – allegedly to defend “European values” such as the rights of women and minorities (e.g., Jews, Roma and LGBTIQ+) as well as other liberal values. Bartoš combined Islamophobia and anti-EU attitudes with “old xenophobia,” racism, conspiracy theories (anti-vax), and virulent anti-Semitism.

Reaction of political elites, media, and the public

While Czech political elites partially shared the Islamophobic definition of the situation, they also had to distance themselves from the hateful and anti-EU rhetoric of the movement. Thus, they mostly refused it, but, at the same time, they behaved according to its demands: They

opposed EU refugee quotas and refused to accept refugees. By doing so, they effectively prevented the movement from becoming a greater challenge but also made it successful. Unlike other Czech mainstream politicians who officially distanced themselves from the movement, former President Klaus and President Zeman supported it. Although the police already knew how to face the traditional far right, Islamophobes were a new challenge. Their actions continued without police intervention, and the police defended them against their opponents during clashes at protests and counter-protests. Nevertheless, much to the disapproval of some prominent figures, such as President Zeman, police did include the activities of Islamophobes and that of Okamura's SPD on the annual list of extremist activities. Similarly, the mainstream media's approach to the anti-Islam movement was paradoxical. To some extent, they reproduced the definition of Islam as a threat. But they also described the Islamophobic movement as a threat to liberal democracy. As a result, they produced two competing moral panics – one against Muslim migrants and the other against Islamophobes (Slačálek, 2021).

In general, the basic demands of the movement were supported by a large portion of Czech society, and its xenophobic rhetoric resonated on the Internet: Before IVČRN's Facebook page was banned for hate speech by Facebook authorities, it had over 163,000 followers. This support, however, was only partially transformed into participation at demonstrations (only a few hundred or thousand participants) and was mostly not harvested by party movements. Only Okamura's political-business project was successful in transforming it into electoral support. While there were some left-wing and liberal counter-mobilisations, they were mostly unable to outnumber the far right. The ideology of the third cycle materialised into hate crimes and attacks that particularly targeted members of anti-racist NGOs.

The fourth cycle (since 2020): COVID-19

A window of opportunity

The years 2020–2022 brought a whole new dimension to the dynamics of the Czech far right. The COVID-19 pandemic itself and the way it has been dealt with by the state authorities, combined with the growing discontent of a particular part of the population, have opened up new opportunities for the far right but, at the same time, led to certain internal contradictions.

Ideological and organisational development

In late 2020, a broader movement emerged to oppose the government's measures against COVID. The former and current far right have played a significant role in the diverse movement. The former leader of the band Orlík (which had been prominent during the first cycle), Daniel Landa (who later became an important "patriotic" singer and was more or less disavowed from the political far right), played an essential role as an organiser of initiatives and spokesperson for the broader anti-vax movement. His initiative in the COVID situation went beyond the far right, seeking broad support across society, and evoking values of freedom. At the same time, it promoted radicalism through its statements and actions (e.g., "civil disobedience" in an attempt to block the activities of sanitation authorities) and by framing the situation with conspiratorial imagery.

On the political party level, all opposition parties criticised the form of the measures, but SPD was the only one to openly reject them and profile itself as an anti-restriction party. In addition, a new movement party, Free Bloc (Volný blok), was founded by a former SPD MP, Lubomír Volný. By combining obstructive and scandalising speeches in the parliament with

public rallies against the lockdown, he was able to attract attention. However, his project had a poor electoral result (1.33% in the 2021 parliamentary elections).

Parts of Czech society holding a comprehensive mix of ideological views expressed resistance to the pandemic restrictions through various means: the promotion of individualism (based on a neoliberal narrative prevalent since the early 1990s); protests against pandemic restrictions, surveillance, and the power of pharmaceutical companies; reactions to the social problems caused by the measures; displays of concern regarding the decline of the nation; and expressions of fear over “the great reset” and newly strengthened power structures (often referencing conspiracy theories). This resistance gradually concentrated around three partially overlapping themes: (1) opposition to anti-COVID measures, (2) a mixture of conspiracy theories about the nature of COVID itself, and (3) anti-vax positions.

Although the far right participated in the resistance against COVID restrictions and vaccination, it was not a dominant actor in the movement. However, former and current leaders of the far right have gained considerable opportunities through the movement and have been amongst its most prominent spokespeople. Many participants without a previous far-right background adopted specific definitions of the situation articulated by the far right – in particular, conspiracy theories. It is also true that even though the majority of people involved in the movement against the restrictions were not amongst the far right, the vast majority of the far right was against the restrictions (for exceptions, see the following paragraph). Furthermore, previous far-right activism was not necessarily an advantage: When DSSS supported Free Bloc in the election, its members could not officially become party candidates and did not make public appearances at the party's events to avoid discrediting the new party as being affiliated with neo-Nazism.

At the pandemic's beginning, most of the Czech far right favoured the lockdown and the closing of borders. Only a handful of far-right figures opposed the measures from libertarian positions. However, throughout the pandemic, their positions changed, and most of the far right began to oppose COVID-19 measures. The only exception was a tiny section centred mainly on the remnants of the anti-Islamist movement (led by Martin Konvička and Petr Hampl), which called for firm measures based on an idea of national unity (evoking the example of Orbán) and emphasising the deadly effects of the pandemic.

