

Our people first (again)! The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the populist Radical Right in the Czech Republic*

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Abstract

The report examines the impact of the war on the Czech populist Radical Right Freedom and Democracy Party (SDP) and its reaction to the war. Among the countries of the European Union (EU), the Czech Republic has become one of the most outspoken supporters of Ukraine, creating specific discursive opportunities for populist Radical Right actors. The paper investigates the supply and demand side of populist Radical Right politics, focusing on how the party positioned itself to attract support facing the challenge of reading and accommodating new public sentiments. We use qualitative analysis of the social media posts of the party leader Tomio Okamura to show that after the initial hesitant rejection of the Russian invasion, the party (re-)turned to pro-Russian narratives, incorporating the war into its populist nativist discourse and driving the ideas of welfare chauvinism and economic protectionism. Using data from the representative public opinion surveys, we show that the party supporters criticize economic support for Ukraine and the refugees and have the most positive attitudes towards Russia compared to the rest of the electorate. We discuss the potential long-term consequences on the position of the Czech populist Radical Right stressing the economic difficulties and war-related grievances.

Keywords: *populism, Radical Right, anti-populism, Czech politics, polarization, Tomio Okamura*

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Introduction

Among the member states of the European Union (EU), the Czech Republic has been one of the most vocal supporters of Ukraine since the Russian invasion of February 2022. Petr Fiala of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS)—the Czech prime minister since September 2021—was among the first high-ranking politicians to visit Kyiv (in March 2022), alongside Poland’s Jarosław Kaczyński (then deputy prime minister) and Slovenian prime minister, Janez Janša. Moreover, the Czech Republic has also provided Ukraine with extensive military support and implemented an open border policy for Ukrainian refugees, who have been provided both asylum and extensive social support (including financial and housing assistance). Almost half a million Ukrainians (equivalent to 5% of the entire population of the Czech Republic) have entered the country since the outbreak of the war, making Czechia home to one of the largest populations of displaced Ukrainians in the EU.

This paper examines the impact of the war on populism in Czechia through the prism of the Radical Right Freedom and Democracy Party (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, SPD) and its reaction to the war. We focus on the supply and demand side of their politics, showing how the SPD has positioned itself to attract support facing the challenge of reading and accommodating new public sentiments. On the supply side, we evaluate how the SPD has communicated the war in its political messages through qualitative analysis of the social media posts of party leader Tomio Okamura (Okamura, n.d.). We show that after the initial hesitant rejection of the Russian invasion, the SPD (re-)turned to pro-Russian discourse. The party successfully incorporated the war and related issues, such as the energy crisis and inflation, into its nativist–populist discourse, mainly as a way to drive the ideas of welfare chauvinism and economic protectionism. On the demand side, the electoral support of the SPD has increased modestly since the beginning of the war. Using data from public opinion surveys, we show that party supporters criticize economic support for Ukraine and the refugees coming to the country and have the most positive attitudes towards Russia compared to the rest of the electorate.

Populist Radical Right parties in the Czech Republic

The Radical Right populist “Rally for the Republic” or the Republican Party of Czechoslovakia was founded in 1989 during the transition to democracy; after some parliamentary success in the 1990s, the party fell out of national political

favour (Hanley, 2012). Aside from several minor parties whose support seldom exceeded 1% (such as the Workers Party or the Republican Party), the Czech party system lacked a significant Far Right presence through the first decade of this century, diverging from most other European party systems. It was not until the 2013 general election that a populist Radical Right party crossed the electoral threshold and entered the parliament.

Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy was established shortly before the 2013 general election, in which it scored almost 7% of the vote and 14 seats (out of 200). The party, led by a well-known entrepreneur and sitting senator⁴ of Czech-Japanese-Korean descent, Tomio Okamura, was built around strong anti-elitist and anti-corruption slogans. The political context was favourable for such a strategy: already low public trust in established political parties was compounded by a series of political crises and deteriorating macroeconomic conditions (Havlík, 2015). During the initial phase of the party's existence, Dawn was not focused primarily on issues preoccupying the Radical Right except for occasional exclusionist anti-Roma statements. After intra-party disputes about the party's future direction and Okamura's alleged embezzlement of party funds, he was expelled from Dawn. Shortly after, in 2015, Okamura founded the SPD.

