



Conclusion: Reclaiming Politics from the Logic of War

This book offered a comprehensive analysis of how the rise of the ‘hybrid warfare’ discourse transformed the understanding of (in)security in Czechia in the aftermath of 2014. Through a detailed empirical study based on an extensive amount of both primary and secondary sources, we unpacked simultaneously the socio-psychological (ontological insecurity), socio-linguistic (discourse and narratives) as well as socio-material (assemblage) aspects of this process. By combining these different concepts that are usually kept apart, we contribute to a range of IR and human geography literatures, as outlined in Chap. 1. Our focus was primarily on events, actors and institutions in Czechia, and we have indeed emphasised the distinctly domestic character of many aspects of the problem, especially the variety of domestic social, economic and political crises and grievances. At the same time, though, we repeatedly highlighted that the HW discourse emerged at the intersection of specifically Czech developments with broader transnational trends occurring beyond the single country.

It is in relation to these regional, European and even global trends that our study gains a broader relevance, as it speaks to matters that are manifested not only in Czechia but also elsewhere—albeit in their specific local modifications and in intersections with different domestic trends. This concerns the concept of HW, which is used across EU/NATO countries (and beyond), responses to liminality by states and societies across Central and Eastern Europe (and beyond), as well as the global trend of

increasingly approaching politics and complex societal issues through the uncompromising logic of war. Therefore, we believe that many of our findings should be useful also for understanding other cases of political developments marked by the presence of geopoliticisation, warification or even the whole discourse of HW. The extent of this relevance, though, has to be determined by detailed studies sensitive to local and contextual variations, for which our conclusions should be seen as open-ended, guiding hypotheses.

Our ambition was both analytical and normative. While most of the book was spent rather on detailed analysis, this concluding chapter is devoted to the articulation of lessons driven by our normative position, as grounded in various strands of critical theory. Throughout the book, we have criticised the discourse of ‘hybrid warfare’ and the assemblage that emerged around it for approaching politics through the logic of war. Via strategies of geopoliticisation and warification, ‘hybrid warfare’ came to redress a broad array of disparate political issues as somehow linked to an existential, war-like East/West struggle. This logic of war, we suggested, contributes to the deepening of social fragmentation and polarisation, and to the reproduction of the underlying anxieties—rather than resolving them as purported (also Eberle & Daniel, 2022). As argued in Chap. 1, we consider this a price too high, given the limited utility of the HW discourse in dealing with both domestic and international challenges, as well as the problematic or flawed assumptions upon which it relies.

Fortunately enough, HW is just one among the possible responses to the underlying crises and anxieties that have shaken up societies in Czechia, Europe and even further across the globe. There is nothing natural about the HW discourse and its rise in the aftermath of 2014, as the shape it eventually took was a contingent result of often unruly and decentralised processes and interactions, transnational and domestic, that could have turned out in a very different way. Therefore, there is no reason why we should accept it as a given. Instead, given the limited utility and significant damage brought by the HW discourse, we believe it is paramount to strive for different approaches not only to security but also to democratic politics and our relations to one another. In the following pages, we offer a sketch of how this alternative, one driven by the ambition to reclaim politics from the uncompromising logic of war, could look like. While developed chiefly from Czechia’s experience with ‘hybrid warfare’, we believe that these lessons are generalisable enough to be of potential use in relation to all sorts of ‘culture wars’ and other instances of ‘weaponization’ or ‘militarisation’

of politics in general (Davies, 2019; Galeotti, 2022; Larsson, 2021; Stavrianakis & Stern, 2018), and for (Central and Eastern) European debates in particular. That said and to repeat, local modifications may be necessary.

On the one hand, some of the key lessons are relatively clear. We discuss them in the first section around the ideas of dismantling ‘hybrid warfare’, de-weaponising language and abandoning East/West thinking. These should be adopted as general principles, that is if we want to have a more productive debate on social issues, security or Russia. On the other hand, taking these suggestions seriously may require a more profound shift in thinking about politics and society. We sketch the contours of this alternative political imagination in the second part. We start by returning to the subversive potential of liminality and continue by presenting slowness, vulnerability and democratic conflict as central for our project of politics that resists geopoliticisation and warification. Given the hyper-masculine character of ‘war’ discourses, it is perhaps not surprising that many our arguments are at least partially based on or aligned with feminist thinking—most explicitly that of Judith Butler and Chantal Mouffe—that embraces reciprocity, solidarity and care.

DISMANTLING ‘HYBRID WARFARE’

Some of the key lessons from our analysis can be articulated in rather simple terms. First and foremost, we believe that the notion of *‘hybrid warfare’ should be dismantled*, as its utility is limited and the damage is considerable. As argued throughout, HW is an ambiguous ‘lab leak’ from military debates that has ‘mutated’ over time so that it can mean almost anything. Even its proponents offer markedly different narratives of the threats it poses and how to deal with them, as shown in Chap. 5. The key assumptions upon which HW relies, such as the supposedly high effectiveness of misinformation campaigns, have been put in serious doubt, as shown in Chap. 1. As such, HW ‘undermines strategic thinking’ (Caliskan & Liégeois, 2020) and is of little value in grasping the character of the challenge posed by Russia. Instead, the HW discourse has strongly negative side-effects, as it stigmatises whole sections of societies and makes it difficult to lead an open and critical public debate. For this reason, forgetting and abandoning the notion would be best for almost everyone involved—with the exception of the “‘hybrid-industrial complex” of government agencies, think-tanks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

and pundits' that use it for their particular interests (Galeotti, 2019, p. 11). As this 'complex', or assemblage, is transnational by nature, this recommendation is of value for all countries or international institutions that have adopted HW and its local modifications into their thinking (Janičatová & Mlejnková, 2021; Libiseller, 2023; Wrangle, 2022).

