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# Czech political parties and the war in Ukraine: continuity of foreign policy stances

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## ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the foreign policy preference of Czech political parties in the context of the 2021 elections and the war in Ukraine. The authors question whether the war in Ukraine functioned as a critical juncture in reshaping the parties' positions. The authors show that although the European and international profile of Czech foreign policy prevails, some competing visions have emerged since 2013, which applied to the elections in 2021, too. The outbreak of the war did not create a critical juncture reshaping the foreign policy stances of the Czech political parties. Long-term ideological motivations have remained the essential factor.

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## 1. Introduction

For three decades since the fall of the communist regime, foreign and EU policy remained on the fringes of the interest of Czech political parties.<sup>1</sup> The mainstream seemed almost univocally to stress pro-EU and pro-NATO directions, but the salience of foreign policy topics remained low compared to social and economic issues (Hloušek and Kopeček 2008). In this regard, Czech party politics is not an exception but aligns with general trends observed across Europe (Benoit and Laver 2006; Klingemann et al. 2006).

The polycrisis of European integration has started to change the saliency of issues and arenas for political parties. Yet all these processes represent a continuous transformation to which political parties must adapt rather than an abrupt external shock. The brutal attack of Russia against Ukraine that started in February 2022 is something altogether different, however. As Ukraine shares borders with some countries of the region – and others including Czechia are not far away – the pictures of invading troops and missiles hitting populated areas portrayed that which prior to 24 February had been unthinkable. In this regard, the 2022 invasion differs from the 2014 Crimean Peninsula occupation. The former was obviously driven by Russian revanchism, threatening the Western orientation of the former Soviet republics and Eastern bloc countries (Allin 2022). It became clear to many CEE political leaders that Ukraine may not be the only target of Russian imperialism.

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The imperialistic ambitions (Marple 2022) of Russia and its specific strategic culture (Götz and Staun 2023) had been repeatedly expressed by various Russian politicians prior to the February 2022 invasion, but the assault made them a very realistic scenario.

The question is what this moment means for the political parties and their foreign and EU policy stances. Did the outbreak of unprecedented aggression create a kind of external shock transforming parties' policy stances, or did their long-standing ideas remain unmoved? Our article answers this question with an analysis of the immediate reactions of the Czech political parties to the war, considering the Ukraine conflict in the context of their long-term foreign and EU policy stances.

Apart from contributing to broadening the literature on political parties and research on the CEE region, our article offers added value with important new empirical evidence on multiple topics. Primarily, our paper contributes to the literature on the reactions of political parties to external shocks (Calca and Gross 2019), which relates to the role of party politics in foreign policy making (Hofmann and Martill 2021), and the logic of party change in general (Fagerholm 2016; Harmel et al. 1995; Raunio and Wagner 2020). Our analysis of political parties' stances on the war also sheds light on the resilience of CEE democracies. The increased populist politicisation that we identify (e.g. Bakke and Sitter 2022; Bustikova and Guasti 2017, 2019; Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018; Csehi and Zgut 2021) has created a specific systemic risk by undermining domestic political and societal consensus, as well as the ability of the political elite to act and coordinate its activities with the EU and NATO partners.

The Czech case in particular is worth attention for various reasons. First, the immediate reaction of the Czech government to the Russian assault was one of the quickest and most straightforward, placing Czechia among the leading countries working towards a unified reaction by the entire EU. The country also accepted a large wave of Ukrainian refugees, a policy that stands in contrast to the Czech hesitancy to accept migrants during the European refugee crisis in 2015 (Kovář 2022, 1393). From the historical point of view, Czechia still has its own living memory of experience with the Russia-led (or at the time, Soviet) occupation in 1968. More broadly, Czechia, as a former Eastern Bloc country (as Czechoslovakia at that time), has a shared history with both Russia and Ukraine. This historical context may influence the perception and stance of Czech political parties towards Russian actions, either in terms of solidarity with Ukraine or maintaining neutrality to avoid escalating tensions with Russia. Thirdly, there is the factor of geographical proximity. The Czech Republic shares borders with Ukraine's western neighbours Poland and Slovakia, making it part of the broader Central and Eastern European region. Due to this proximity, the Czech Republic has a clear vested interest in regional stability and security.