Most of the far right supported the initiative *Chcíp PES*, which was funded by owners of restaurants who could not run their businesses, and did not create their own organisations. Members of the established far-right party participated in *Chcíp PES*'s demonstrations, but SPD's chairman, Tomio Okamura, avoided them. The emergence of Volný's far-right movement party, Free Blok, did not shake SPD's position but, due to the presence of competing projects that exploited the pandemic opportunity, Okamura's party slightly lost support in the 2021 elections.

Reaction of political elites, media, and the public

The reaction of the political elites was mixed at the beginning of the pandemic. Sometimes there was a visible effort to co-opt the opposing sides into a dialogue (e.g., repeated hearings in the parliamentary petitions committee, space for Landa), reflecting the political elites' inconsistent criticisms of lockdown measures. At other times, there was an effort at clear condemnation, exclusion, and repression, which was not very effective.

The media's reaction reflected the state of society – one that has been divided since the migration crisis. On the one hand, some media sources tried to be neutral but gradually gravitated towards promoting moral panics around the “image of disinformation” (with marginal

anti-vaxxers emphasising conspiracy theories about vaccination (chips). In other words, the media continued to simplify and ridicule, invoking “common sense.” At the same time, however, other media sources heavily publicised the participation of the Workers’ Party chair in Free Bloc events, which led to the withdrawal of the Workers’ Party. The period was marked by harassment of the people associated with vaccination, such as medical experts and politicians supporting vaccinations.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the more than 30-year-development of the far right has resulted in many varieties, and we cannot identify a simple pattern. Still, some conclusions can be drawn regarding our original research questions.

From the point of view of *political opportunities*, it is not surprising that the far right has gained support in new contexts and especially in the context of a broadly perceived crisis. The analysis of the Czech case proved that long-term stability is not a fertile ground upon which the far-right thrives: It develops and finds its opportunities but it also encounters obstacles, exclusion, and the repression of a relatively stable society. When faced with a new challenge (be it a new regime, refugee crisis, or the COVID-19 crisis), the far right was able to regroup and avoid stigma and exclusion. Moments of crisis, nevertheless, provide ambivalent chances to the far right. Since their definition of the situation is often shared by a much broader set of actors, the far right is mostly unable to defend its “copyright” or “ownership” (and therefore leadership). Consequently, they must compete with other actors who can exploit these issues.

Although the far right was able to exploit some discursive opportunities in the beginning, its own *longue durée* transformed some of its features, such as Nazism and anti-Semitism (as well as, to some extent, biological racism and violence), into discursive obstacles. When it comes to *ideology*, based on our analysis, we conclude that the extra-parliamentary far right succeeded in mobilising higher numbers of people when the actors dropped their identification with subcultures (and/or identities derived from broader ideologies or “isms”) and instead defined the identity of the movement based on single issues, such as the refugee and COVID-19 crisis.

The main finding of this chapter is that different *organisational logics* complemented each other in ambivalent and mostly conflicting ways. While they interacted together and created various hybrids, their different telos often led to conflicts between political parties, social movements, and subcultures. The findings of our analysis support the conclusion of Císař and Navrátil (2018) and extend them: Segments of social movements and far-right political parties are separate, not only during the refugee crisis but also throughout all four waves. Czechia has not had a successful movement party. While both cases of successful far-right political parties can be understood more as the business projects of their leaders, Sládek and Okamura, social movements or subcultures have always failed in their attempts to establish themselves as parties. We argue that we need to enrich the conceptual dichotomy of social movements and political parties with the concept of subculture to understand such developments. The first two cycles can be characterised by the hybridisation of subculture and movement practices. On the one hand, there were subcultural aspects present that aimed at authentic expression. On the other hand, the events organised by the subculture were also intended to create a wider social movement. As such, the Czech extra-parliamentary scene oscillated between the two logics, neither of which was completely compatible with the logic of a political party. This logic and focus on political success both produce conflicts with the logics of social movements’ immediate self-expression and conflict with the idea of subcultural “authenticity” in the expression and performance of far-right values.

To conclude, the proponents of Czech far-right social movements have faced a riddle of how to combine these two conflicting logics. They often understood the movements not as social movements but as bases for forming political parties (and sometimes even managed to establish them). At the same time, the movements were deeply influenced by subculture, which provided a viable source of activists and ethos. However, when the movements were to enter the political sphere, their subcultural base caused problems as members could not compromise and adopt the universalising and acceptable language needed for mainstream politics (see Marchart, 2003). This can partially explain the success of actors outside movements. Whereas during the first two cycles, the extra-parliamentary arena was dominated by the subcultural far right, the successful mobilisation of people beyond the traditional circles was possible only when the far right abandoned their subcultural aspects and became a “movement for anyone,” focusing only on single issues, such as Islam or COVID as we observed during the third and fourth cycles.

Notes

- 1 We would like to thank Ondřej Císař, Måns Ljungstedt, Miloš Dlouhý, and two anonymous reviewers for their stimulating comments on the first version of the chapter.
- 2 This chapter was supported by the NPO “Systemic Risk Institute” “LX22NPO5101”.
- 3 The research for this chapter was supported by the European Regional Development Fund-Project “Creativity and adaptability as conditions of the success of Europe in an interrelated world” (No. CZ .02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).
- 4 Referring to the German theory of extremism (*extremismustheorie*).

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