Crucially, dismantling means more than simply crossing out 'hybrid warfare' from the vocabulary. It is important to challenge the discourse that underlies it and that links social issues together and subsumes them under the idea that they are part of a broader war-like confrontation. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine makes this more relevant than ever. The scale of brutality and suffering unleashed by Russia's forces should alert us to the importance of drawing clear boundaries between the bombing of cities that characterises *war* and the annoying, yet essentially non-violent nuisances like trolling or spreading misinformation on social networks, that *does not*. Just to reiterate, as large parts of Ukraine are suffering from the sheer material force of industrial warfare, we should stop applying 'the ethics of total war [...] to the smallest skirmish' (Galeotti, 2019, p. 8). Therefore, proper dismantling needs to break up the discursive links that tie together issues as different as cyberattacks, disputes over societal values and media literacy and present them jointly as a matter of war-like *security* governance, often under the conditions of exception and emergency.

Instead, each of these problems should be first approached individually, with two simple questions in mind: Would this be a major problem in its own right, without the supposed link to the broader threat of 'hybrid warfare' that makes it so disturbing? Are security agencies, rather than other institutions, really best equipped to address it? In certain cases, the response will be a 'yes' on both accounts—and rightly so. The threat of cyberattacks against state infrastructures such as the energy grid or hospitals is clearly a major issue in its own right. They could bring significant damage, including loss of life, completely regardless of whether done by hackers linked to the Russian state or anybody else. Clearly, the state security apparatus plays a central and irreplaceable role in protecting and defending these infrastructures. In this sense, some of the conceptions and measures offered by the defence narrative (as outlined in Chap. 5) can serve as a legitimate and useful starting point, as long as they are kept apart from the more expansive versions and logics of HW.

However, the same response would probably not stand for many other issues grouped under the expansive definition of HW, especially those articulated by the counterinfluence narrative. Limited media literacy, issues with history education, trust in conspiracy theories or diverging opinions on same-sex marriage can be seen as legitimate problems. But, perhaps, the importance of some of them (e.g. conspiracy theories, diverging values) may not be as high as that of more pressing questions of the day that might be the actual drivers of public discontent and widespread insecurity, such as cost of living crisis, rising energy prices or, of course, the Russian attack against Ukraine. Political attention is a scarce resource and devoting too much of it to comparatively secondary problems because of their supposed HW-links means that it will probably be missing elsewhere.

While other issues, such as those concerning media literacy skills and history education, can still be considered highly relevant, security optics in general and security agencies in particular may not be the best way to address them. Would it not be better to approach them as problems that should be solved primarily for the reason of having better educated citizens, capable of exercising qualified and independent judgement regardless of whether it fits into Russia's supposed plans or narratives? And, as discussed in Chap. 6, are security institutions even qualified to make decisions on these matters? In this sense, we align also with some of the key ideas of the education narrative, especially in its focus on education—again, as long as this is dissociated from the broader HW logic as well as some of its patronising tendencies towards elderly people or underprivileged classes.

Second, this means that instead of being used as warification, '[l]anguage needs to be de-weaponized' (Davies, 2019, p. 223). As long as we want to strive for a less divided society, one of the simplest things to do is to avoid the plethora of deeply derogatory labels that circulate in the HW debate. Everyone will be better off if we stop using words 'like weapons' so as to 'demoralize and hurt' the other side (Davies, 2019, p. 148). Throughout the book, we have criticised the Czech HW assemblage for calling their opponents 'Russia's agents', 'fifth column', 'collaborators' or 'useful idiots'. Unfortunately, especially (if not exclusively) social media debates bring in a range of even worse slurs and insults, including 'desolates', 'patriots' (*flastenci*) or 'drunkriots' (*chlastenci*) (Břešťan, 2023), which often do not even pretend to hide the underlying class-based

disdain.¹ In a particularly worrying Czech example, the Minister of the Interior, Vít Rakušan, publicly denounced on his official social media profile some potential opponents of a decision connecting extremism and ‘disinformation’ as ‘pro-Russian cockroaches’ (Rakušan, 2022a), channeling the classic dehumanising trope of comparing humans to insects, one that had been used also in a range of mass atrocities (Abdalla et al., 2021; de Ruyter, 2023). As the proliferation of terms like ‘libtards’ or ‘gammons’ in Anglo-Saxon discourses shows, to give just one example, this is also a trend that goes beyond Czechia.

The key problem is that through these labels, opponents are automatically delegitimised or even dehumanised. If the other is seen as a ‘Russian fifth column’, uneducated ‘patriot’ or a mere ‘cockroach’, there is little space to take their grievances seriously and accept them as legitimate subjects of a political conversation. Unsurprisingly, there is also little goodwill on the side of those labelled in this way to engage in such conversation. In this sense, we believe it is detrimental to put anyone’s worth in question before the conversation even started. On top of that, we also suggest that more attention is paid to the results of reputable research into the actual motivations of those engaging in protests or believing and spreading misinformation. Studies from Czechia show that these are people from different classes and age groups, who often neither admire nor trust Russia, and whose activities can be seen as misled, yet not entirely irrational responses to genuine grievances (Buchčík et al., 2021; Hořejš et al., 2020).