Unlike Dawn, the SPD immediately embraced Radical Right rhetoric. It employed a stanch anti-Muslim and anti-immigration discourse, taking advantage of the unfolding refugee crisis and the prevailing anti-refugee xenophobic attitudes among the public. In economic terms, the SPD combined right-wing (low taxation) and leftist protectionist measures (decent state-guaranteed pensions) with welfare chauvinism (exclusion of immigrants and Roma people from social security measures). The party also adopted hard-Eurosceptic positions (calling for "Czexit") and drew clear authoritarian and anti-progressive lines, including denying the existence of human-made climate change (Kim, 2020). The party has also forged a programmatic profile similar to populist Radical Right parties elsewhere in Europe. The SPD gained 11% of the vote (and 22 seats) in the 2017 general election and slightly less than 10% (20 seats) in the 2021 general elections. Because the party's populist Radical Right profile hampers its coalition potential, the SPD has spent all its parliamentary presence in opposition.

4. The Czech Republic has a bicameral parliament made up of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower and more important chamber) and the Senate.



The supply side: Freedom and Democracy's populist framing of war-time conditions

After 2015, the SPD was among the few pro-Russian or pro-Putin political parties in the Czech parliament (alongside the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, which is no longer in the parliament). The SPD's discourse on Russia integrated anti-liberal, anti-EU, anti-American, and xenophobic narratives, depicting Putin and his regime as guardians of "traditional" values and Christianity. In his social media posts, Okamura endorsed Putin's disparaging rhetoric on issues such as migration, same-sex marriage, and the role of the West and the United States in international relations. The party also shared the Russian narrative about the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk areas as the logical Russian reaction to Ukraine's 2014 "Revolution of Dignity" (also known as the Maidan Revolution). The party representatives recognized the referendum in Crimea as legitimate, described it as a decision made by the Ukrainian citizens, and even compared it to the foundation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 (Hrbáček, 2018, p. 31).

Shortly before the invasion, Okamura downplayed the risks of Russia attacking Ukraine. During the weeks after February 2022, the party only rarely commented on the war. When public reactions became more readable after the initial shock of Russia's war of aggression, the SPD developed a coherent discourse about the war. The party's communication revolved around three main points: (1) a general and abstract anti-war narrative; (2) an overarching socioeconomic framing of the war combined with nativism (welfare chauvinism), and (3) persistent anti-elitism.

The underlying frame of the war-related communication of SPD can be best characterized as an abstract anti-war narrative. This narrative named generalized "aggression in Ukraine" as the problem to be addressed (omitting Russia's criminal liability as the aggressor) based on an oversimplified version of reality in which there would be no war if only the conflict were resolved with "peaceful, diplomatic solutions" (Tomio Okamura - SPD, 2022a). Though this general statement was Okamura's only comment on war published on his social media during the first two weeks following the Russian invasion, it set the tone of the party's principal stance on the war: relativizing Russia's responsibility by attributing part of the blame on Ukraine, and framing of the war as a logical reaction to security threats to Russia posed by Ukraine and the West. This victim-blaming position toward Ukraine replicated the official Russian narrative. The SPD also rejected the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU, the United States, and other countries as

“ineffective” and criticized the military supplies for Ukraine as potentially escalating the conflict and threatening Czech security. The abstract anti-war arguments thus equalled a position *against intervention*, eventually legitimizing the aggressor.

Nonetheless, direct references to war were rare in the SPD’s communication about the conflict. Explicit mentions of Russia and Putin, or the term “invasion”, were almost non-existent in Okamura’s social media posts. Interestingly, older positive mentions of Putin and his regime were deleted from Okamura’s Facebook page (Moláček, 2022), possibly to avoid accusations of direct sympathy for Putin.

The economic difficulties arising from the conflict became the central context in which the war-related issues were presented. The SPD repeatedly pointed to the high inflation in the Czech Republic, one of the highest in the EU, and the threats to energy security (Czechia is highly dependent on gas supplies from Russia) at the beginning of the war. Okamura’s economic messaging reflected the broader Putin-is-not-to-blame framing of the conflict. Although the inflation rate and spiking energy prices were not explicitly linked to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, the SPD used these as vivid images in a broader narrative exploiting insecurity and the sense of crisis created by the war. More directly, the SPD supported policies that would help Russia economically, especially regarding energy supplies. Legitimizing this approach by pointing to Hungary’s policies and generating fear about the prospect of further inflation driven by spiking gas prices, Okamura advocated purchasing “cheap gas” directly from Russia’s Gazprom instead of through the “expensive” gas market in Germany.