Given the political salience of the situation, we can logically expect, the Czech political parties could have different views on addressing the situation. Thus, the domestic political landscape is the third interesting factor. The Czech political landscape is diverse, with various political parties representing different ideologies, from liberal to conservative, and nationalist to globalist. Analysing the reactions of these parties could provide valuable insights into how different political ideologies perceive and respond to Russian aggression. Moreover, in recent years, the Czech Republic has experienced alleged Russian interference in its domestic affairs, such as the 2014 explosion at an ammunition depot in Vrbětice. This event could influence how Czech political parties view Russian

aggression and their willingness to take a strong stance against it. Thus, the 'country's tough anti-Russian stance mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph was not automatic. Various scholars have identified rather different trends in pre-war Czech foreign and EU policy. For example, President Miloš Zeman strongly favoured a pro-Russian and pro-Chinese orientation, arguing the country was missing economic opportunities from relations with non-Western countries (Vérteši and Kopeček 2021). Moreover, Czechia was in the conflict's outburst heavily dependent on Russian gas and oil imports. This dependence may shape the political discourse around the Russian aggression towards Ukraine, as political parties may consider the potential implications of taking a strong stance against Russia.

Finally, yet importantly, the Czech case analysis can feed the theoretical debates about the role of foreign policy issues in party politics, their relative politicisation, importance, stability and change or persistence of particular party stances and their reasons. For a long time, the Czech case confirmed assumptions of (mainstream) parties' consensus on foreign policy orientation and certain hesitation to use genuinely international political issues as objects of mutual context and electoral campaigning (Gowa 1998; Ishiyama, DMerrit, and Widmeier 2015, Laver 2005). After 2013, a certain level of politicisation and contestation (Zürn 2014) has become a new mainstream regarding the Czech parties' debate on foreign policy preferences and priorities (Hloušek and Kaniok 2021). Thus, the Czech case can be perfect for testing two potential assumptions in the relevant literature. Did Russian aggression to Ukraine create a moment of foreign policy shock that can reshape the long-term patterns and build a new consensus (Fagerholm 2016; Ishiyama, DMerrit, and Widmeier 2015, 325–326; Ishiyama, Pace, and Stewart 2018, 327)? Or do the long-term predictors, like ideology (Raunio and Wagner 2020; Wagner 2020), prevail and cement existing politicisation patterns regardless of the crisis's imminent impact? Meticulous analysis of the Czech case contributes new empirical evidence to these theoretical debates.

As the key finding, our analysis reveals that the outbreak of the Ukraine war was not a *path breaking* moment for the Czech political parties' foreign policy stances. On the contrary, long-term ideological motivations and other considerations seem to be the most important factors alongside strategic interests. A scenario of reframing the war into the context of domestic distributive policies, which succeeded in Slovak parliamentary elections 2023 won by Fico who used it, was tested by Andrej Babiš in the Czech presidential elections 2023 without success (Gregor and Šedo 2023). This finding has an important implication not only for the literature on party politics and political development in CEE but also for our understanding of the behaviour of the Czech Republic in relation to the war in Ukraine.

The paper is organised in the following way. First, we discuss the role of political parties as actors in shaping foreign policy. In this part, we also briefly summarise the debate on the role of external shocks on party positions in general and on Czech parties and their foreign policy preferences, identities and profiles. Based on this literature, we propose our analytical framework and explain our methods and data. Third, creating necessary context, we analyse the parties' manifestos for the 2021 elections. Here we argue that even though the European and international profile of Czech foreign policy prevails, since 2013 other competing visions have been emerging. This trend was confirmed in the positions staked out by parties in the 2021 electoral campaign. Fourth, we analyse

the official reactions of the Czech parties to the Russian invasion in the time period decisive for the formulation of their stances – February and March 2022.

## 2. The role of political parties in foreign policy making

The start of Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 can be treated as a typical example of a foreign political shock that “changed the course of interstate and intrastate relations and may have altered the nature of regional or global international politics” (Gordell and Volgy 2022, 110). Such shocks impact not only the system of international relations and its immediate actors, but can also impact the political actors that perform primarily in the arena of domestic politics, such as political parties. Yet the literature on how changes in foreign policy impact political parties remains underdeveloped (Ishiyama, Pace, and Stewart 2018, 325). The metaphor of political parties “stopping at the water’s edge” of foreign political consensus within a state (Gowa 1998) and the long-term assumption of the multilateralist consensus of liberal internationalism (Ishiyama, DMerrit, and Widmeier 2015) have prevented a deeper investigation of how parties matter in foreign policy and how foreign politics matters for parties.