Third, and here we are most explicitly channelling the CEE dimension, instead of geopoliticising domestic and international issues, ‘East’ and ‘West’ should be abandoned as political concepts. Rather than neutral descriptive categories, ‘East’ and ‘West’ are arbitrary tools through which individuals, states and societies are ranked according to their degree of supposed development and backwardness. This creates dubious and problematic hierarchies, in which people or attributes seen as closer to ‘the West’ are constructed as superior and desirable, while links to ‘the East’ are inferior and despicable (Neumann, 1999; Said, 1978; Todorova, 2009). Dubious, because ‘the West’ is an ambiguous category, with very

¹To be sure, this indeed works both ways so that the mostly urban, liberal and educated ‘pro-Western’ classes are denounced back as ‘betterpeople’ (*lepšolidi*), ‘libtards’ or ‘Havloids’ (a pun on Václav Havel), allegedly dwelling in their detached ‘Prague cafés’ or even ‘fascio-cafés’ (Břešťan, 2023). In line with this book’s aims, though, our focus is on the HW discourse and we try to speak especially to elites that form the assemblage that pushes it further.

different contents, boundaries and membership depending on the given speaker and the given time (Browning & Lehti, 2010; Jackson, 2006). This should be clear in the returning debates about where ‘the West’ ‘ends’ or how to evaluate the ‘Westernness’ of ‘borderline’ countries like Turkey, Ukraine, Russia or Georgia, or how to grasp the like-minded yet far-away countries like Japan, South Korea or Taiwan. Problematic, because of how political difference is redressed as deep-seated, even unbridgeable civilisational otherness. This becomes even more apparent when geopoliticising discourses enter domestic political debate. Considering whole parts of our societies as somehow ‘not Western enough’—effectively meaning culturally and morally inferior—can hardly be the basis for a cohesive society or a well-functioning polity. As such, it would also hardly help us in tackling the social issues that, as we believe, contribute to the proliferation of the very anxieties that gave rise to the HW discourse in the first place.

But would the abandoning of the idea of ‘the West’ not undermine the fundamentals of EU and NATO unity, identity and foreign policy? Not one bit. As believers in the importance of EU and NATO—and the indispensability of Czechia’s membership in both—we do not see any damage incurred to these institutions coming from the rejection of East/West thinking. There is no mention of ‘West’ or ‘Westernness’ in their founding documents, NATO’s Washington Treaty and EU’s Lisbon Treaty. On the contrary, the values listed—democracy, human rights, rule of law—are distinctly universal. Similarly, we do not need the dubious and problematic notion of a ‘Western civilisation’ to see the benefits of EU and NATO. The provision of collective security, economic prosperity and shared governance of transnational issues can all be easily maintained without indulging in a civilisational discourse. Ditching East/West thinking could even bring added value, especially in EU and NATO’s relationship with other partners. In relation to the Global South, it could help the EU overcome the colonial and racist associations ‘the West’ has earned in these countries historically. Crucially, it could also open the way for accepting Ukraine—and other states of the region—in EU and NATO *as equals*, not repeating the mistakes of the previous enlargements (Krastev & Holmes, 2019).

THINKING DIFFERENT POLITICS

The three principles discussed above—dismantling ‘hybrid warfare’, de-weaponising language, abandoning East/West thinking—should not be too abstract to understand. Their proper implementation, however, may require more fundamental rethinking of how politics could look like. Put differently, the key ideas about war and peace, East and West, or how to relate to one another that have enabled the rise of the HW discourse may be just too deeply embedded in the ways we think, speak and act to be changed overnight. Broader transformations may be necessary in our search for reclaiming politics from the uncompromising logic war.

As a starting point, it is helpful to revisit the discussions of *liminality*, above all in the two articles written by Maria Mälksoo (2012) and Bahar Rumelili (2012) that are directly concerned with matters of international politics, war and Central and Eastern Europe. Building on their work, we have argued that the rise of HW in Czechia should be read as one possible response to the condition of East/West and war/peace liminalities. Part of the appeal of the HW discourse lies in the promise of escaping from the troubling liminal ambiguities by identifying firmly with the West and adopting war as the organising logic of politics. This coping strategy is ultimately a conservative one, having ‘an overall reproductive effect on structure’ (Rumelili, 2012, p. 503) and bringing in little novel solutions to the far-reaching challenges our societies nowadays face. Put simply, instead of thinking and acting afresh, the HW discourse pushes us to view the world through the well-worn optics of civilisational geopolitics and to adopt an uncompromising war-like approach to dissent and difference.

However, Mälksoo and Rumelili also argue that liminality bears the promise of seeing politics in a different light—and even to do things differently. Not fitting into the established categories, liminality is simultaneously ‘a realm of social possibility; [...] a fluid space, which can be occupied’ (Rumelili, 2012, p. 503) and ‘a vital moment of creativity, a potential platform for renewing the societal make-up’ (Mälksoo, 2012, p. 481). Following this line of argument, being stuck between the East and the West, as well as being at unease about the blurring of war and peace, can prompt us to reflect on these very categories and how they structure our politics—and change it accordingly. In simpler terms, ‘there is also a positive, productive aspect of the situations of crisis and transition as the new setting emerging from these transitions can be better than the old order of things’ (Mälksoo, 2012, p. 489).