The SPD also skilfully framed the economic impacts of the war through appeals to nativism and welfare chauvinism. In general, welfare chauvinism avoids direct criticism of the welfare state itself and instead focuses on its scope (and expense) by shining a light on the universality of entitlements (De Koster et al., 2013). Thus, policy choices around welfare spending are framed in terms of the prudent allocation of scarce economic resources setting up a competition between the (deserving native) “people” and the (undeserving foreign) “others”.

Initially, Okamura indicated a positive attitude to accepting Ukrainian refugees for “humanitarian reasons” and an “absolutely necessary period of time” (Okamura, 7.3.2022). Soon, however, the SPD leader set substantial financial support for Ukrainian refugees against the backdrop of a worsening macroeconomic situation and the need to shepherd scarce government resources carefully. The party described



the immediate measures and planned public spending on integration as costly and destabilizing for the Czech social and healthcare system. Furthermore, accepting a large number of refugees was presented as a challenge for the job market, the education system, and community safety. The party leader also occasionally (though far less often than in the case of non-European refugees during the 2015 migration crisis) questioned the refugee status of Ukrainians by blaming them for “drawing too many solidarity and humanitarian benefits from our budget” (Okamura, 13.4.2022) and downplayed the severity of the situation by claiming that “there is no war on the majority of Ukraine’s territory” (Wirnitzer, 2022).

The party further created a persistent anti-elitist anti-government narrative. Okamura accused the governing coalition of incompetence, inefficient measures, and not solving the country’s economic troubles (or even deepening them). Against this discursive background, Okamura constructed a nativist divide between the Czech people and Ukrainians, claiming the government was placing the needs of foreigners ahead of its own people. Okamura described Fiala’s cabinet as

The government acts as if it were the Ukrainian government in exile, and not the government of our citizens. It takes care of Ukrainians but not Czech citizens. [...] For example, single mothers or people who are disabled have been waiting for apartments for a long time without success, but priority is given to immigrants, whose arrival is at the same time still supported by the offer of free transport on sleeper trains from Lviv” (Tomio Okamura - SPD, 2022b).

The number of issues the SPD mentioned in this context increased. Still, the main message remained consistent: the government (and the media) was prioritizing Ukrainians and neglecting ordinary Czech people whose already difficult circumstances were deteriorating further in the wake of spiking food and energy prices.

The demand side: Czech voters fed up with rolling crises

The war started just a few months after the October 2021 general election in the Czech Republic. The SPD gained slightly less than 10 % of the vote, a similar result to its 2017 performance. Public opinion polls indicated a modest increase in the popularity of the party and its leader in the wake of Russia’s invasion. According to

data collected by the Czech research agency MEDIAN, the party's support grew from 8.5% in November 2021 to 10% in March 2022 and 14% in August 2022 (iDnes, 2022). Party support then stabilized at around 12%.

Although it is difficult to draw a causal link between the outbreak of the war and support for political parties, we see an interesting pattern. Since the outbreak of the conflict, SPD support has been consistently higher than in the past, when it rarely surpassed 10%. Moreover, we can observe a significant increase in public trust in Tomio Okamura. According to a poll conducted by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CVVM) in March and May 2022, 34% of respondents expressed trust in Okamura, roughly ten percentage points more than the average recorded in the two years preceding Russia's invasion (Červenka, 2022a).

The increased support for SPD correlates with decreased public support for Ukraine and the Czech government's handling of the war. The CVVM data shows that while almost 60% of voters supported the government's general approach towards Ukraine in the spring of 2022, support had dropped to 40% by the autumn (Červenka, 2022b). A similar decrease was recorded regarding specific policies: 55% of respondents supported financial aid for Ukraine in the autumn (compared to 73% in the spring), and 43% of respondents supported providing Ukraine with military materiel (54% in the spring). Also, the public attitude towards the general approach to Russia "softened" over time. While 63% of respondents were for a "total political and economic isolation of Russia" in the spring, only 49% said so in the autumn.

The assumed linkage between the public perception of the war and the popularity of the SPD is supported by the data on supporters of individual political parties. According to a survey administered by CVVM between November 2022 and January 2023, 80% of the declared voters of SPD did not agree with the government's support for Ukraine, and 70% of them were against accepting Ukrainian refugees to the country. Moreover, when asked about emotions induced by the current political and societal situation, 80% of SPD voters agreed with the statement that they feel fear (CVVM, 2023). Although we do not have hard data uncovering the causal mechanism, the evidence indicates that the SPD has succeeded in seizing the opportunities presented by the crisis to mobilize voters around its pro-Russian populist nativism.