Hofmann and Martill (2021, 308) list reasons why parties have mattered more since the end of the Cold War: the democratisation of foreign policymaking procedures, the blurred line between domestic and foreign politics because of globalisation and Europeanisation, as well as fruitful communication among scholars of foreign policy analysis, comparative politics and international relations. Zürn (2014) stresses the increasing politicisation of foreign political issues. The connection between foreign political shocks and the stances of political parties is hardly linear. It contains many elements, starting with the ideological background expressed in party manifestos (Ishiyama, DMerrit, and Widmeier 2015, 321) and going through the impact on patterns of party competition to impulses for realignment and new cleavages (Raunio and Wagner 2020; Zürn 2014). Political parties are reluctant to change their policy positions significantly (Laver 2005). Nevertheless, shifts can occur for a variety of reasons, depending on the type of party, its position within the party system, its electoral performance, and external shocks (for an overview, see Fagerholm 2016).

According to the literature, external shocks can affect long-term priorities and immediate stances, typically in favour of military intervention (Ishiyama, DMerrit, and Widmeier 2015, 325–326; Ishiyama, Pace, and Stewart 2018, 327). Harmel et al. (1995; see also Ishiyama, Pace, and Stewart 2018, 326–327) distinguish identity and image as two possible functions of party manifestos and expressions. Identity refers to “the substantive content of [the party’s] issue position”, and image is “projected through the manifesto’s packaging, as indicated [...] by the relative emphases placed across a range of issues” (Harmel et al. 1995, 2). We assume that the external shock of Russian aggression against Ukraine might have led to changes in both the image and identity, conditioned by their long-term preferences, of particular Czech parties. The external shock might have reinforced the already adopted positions of those parties treating Russia as a potential threat in general and aligned to pro-Western foreign policies. Other parties might have faced difficulties interpreting their foreign policy preferences in the new context of military conflict.

The literature describes some general trends. Governmental parties must react quicker and more decisively than opposition parties (Calca and Gross 2019, 547–549). Leftist parties tend to be more “dovish” when supporting the use of force. Meanwhile, right-

wing parties tend to be more “hawkish” (Raunio and Wagner 2020, 518). Wagner (2020) documents that the “hawkish” approach does not apply to the parties of the radical right, and thus moderate right parties are typically the most prone to support the use of force. Populist and radical right parties also oppose internationalism and multilateralism and stress the national interest in self-exclusion from international operations, including the use of force (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017). Haesebrouck and Mello (2020) show that centre-left and centre-right parties are the clearest supporters of military missions, and support declines at both ends of the party spectrum. However, ideology is a better predictor for Western European than for East Central European countries. More specifically, moderate right-wing parties tended historically to contest the Soviet Union and based on their reactions to the occupation of Crimea in 2014 perceive contemporary Russia as a similar threat. Still, the far-right has seen an ally in the Russian Federation. The far left will always remain “dovish”, even vis-à-vis the threat posed by Russian foreign political behaviour (Ishiyama, Pace, and Stewart 2018, 327–328).

The literature on the foreign policy positions and stances of Czech political parties is not vast and deals mainly with party preferences and how they impact foreign policy making. Drulák (2006) and Kořan (2007) analysed the differences in relations to NATO and the EU among other Czech political parties, demonstrating that after achieving the main goals of the post-1989 official Czech foreign policy – NATO and EU membership – the diversity of views of what exactly it means and how active Czech membership should be increased. In the following decade, the Social Democratic Party introduced China as a potential alternative for economic cooperation, thereby creating a new line of foreign policy argumentation (Fürst and Pleschová 2010). China has remained an important part of the foreign policy discourse of the Czech Communist Party and President Zeman ever since (Kowalski 2022). Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 provided another incentive for reaffirmation or modification of the basic foreign policy preferences of the Czech parties. Inter-party discussions confirmed the ambiguous stance of some prominent Social Democrats as well as the pro-Russian preference of the Communist Party and part of Okamura’s far-right party (called Dawn of Direct Democracy in 2014–2015, and Freedom and Direct Democracy from late 2015 on). On the other hand, the Civic Democrats (ODS), TOP09 and Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL) reaffirmed their anti-Russian positions. Only ANO 2011 did not more actively enter the debate, confirming its lukewarm approach to the formulation of *any* clear position (Mochťak 2016, 329–333).