Therefore, the position of liminality is not only one of insecurity but also of opportunity: not to conserve the existing structures, as the HW discourse does, but to transform them. This realisation underpins the normative project of this book, which is not only about criticising the HW discourse but also about searching for ways how to move beyond it. Taking up this opportunity, though, requires responding to liminality with ‘a more subversive strategy that seeks to convert the ambiguity [...] into an asset, and to challenge the existing social categories’ by thinking and acting in ‘a way that embraces [...] ambiguity and in-betweenness’ (Rumelili, 2012, pp. 503, 505). From this point of view, the particular flavour of the Czech and CEE experience at the intersection of East/West and war/peace liminalities can be productively utilised to rethink both civilisational geopolitics and the growing feeding of ‘the spirit of warfare into civilian life’ at large (Davies, 2019, p. xvi). Naturally, this does not mean reifying some assumed, essentialised or supposedly timeless qualities of Czech or CEE in-betweenness, but rather cherishing sensitivity to certain issues that living through the liminal condition makes apparent to us. The following sections sketch the key tenets of this project.

Slowness as De-escalation

The first task is to *deescalate*—rather than deny or resolve—tensions within societies, instead of fuelling them up through geopoliticisation and warification. Valuable lessons can be learnt from our study of almost a decade of living with HW in Czechia. Russia’s misinformation and propaganda machine is at work, yet its results have been limited (as shown in Chap. 1). Still, disagreements and tensions do not seem to disappear. Politics remains heavily polarised, which is a picture familiar also elsewhere in Europe and beyond. While only small minorities seem to be genuinely impressed or attracted by Putin’s Russia, much larger groups are alienated and discontent. Democracy indeed remains under duress in the Euro-Atlantic space, yet it appears that Russia’s dark arts of HW do not necessarily have that much to do with it (which may be less valid in countries like Moldova or Montenegro, where Russia sponsored direct attempts to overthrow the governments). Quick fixes from the anti-HW playbook, like fact-checking or ‘strategic communication’, do not seem to be the silver bullets some may have wished. What else, then, is there?

One step in de-escalation can be to strive for more *slowness* in our political actions and reactions (Davies, 2019). Speed is a crucial factor behind

warification, as the logic of war requires that no time is wasted. Knowledge produced at speed tends to be the highly instrumental ‘knowledge for war’, whose main purpose is to harm the opponent and gain a competitive advantage (Davies, 2019, pp. 124, 133). Needless to say, the information economy based on immediacy and instant engagement amplifies this issue. Yet, ‘[i]mpulsive reactions can be paranoid and aggressive, whereas more careful ones can be more understanding and attentive to context’ (Davies, 2019, p. 223). This may not be applicable to the security and defence agencies tasked with protecting state infrastructures from attacks (physical or in cyberspace alike). Yet, the rest of us, especially actors engaged in public debate, would be well-advised to exercise more caution and restraint. If the experience of liminality teaches us that some people, problems and situations do not always fit in the existing categories, this means that we should also take the time for a deeper reflection before trying to impose unequivocal interpretations on the world.

Indeed, multiple of the controversies discussed in this book were fuelled by the habit to come up quickly with a tweet, a TV appearance or an article. These would be followed by both passionate endorsements and uncompromising rejections, often based on pre-existing alliances formed around the ‘identities and values’ that define ‘culture wars’ (Barša et al., 2021, p. 10). Positions formed in this way are often inaccurate (or plain wrong), yet the ‘us versus them’ logic makes it difficult to backtrack on them. Prime example is the Ricin Affair of 2020, initiated by a highly problematic article and followed by (over)reactions from commentators, politicians and influencers alike (see Chap. 6). A more recent case was on display during Russia’s war against Ukraine, when an initially unspecified missile killed two people on the Polish territory in November 2022. Within minutes of the incidents, multiple members of the Czech government (and many other figures) went to Twitter and on air to paint this as a likely Russian attack and even called for retaliation (Novinky, 2022; Rakušan, 2022b). In a few hours, Polish and US officials declared that the missiles were most likely fired by Ukraine’s anti-rocket systems, as the country was under severe Russian bombardment at that point, and the deaths were an unfortunate accident (Mattingly et al., 2022).

Cases like these clearly demonstrate the need for ‘less speed and more care, both in our thinking *and* our feeling’ (Davies, 2019, p. xvii). Fortunately enough, they also bring us examples of how such slow, responsible and even empathic and reassuring behaviour may look like. Sometimes, being slow means nothing more than focusing on the

standard of one's job, such as some of the journalists in the Ricin Affair, who stuck to their standards and conducted the slow routine of collecting solid evidence and evaluating it in a diligent manner. Similarly, during the 2022 missile incident, both Polish and US governments were cautious from the very beginning, recognising the risks of a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia. Even though we can imagine the pressure to act quickly as well as the complexity of the situation, both US and Polish leaders were very careful not to provide rushed conclusions before investigating the matter and giving the situation proper deliberation. In Czechia, a similar line was set by Petr Pavel, then only a presidential candidate, who distinguished himself from his more hawkish contenders by sharing a calming and emphatic video, in which he asked the audience to remain patient and reassured that this does not have to lead to a broader confrontation (iDNES.cz., 2022).² If Joe Biden, Andrzej Duda or Petr Pavel could remain careful in situation as serious as this, then perhaps all of us can be a little slower before making judgements and screaming them into the world.