Discussion and perspectives

The Russian invasion of Ukraine profoundly impacted the populist Radical Right in the Czech Republic. In this report, we have focused on the SPD, the only significant populist Radical Right party in the Czech Republic, showing how it adapted crisis communication to the new situation. First, the party discarded messaging that openly supported Putin and Russia or cast Putin as a role model for defending conservative values against the liberal and “decadent” West. SPD leader Okamura even removed pro-Russian social media messages posted before the war. Second, the SPD integrated its communications about the war into the party’s established populist and nativist narratives. Most notably, the party has deployed welfare chauvinist and anti-elitist arguments to contest the Czech government’s financial and military aid for Ukraine. Worsening macroeconomic conditions (especially high inflation) and the volatile energy market helped the party integrate these arguments into its discourse. Moreover, eschewing the cultural xenophobia it had adopted during the 2015 refugee crisis, the SPD instead framed its opposition to government policy on prudential grounds (careful allocation of scarce resources) and national security (pointing to the risk of escalation of the war). Finally, although the SPD stopped short of an explicitly pro-Russian stance, it occasionally downplayed the intensity of the conflict, failed to condemn Putin’s aggression and relativized Russia’s responsibility, eventually taking the Kremlin’s side by supporting vague “peace talks” and “diplomatic solutions”.

The data from public opinion surveys indicate that the war modestly boosted support for the SPD. Not surprisingly, most SPD voters do not support governmental aid for Ukraine, are against accepting Ukrainian refugees, and are most fearful when evaluating the current political and societal situation. By the end of 2022, the war had not lead to the emergence or rise of already existing populist Radical Right parties. As for other populist actors in the system, the centre-left ANO party of the former prime minister, Andrej Babiš, underwent a significant transformation of its attitude to Russia. After taking a clear anti-Russian position and openly supporting the government’s moves after the invasion, the party stepped back somewhat, adopting what we could call a “soft pro-Ukrainian” stance. During his candidacy for the president of the Czech Republic (the election took place in January 2023), Babiš adopted a more Russian posture, stressing the need for peace talks (in a similar way as Okamura). Before the run-off, he also accused his opponent, Petr Pavel, a former general, of warmongering to appeal to the anti-Ukrainian part of the electorate. Pavel based his campaign on anti-populism,

describing Babiš's incompetence and graft as his primary motivation to run, contrasting "chaos and personal gain" with order, calmness, dignity, and civility, the central values of his candidacy. In the second round, Pavel won a landslide victory, taking 58.3% of the vote.

The mainstream parties also used war-related narratives in their communications. In the lead up to the 2021 general election, the two electoral coalitions, the right-wing SPOLU and the centrist Pirates and Mayors and Independents (which eventually formed the government), based their electoral campaign on an anti-populist appeal. This strategy constructed two opposing identities: the populist and extremist camp (consisting of ANO, the SPD, and the communist party on the one side) and the anti-populist democratic camp on the other. One of the defining features of their discursive anti-populism was the construction of a frame in which a pro-Western (and pro-democratic) group was holding the line against an implicitly anti-West and pro-Russian extremist one (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). Notably, the anti-populists (predominantly SPOLU) used war-related narratives in their communications before the local election in the autumn of 2022 and anti-populist messages mainly targeted the ANO party. SPOLU built on Babiš's past record of collaboration with the communist secret police, compared him to Putin, and blamed the former prime minister for the Czech Republic's dependence on Russian gas (Koalice SPOLU, 2022).

At the time of writing (February 2023), the end of the war seems nowhere in sight. The populist Radical Right SPD has successfully adapted its discourse to the new conditions and communicated a more or less implicit pro-Russian narrative while leveraging the economic challenges the Czech Republic is facing to appeal to disaffected voters. As the public grows steadily more disposed to the Russian position, space is opened for the populist Radical Right, already rising modestly in the polls, to mobilize voters. Still, an improvement in Czechia's macroeconomic outlook or government assistance targeting the economically most vulnerable groups of the population may blunt the continuing rise of the SPD. It could also mean increasing trust in the democratic system as the SPD is more popular among the less educated and poorer voters, who are disenchanted with politics (Voda & Havlík, 2021). Also, given the change in the communication strategy of the populist ANO, we may witness a discursive (and electoral) competition between the two populist parties trying to take advantage of the war. Regardless of who wins this fight, in the absence of an effective mainstream political opposition, the Czech Republic will likely encounter further polarization between populist and anti-populist forces.



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