Nevertheless, the patterns of the foreign policy identities and images of Czech political parties were remarkably stable before February 2022. Within the Czech foreign policy debate, Drulák (2006, 77) differentiated four positions: (1) the pro-NATO and pro-EU “Internationalists”, represented by the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL), liberal politicians, and elements of the Civic Democrats (ODS) and Social Democrats (ČSSD) in the 1990s; (2) the pro-NATO “Atlanticists” – the mainstream position of Civic Democrats sceptical of deepening EU integration; (3) the pro-EU “Europeanists”, exemplified by those in the Social Democratic mainstream hesitant to endorse closer cooperation within NATO; and (4) the “Autonomists” – the Communist Party (KSČM), rejecting both NATO and the EU. An even more sophisticated conceptualisation was most recently offered by Hloušek and Kaniok (2021), whose conceptual frame is based on distinguishing between two dimensions of Czech foreign/EU policy. The first dimension is whether

Czechia should be an active or passive actor in international politics. Therefore, two ideal typical positions are internationalism and isolationism. The second dimension is based on the trajectory Czech foreign policy should take based on geopolitical priorities and preferences, relying on the previously used concepts of Europeanism, Atlanticism, unspecified Multilateralism, and Easternism (Hloušek and Kaniok 2021, 706–708).

### 3. Method and data used

Our analysis has two goals. First, we are interested in the pre-war foreign policy stances of the Czech political parties as expressed in their 2021 parliamentary election campaigns. For this analysis, we adopt Hloušek and Kaniok's (2021) conceptual framework and apply it to the electoral manifestos of the Czech political parties. The operationalisation of the categories is based on respective codes from the CMP project codebook and can be found in Table 1.

As we were not interested in the overall importance of foreign and EU issues in the manifestos, we coded only the relevant chapters or sections. The coding was done manually by two coders, who firstly identified the relevant sections/chapters, dissected them into quasi-sentences, and coded each relevant quasi-sentence using codes from Table 2. We consider this relatively simple approach as adequate, as the amount of textual data analysed through it was relatively small as was the number of codes that was used for the analysis. For all parties, foreign and EU policies were distinctively separated from other topics. Interestingly, almost all the parties and coalitions still treated both issues as two parts of the same topic; even though at the time the country was anticipating the upcoming Czech EU Presidency (in 2022), EU policy was not seen as a distinctive agenda. We analysed all parties that had been represented in the House of Deputies prior to the election or had a reasonable chance to be represented after the election. Altogether, this led to the inclusion of nine political parties – ČSSD, KSČM, SPD, ANO, ODS, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09, Pirates, and STAN.

For our second goal – identification of the immediate reactions of the Czech parties to the war – we decided to modify the Hloušek and Kaniok framework. All categories

**Table 1.** Operationalisation of Approach/Trajectory.

Approach	
Internationalism	Per107 Internationalism positive Per104 Military positive
Isolationism	Per109 Internationalism negative Per105 Military negative Per106 Peace
Trajectory	
Europeanist	Per108 EC/EU positive Per101 Foreign Special Relationships: Positive (Western European countries/EU as such)
Atlanticist	Per101 Foreign Special Relationships: Positive (USA) Per1012 Western states positive
Multilateralist	Per102 Foreign Special Relationships: Negative Per103 Anti-Imperialism Per1032 Independence positive
Eastern	Per 1011 Russia Positive Per110 EC/EU negative Per101 Foreign Special Relationships: Positive (RF and/or China)

Source: the authors on the basis of Hloušek and Kaniok (2021)<sup>3</sup>

**Table 2.** Number of entries according parties.

Party	No. of entries	Party	No. of entries
ČSSD	24	KSČM	9
ANO	16	SPD	14
KDU	22	TOP 09	16
ODS	99	Pirates	16
STAN	10	Total	226

Source: Authors' own compilation.

were defined as follows. For the Approach, Internationalism means that the document acknowledges the wider (international or European) perspective of the war and gives it preference over the domestic implications. Contrarily, Isolationism in this regard represents a stance when the internal aspects – be it the impact of the aggression or specific steps required to address it – are clearly either the main or the dominant theme of the message. The second dimension – Trajectory – consists of four categories. The first, Europeanists, we define as message content that is either pro-EU or pro-western European countries. The second, Atlantists, highlight the role of the USA, NATO as a whole, or western European countries (including for example the United Kingdom). The third type, Multilateralism, positively speaks about the role of the broader international community as embodied for example in the United Nations. Lastly, Easternism, advocates and supports Russia or China.