Vulnerability as We-ness

Second, these de-escalating efforts can be furthered by rebuilding a shared sense of community, a collective we-ness. Warification and 'war' discourses divide societies along an uncompromising 'us versus them' boundary, in which the other side is seen as dangerous, inferior or radically 'other'. Yet, it appears that winning such 'wars' is not possible, as this would imply conversion or annihilation of one of the two camps. Instead, the more time passes without a 'victory' in sight, the more we are confronted with the disturbing possibility that people with very different, even incommensurable worldviews may be condemned to coexistence. This is easiest to demonstrate for democratic politics at the state level, as one cannot simply wish away large parts of their fellow citizens, who continue to cast their vote in the same elections. However, we are bound to coexist—or, alternatively, perish—together also on the planetary level, as we all rely on the functioning of the same, seriously endangered ecosystems. The liminal experience of passing through the state of being 'neither one thing nor the

²Interestingly, this laudably cautious, restraint and 'slow' line was adopted also by Jakub Janda, whom we have otherwise identified as one of the key actors driving geopoliticisation and warification in Czechia (Janda, 2022).

other' (Beech, 2011, p. 286) could serve as a springboard for meditation on how to coexist with difference in both national and global politics.

Yet, how to rebuild such shared we-ness, when societies are divided not only by values and identities but by even interpretations of what counts as reality? One option is offered by Judith Butler's call for 'reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of *vulnerability*' (Butler, 2004, p. 20, *emph. added*). For Butler, vulnerability is the one thing that is universal. Everyone is vulnerable to the possibility of being hurt and everyone can suffer trauma, anxiety and loss (although, it should be said, this vulnerability is distributed highly unequally). It is this 'precarious' nature of our lives that we all have in common, regardless of different truth claims, worldviews and values. Therefore, against the particularistic struggles of 'culture wars' or 'hybrid warfare', Butler suggests recovering shared we-ness based on the fragility and mutual dependence of our lives.

The key question is how to grasp vulnerability politically. The problem is similar as with the closely related notions of ontological insecurity and liminality. We can attempt to build our politics on denying vulnerability, which will often lead to the classical Freudian response, in which repression leads to aggression. In Butler's words, 'denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war' (2004, p. 29). This is very much the logic of warification and geopoliticisation, through which liminal vulnerabilities are denied and (supposedly) mastered through the muscular and often aggressive discourse of 'hybrid warfare'. There is, however, another option, namely to attempt to face the precarious nature of ourselves and others and approach 'vulnerability [as] one precondition for humanization' (Butler, 2004, p. 43). By building on vulnerability as something shared (see Browne et al., 2021, pp. 7–10), we can partially break down us/them boundaries, rather than fortifying them through warification and geopoliticisation.

But what would this mean in practical terms? We can start from the observation that the idea of vulnerability is by no means foreign to the HW discourse. It could perhaps be even said that the HW discourse is obsessed by identifying all sorts of vulnerabilities that can possibly be exploited by foreign actors, ranging from state infrastructures, through social values, all the way to individual skills, as argued in detail in Chap. 5. Yet, this admission rarely serves as a point for reflection. Instead, vulnerability is invoked rather as something to be resolved by quick fixes ranging from national security measures, through collecting lists of supposed

‘agents’, ‘useful idiots’ or collaborators, to fact-checking and ‘critical thinking’ education. Very often, this is connected to the singling out of certain parts of populations, for example elderly people, unprivileged classes or discontent citizens. They come to be seen as particularly ‘vulnerable’ communities that are ‘at risk’ of being manipulated by malign misinformation and thus becoming ‘risky’ for the rest of the society (see Heath-Kelly, 2013). As such, they need to be either educated and made thus more resilient, or surveilled and contained, depending on the particular HW narrative. Rather than a shared attribute upon which communities can be built, vulnerability is used as a stigma to harden the existing divisions. As a consequence, these ‘vulnerable’ people are treated as objects to be protected, contained or re-educated, rather than subjects to be heard or accepted within the community as equals. Such dilemma of emphatic care and patronising control as two intertwined modes of reaction to vulnerability has been frequently discussed in the vulnerability literature (Browne et al., 2021, pp. 11–14).

These contrasting ways of approaching vulnerability can be illustrated on the ways how politicians and other public figures responded to the growing discontent within the Czech society. Anxiety and tensions were again on the rise through 2022, peaking in a series of eclectic demonstrations in the autumn, which expressed a combination of economic angst (triggered by double digit inflation and high energy costs) with nationalist, anti-establishment and even Russia-friendly messages. Commenting on one of these demonstrations, Prime Minister Fiala labelled it chiefly as a gathering of ‘forces’ with ‘strongly pro-Russian positions’: ‘It is clear that Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns are present on our territory and some people simply succumb to them’ (ČTK, 2022). In statements like this, vulnerability is presented as other people’s vulnerability to Russian misinformation and propaganda—and, by implication, hardly a basis of a legitimate political position, let alone shared we-ness.³ Fiala’s approach, therefore, cannot be seen as one of humanisation of the other and community-building around the shared experience of

³Fiala later somewhat backtracked on the statement, clarifying that he was talking about the organisers of the protest, whom he continued to call ‘members of Russia’s fifth column’, but not necessarily the participants (Fiala, 2022). Arguably, even this follow-up was rather short on empathy, especially when compared to the more understanding tone struck by some of his government and party colleagues.

vulnerability. Rather, it hints on the riskiness of having these groups as a part of the imagined national body.

Some of Fiala's government colleagues chose a very different approach, based on the affirmation that we are all vulnerable and need to work together, rather than trying to single out someone else's vulnerability as a problem. Particularly interesting was Deputy Prime Minister and Pirate Party Chairman, Ivan Bartoš, whose Facebook post gives an example of how an alternative politics of vulnerability may look like. Bartoš began by implicitly distancing himself from the geopoliticising logic of Fiala's approach. 'I refuse to diminish people's fears of the energy crisis and to label as pro-Kremlin supporter everyone who challenges the government policy' (Bartoš, 2022). He continued by an explicit and emphatic acknowledgement—even validation—of anxieties expressed through the protests, mentioning 'a range of entirely common people, families, small business owners, who are anxious when they think about following months and look at rising prices' (ibid.). Most importantly, Bartoš not only affirmed the vulnerability expressed by the protesters as legitimate and shared but also transformed it into an appeal for solidarity. 'Resolving these issues is in the interest of the whole of our society, because it will break down if we fail. One part cannot prosper without the other by ignoring their problems and letting them fall to the bottom' (Bartoš, 2022).

On the one hand, statements like this present a case for cautious optimism, as they show that there is some openness to affirming social vulnerability and transforming it into a sense of shared we-ness, for which humanisation of the other—including protestors with whose positions we may deeply disagree—is a key precondition. On the other hand, taking the worries of other people seriously requires much more than emphatic language. First of all, a genuine acceptance of shared vulnerability should not fall into patronising care translated into quick fixes that reify the hierarchy between those holding power and those who are deemed vulnerable (Browne et al., 2021, pp. 4–5). Second, as Davies argues, the reinvigoration of democracy and the rebuilding of community does not require only that public 'feelings [...] are recognized', but also that 'the urgency of our social, economic, and environmental situation is taken seriously' (Davies, 2019, p. 223). Put differently, a productive politics of vulnerability requires empathic rhetoric but also government action that would harness the crisis into resolving the social and economic issues that bring people to the streets or to misinformation websites. Sensitive 'stratcom' needs to be followed by a genuine reform to address the needs of 'particularly those who

have been disadvantaged or ignored in the last few decades' (Kundnani, 2020). Such ethics of shared vulnerability should extend beyond the relations between the government and citizens. Rather, they should inform our common conversations about how we want to live together also on the mundane inter-personal level of everyday interactions.

Rethinking Democratic Conflict

Third and finally, our calls for de-escalation and community-building, as well as the whole project of reclaiming politics from the logic of war, do not mean that we would reject or deny the importance of *conflict* for democratic politics. In fact, the opposite is true. First of all, we believe that conflicts within a society are inevitable, as people genuinely have often directly opposed interests and values. These differences, be they over socio-economic issues like taxes and redistribution or over the socio-cultural questions of collective memory, identity or same-sex marriage, cannot be fully resolved by argumentation, fact-checking or strategic communication. This is because they rely on often incommensurable material interests and worldviews, with radically different values and even interpretations of what counts as reality. Second, we believe that this may actually be good news, as plurality and dissent are preconditions for a vibrant and evolving democracy—or even its defining features. 'Conflict in liberal democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated, since the specificity of pluralist democracy is precisely the recognition and the legitimation of conflict' (Mouffe, 2013, p. 7).

The key problem, therefore, is not how to remove conflict from our societies but rather how to incorporate it into democratic politics in less toxic and damaging ways than those offered by the uncompromising logic of war. This has been a central problem also for Chantal Mouffe, who argues that '[w]hat liberal democratic politics requires is that the others are not seen as the enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries whose ideas might be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned' (Mouffe, 2013, p. 7). Mouffe develops this claim by making a distinction between two versions of conflict: antagonism and agonism. In *antagonism*, the two sides understand each other as uncompromising *enemies*. This corresponds with the warified politics of 'hybrid warfare' and 'culture wars', as it leads to the perception that much more is at stake than different interests, narratives or policies. Instead, the other side becomes 'perceived as putting into question *our* identity and

threatening *our* existence’ (Mouffe, 2013, pp. 5, original emph.). In contrast, an *agonistic* approach to conflict considers the other side not as enemy but as an *adversary*—a legitimate if often radically opposed opponent, whom I consider as my equal and who remains part of the same community on a national, transnational or planetary level.

Thinking politics differently is then essentially about transforming the antagonist politics of war-like confrontation into an agonistic conflict, in which dissent and plurality are seen as legitimate and tolerable, however difficult this often may be. One small step in this respect would be pushing for a broader openness in debates on social and security issues so that critical voices are valued and invited. This is not merely a matter of courtesy or nicety but should be instead seen as vital for the quality of both concrete decision-making and democracy at large. As Butler puts it, ‘foreclosure of critique empties the public domain of debate and democratic contestation itself, so that debate becomes the exchange of views among the like-minded’ (Butler, 2004, p. xx). In such conditions, the only things that prosper are groupthink and ‘analytical monocultures’ (Bronk & Jacoby, 2013), which are notoriously bad for decision-making. In contrast, ‘criticism, which ought to be central to any democracy, becomes a fugitive and suspect activity’ (Butler, 2004, p. xx). Arguably, this tendency to exclude, ignore or attack even moderately critical voices has been a feature of the activities of the HW assemblage, as shown in the treatment of dissenting academic voices (see Chap. 6). Therefore, inviting a broader array of voices into the debates on social and security policy and treating them in an agonistic manner should be another inroad into reclaiming politics from the logic of war.