We believe that this slightly modified framework represents a relevant mirror for the stances identified in the electoral manifestos, and findings drawn for both analyses can thus be compared. We applied our method to all press releases we downloaded from the parties' websites for the period from 24 February 2022–2031 March 2022. Here, the coding process focused on each document as a such – that means that no quasi-sentences, but the general content of the statement was coded. Again, two coders went through the dataset independently. The scope of these materials differed from one party to another one – sometimes they included only the party's official stances, and sometimes they also included articles from newspapers or other websites, or commentaries and articles written specifically by party members. But in all cases, the available materials represented the party – otherwise they would not have been shared and promoted on their official websites – and served to create its public profile/perception. Moreover, analysing political parties' press releases can provide insight into their priorities, strategies, and messages. As such, press releases are often compared with positions articulated in manifestos (e.g. Popa, Braun, and Leidecker-Sandmann 2020) to consider how the press releases fit into the party's overall messaging and policy positions. This can help identify any inconsistencies or changes in the party's positions over time.

Thus, we consider these to be relevant sources of information, even though we are aware that other relevant data capturing parties' positions could have been analysed – for example social media posts on sites such as Facebook or Twitter. Just as our analysis of the electoral manifestos included parties that did not succeed in the 2021 parliamentary elections – the Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party – we included them in this analysis as well in order to provide as complex a picture as possible. Thus, we again analysed the same nine political parties.



## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Foreign policy in the 2021 electoral manifestos

Compared to previous elections, the 2021 Czech elections differed in that several long-standing political parties such as ODS and KDU-ČSL suppressed their distinctive identities in order to run as coalitions. This makes things empirically interesting – there were in fact two such coalitions – but also creates analytical difficulties because from the strict methodological view, qualitatively different organisations – independent political parties and their electoral coalitions – are in some cases compared. We are aware of this. Nevertheless, neither the right-wing coalition (KDU-ČSL, TOP 09 and ODS) nor Pir/STAN block differ in the EU and foreign policy approaches from the positions on the same policies that participating parties had prior joining the coalitions. Both formations were established on the ideological proximity basis and even that their members had to make some concessions – for example, ODS on the EU policy – they did not affect the broad underlying positions. Thus, the comparative perspective exists and can be discussed. Nevertheless, we deliberately left the idea to carry out the comparative analysis quantitatively as Hloušek and Kaniok (2021) did and preferred the qualitative approach instead.

The strongest party – both in terms of support and party position in the government – prior to the elections, the Andrej Babiš-led ANO movement, presented in its electoral manifesto rather critical language about the EU. ANO repeatedly claimed that “Czech interests come first” and that “the EU should not get more power”. The stress on defending Czech national interests prevailed in all relevant parts. There was no explicit mention of Russia or relations with China; the EU arena is the key destiny for ANO. Interestingly, human rights were listed at the end of the relevant chapter (ANO 2021). Thus, ANO’s foreign policy approach can be classified as European isolationism.

ČSSD, before the elections a minor coalition partner, clearly preferred a multilateral approach in its manifesto. The Social Democratic Party called for a very broad and non-exclusive orientation for Czech foreign policy. For example, the party advocated mutually beneficial cooperation with countries such as Russia and China. However, the EU was perceived as the key strategic partner for Czechia, as well as the USA. The issue of European integration was more commented upon than other aspects of Czech foreign policy (ČSSD 2021). All this demonstrates that ČSSD can be identified as a proponent of Multilateral Internationalism.

Prior to the elections, the opposition consisted of two newly formed coalitions – Spolu (Together), containing the three centre-right or centre-conservative parties KDU-ČSL, ODS and TOP 09, and the two-party bloc of the Pirates and Mayors and Independents (STAN) – and two established anti-system parties – the far-right SPD and far-left KSČM. Their roles and positions within the system were, however, different. Whereas both coalitions portrayed themselves as the true opposition and alternative to the government, both SPD and KSČM to a certain extent supported the ANO/ČSSD minority cabinet.

Both Spolu as well as Pir/STAN committed themselves to European internationalism. In the case of Spolu, its manifesto explicitly referred to the legacy of Václav Havel and his values-based foreign policy. Membership in the EU and NATO was considered the key pillar of the Czech foreign orientation. Adherence to Western values was also explicitly included in the manifesto. Spolu also mentioned Russia as “external threat for the

West”, whereas China was left aside. Interestingly, the chapter on foreign policy and the EU also included some references to the Transatlantic partnership – perhaps due to the preference of ODS for this issue – but this was strictly connected with Czech membership in NATO (Spolu 2021).