Two caveats need to be made. First, this is not a naïve invitation equally valid for everyone. Sometimes, antagonistic relationship is inevitable, as it may be imposed on us. Tolerating those trying to damage the democracy that agonism strives to enliven or even physically destroy individuals and societies, such as anti-democratic forces and violent extremists at home and aggressionists like Vladimir Putin abroad, would be suicidal. We do not suggest that the antagonistic logic of war should be banished from the world altogether, but rather that it is reserved only for the most extreme cases, such as when defending in actual wars of aggression, as Ukraine does at the time of writing. Instead, we call for keeping the tent for agonistic conflict broad and open and giving others the benefit of the doubt. After all, it may perhaps be possible to try to isolate, re-educate, remove or suppress a marginal segment of population or a dictator in a small country.

It is much less so if we are speaking about those 52% that voted for Brexit in the UK or Miloš Zeman's presidency in Czechia or about great powers like China. Antagonism, therefore, should be reserved only for the rarest cases and even there it should be applied with extreme caution.

Second, this affirmation of pluralism and agonistic conflict does not sit comfortably with our earlier calls for de-escalation and community-building. While we believe that conflict should be both accepted and de-escalated, and that democracy needs both shared we-ness and irresolvable difference, we understand that holding the two together is never easy. Yet, rather than an obstacle, it is perhaps fruitful to see it as another of liberal democracy's in-built, necessary and defining *tensions*, together with the clash between the principles of individual rights and popular sovereignty (Mouffe, 2000), or the discrepancy in democracy's simultaneous insistence 'on the idea that truth both matters and that nobody gets to say definitively what it is' (Chotiner, 2019). It is perhaps in accepting and even cherishing these elements of tension and ambiguity, similarly to those stemming from the experience of liminality, that a different, distinctly non-war-like and agonistic politics could be grounded.

* * *

Throughout the book, we have analysed and criticised the *politics of hybrid warfare*—a process through which security is remade as constantly endangered by a range of existential yet invisible threats, and in which virtually any issues can be drawn in via the strategies of geopoliticisation and warification. As a result, politics becomes colonised by the uncompromising logic of war, which takes air out of vital democratic debates and denies the disturbing possibility that we all may be condemned to coexist with incommensurable, even unbearable difference. We have rejected the alarmism of the 'hybrid warfare' discourse, in particular because of the way how it effectively blocks any meaningful debate on security and social issues. This, though, certainly does not mean that we are at ease in relation to the state of Czech and European democracies or the ever-more pressing global issues, of which Russia's aggression is certainly one. However, we are concerned that if these are to be resolved, we need to open space for thinking politics differently. We hope that this book has made a small contribution in this direction by its effort to reclaim politics from the logic of war by turning to slowness, vulnerability and genuine democratic pluralism.

REFERENCES

- Abdalla, M., Ally, M., & Jabri-Markwell, R. (2021). Dehumanisation of ‘Outgroups’ on Facebook and Twitter: Towards a Framework for Assessing Online Hate Organisations and Actors. *SN Social Sciences*, 1(9), 238. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00240-4>
- Barša, P., Hesová, Z., & Slačálek, O. (2021). Introduction: How Post-Communism Ends. Central European Culture Wars in the 2010s. In *Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-communism and Populism* (pp. 7–27). Faculty of Arts, Charles University.
- Bartoš, I. (2022, September 4). Facebook Post (4.9.2022). *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/ivan.bartos.37>. Accessed 12 March 2023.
- Beech, N. (2011). Liminality and the Practices of Identity Reconstruction. *Human Relations*, 64(2), 285–302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726710371235>
- Břešfan, R. (2023, January 20). Jak potupit, urazit a zadupat oponenta. Flastence i fašokavárnu. *HlidacíPes.org*. <https://hlidacipes.org/robert-brestan-jak-potupit-urazit-a-zadupat-oponenta-flastence-i-fasokavarnu/>. Accessed 12 March 2023.
- Bronk, R., & Jacoby, W. (2013, September 11). *Avoiding Monocultures in the European Union: The Case for the Mutual Recognition of Difference in Conditions of Uncertainty* (LEQS Paper No. 67). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2324413>. Accessed 17 March 2023.
- Browne, V., Danelly, J., & Rosenow, D. (2021). Vulnerability and the Politics of Care: Transdisciplinary Dialogues. In V. Browne, J. Danelly, & D. Rosenow (Eds.), *Vulnerability and the Politics of Care: Transdisciplinary Dialogues* (pp. 1–29). Oxford University Press.
- Browning, C. S., & Lehti, M. (2010). *The Struggle for the West: A Divided and Contested Legacy*. Routledge.
- Buchtík, M., Eichler, P., Kopečný, O., Smejkalová, K., & Uhrová, J. (2021). Jedna společnost, různé světy. Poznatky kvalitativní studie o fragmentarizaci české společnosti. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung/Masarykova demokratická akademie. <https://www.stem.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Jedna-spolec%CC%8Cnost-%E2%80%93-ru%CC%8Azn%CC%81-sve%CC%8Cty.pdf>. Accessed 28 July 2022.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso.
- Caliskan, M., & Liégeois, M. (2020). The Concept of ‘Hybrid Warfare’ Undermines NATO’s Strategic Thinking: Insights from Interviews with NATO Officials. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 0(0), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2020.1860374>
- Chotiner, I. (2019, January 31). Does Democracy Need Truth?: A Conversation with the Historian Sophia Rosenfeld. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com>

- orker.com/news/q-and-a/does-democracy-need-truth-a-conversation-with-the-historian-sophia-rosenfeld. Accessed 17 March 2023.
- ČTK. (2022, September 3). Fiala: Demonstraci v Praze svolaly síly, které se hlásí k proruské orientaci. <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/fiala-demonstraci-v-praze-svolaly-sily-ktere-se-hlasi-k-proruske-orientaci/2251523>. Accessed 12 March 2023.
- Davies, W. (2019). *Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason*. WW Norton & Company.
- de Ruyter, A. (2023). To Be or Not to Be Human: Resolving the Paradox of Dehumanisation. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 22(1), 73–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885120984605>
- Eberle, J., & Daniel, J. (2022). Anxiety Geopolitics: Hybrid Warfare, Civilisational Geopolitics, and the Janus-faced Politics of Anxiety. *Political Geography*, 92, 102502. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102502>
- Fiala, P. (2022, September 5). *Twitter*. https://twitter.com/P_Fiala/status/1566772860600852481. Accessed 12 March 2023.
- Galeotti, M. (2019). *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid*. Routledge.
- Galeotti, M. (2022). *The Weaponisation of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War* (1st ed.). Yale University Press.
- Heath-Kelly, C. (2013). Counter-Terrorism and the Counterfactual: Producing the ‘Radicalisation’ Discourse and the UK PREVENT Strategy. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 15(3), 394–415. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2011.00489.x>
- Hořejš, N., Uhrová, J., Trtíková Vojtková, M., Jungwirth, M., & Buchtík, M. (2020, June 22). Šířitelé dezinformací: Veřejná zpráva z výzkumu. STEM. <https://www.stem.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Verejna-zprava-z-vyzkumu-web-STEM.pdf>. Accessed 12 March 2023.
- iDNES.cz. (2022, November 15). Raketa v Polsku ještě neaktivuje článek 5 NATO. Pavel vyzval k chladné hlavě. *iDNES.cz*. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/ruske-rakety-dopadly-do-polska-pavel-cernochova-fiala-rakusan.A221115_205446_domaci_tty
- Jackson, P. T. (2006). *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West*. University of Michigan Press.
- Janda, J. (2022, November 15). Facebook post (15.11.2022). *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/TheJakubJanda>
- Janičatová, S., & Mlejnková, P. (2021). The Ambiguity of Hybrid Warfare: A Qualitative Content Analysis of the United Kingdom’s Political–Military Discourse on Russia’s Hostile Activities. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 42(3), 312–344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2021.1885921>
- Krastev, I., & Holmes, S. (2019). *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*. Allen Lane.

- Kundnani, H. (2020, February 24). Foreign Interference Starts at Home. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/24/russia-china-foreign-interference-starts-at-home-trump-sanders/>. Accessed 12 March 2023.
- Larsson, O. L. (2021). The Connections between Crisis and War Preparedness in Sweden. *Security Dialogue*, 52(4), 306–324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010620936849>
- Libiseller, C. (2023). ‘Hybrid Warfare’ as an Academic Fashion. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 0(0), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2023.2177987>
- Mälksoo, M. (2012). The Challenge of Liminality for International Relations Theory. *Review of International Studies*, 38(2), 481–494. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000829>
- Mattingly, P., Liptak, K., Gigova, R., Sciuto, J., & Tanno, S. (2022, November 16). Poland, NATO Say Missile that Killed Two Likely Fired by Ukraine Defending Against Russian Attack. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/16/europe/poland-missile-russia-ukraine-investigation-wednesday-intl-hnk/index.html>. Accessed 5 March 2023.
- Mouffe, C. (2000). *The Democratic Paradox*. Verso.
- Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. Verso.
- Neumann, I. B. (1999). *Uses of the Other: ‘The East’ in European Identity Formation*. Manchester University Press.
- Novinky. (2022, November 15). Černochová: Ruský útok na Polsko nesmí zůstat bez odezvy - Novinky. <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-cernochova-ruský-utok-na-polsko-nesmi-zustat-bez-odezvy-40414684>. Accessed 5 March 2023.
- Rakušan, V. (2022a, July 9). Tweet. *Twitter*. https://twitter.com/Vit_Rakusan/status/1545827107934175232. Accessed 12 March 2023.
- Rakušan, V. (2022b, November 15). Uživatel Vít Rakušan na Twitteru. *Twitter*. https://twitter.com/Vit_Rakusan/status/1592609439617806336. Accessed 5 March 2023.
- Rumelili, B. (2012). Liminal Identities and Processes of Domestication and Subversion in International Relations. *Review of International Studies*, 38(2), 495–508. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000830>
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.
- Stavrianakis, A., & Stern, M. (2018). Militarism and Security: Dialogue, Possibilities and Limits. *Security Dialogue*, 49(1–2), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010617748528>
- Todorova, M. (2009). *Imagining the Balkans. Updated Edition*. Oxford University Press.
- Wrange, J. (2022). Entangled Security Logics: From the Decision-Makers’ Discourses to the Decision-Takers’ Interpretations of Civil Defence. *European Security*, 31(4), 576–596. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.2021889>