The European internationalism of Spolu was, however, not the strongest among the Czech parties. The second new coalition – Pir/STAN – had an even stronger profile in this sense. The EU stood at the centre of interest – interestingly, with a very clear focus on the upcoming Czech EU Council Presidency in 2022 – but the coalition profiled itself even in a negative way. The manifesto in this regard paid remarkable attention to China and Russia, both states explicitly classified as non-democratic regimes. Among all the Czech parties, the Pir/STAN manifesto was the most straightforward in this regard and covered the EU/foreign dimension in most detail.

While Spolu and Pir/STAN enunciated clear pro-EU and pro-international alternatives to the ruling Babiš government – namely, the ANO perspective – both the Communist Party and SPD offered different alternative approaches. The common denominator was their clear rejection of EU and NATO membership – most vocally by the Communist Party. The KSČM manifesto also called for creating and maintaining high-level relations with China and Russia (KSČM 2021). As such, the party was inclined towards Eastern isolationism.

The SPD preferred isolationism over internationalism as well. This preference was indicated by the oft-repeated argument that Czechia should always come first and that Czech national interests are most important. Not surprisingly, SPD explicitly called for a “Czexit” – in other words, leaving the EU – and heavily criticised the EU. The desirable path for Czech foreign policy was multilateral cooperation among free and independent countries. Neither Russia nor China was mentioned in the SPD manifesto (SPD 2021). As such, SPD can be characterised as advocating Multilateral Isolationism.

Even though it is a bit problematic to compare the analysis of Hloušek and Kaniok (2021) with our findings – due to the substantial changes in the party landscape before the elections – it seems that the 2021 manifestos confirmed the trends and findings in Czech foreign policy that were typical for the last decade. First, the dominant European Internationalist approach continued to be challenged, including by some governing parties (especially ANO). Second, it seems that the conflict over this trajectory – Isolationism vs. Internationalism – was more salient than the parties’ discussions about the destiny of the country. Only the KSČM appears to have been explicitly trying to push Czechia more towards the East whereas other parties still preferred a European focus.

#### ***4.2. Czech political parties on the war in Ukraine***

Our second aim was to look at how the Czech political parties immediately responded to the Russian aggression towards Ukraine. As we were interested in the immediate reaction, we included all such documents from 24 February until 31 March 2022. When we analysed the content of the documents, we departed from the issues that we analysed in the section on narratives and manifestos above. That means the Approach (Internationalism vs. Isolationism) and Trajectory (European, Atlanticist, Multilateralist, Eastern), as operationalised in the third part of the paper above.

In [Table 1](#), we summarise the number of entries which discussed the events in Ukraine in the period from 24 February until 31 March. The data are presented according party status – first listed are those parties which lacked parliamentary representation at the time (ČSSD and KSČM), followed by the opposition (ANO and SPD), and finally the parties involved in the government (KDU, TOP, ODS, Pir, STAN). It is worth mentioning that we analysed the individual parties – not electoral coalitions – as the coalitions did not produce anything on the issue.

The first interesting finding stemming from the table is the unique position of ODS, the main governing party. The number of entries for the Civic Democrats was much higher than for the other parties. In fact, ODS accounted for almost 44% of all the analysed documents. This means that the party focused on the war very intensively – almost all the official statements/materials available on the party website during the analysed period touched on the war. This can be partly explained by the obviously remarkable level of activity of the party's PR department – it systematically placed all the relevant interviews and articles from the Czech major mass media on the party website – and also by the high degree of responsibility of ODS<sup>2</sup>, but taking into account the content – which will be discussed later on – it seems that ODS tried to build up its profile as the strongest defender of certain values and norms. Another contributing reason for the intensity of communication about the Russian invasion was the fact that Prime Minister Petr Fiala was the chair of ODS and had been very active on this topic right from the outset of the war. The same can be said of Minister of Defence Jana Černochová.

The other parties paid remarkably less attention to the war, as the number of entries varies between 9 and 24. Neither parliamentary nor governmental status were significant factors, as the least interested party was non-parliamentary KSČM. This is somewhat surprising, especially in the case of the Pirates, since they controlled the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Minister Jan Lipavský. On the other hand, ČSSD, having the same status as KSČM, placed second – after ODS – with 24 entries. The difference between the parliamentary opposition and the remaining coalition partners was minimal in terms of absolute numbers.

If we move from this descriptive overview to the analysis of the content of the documents enumerated in [Table 1](#), more interesting findings come to the surface. First, the country's long-standing general foreign policy orientation, as identified in a previous article (Hloušek and Kaniok 2021), and confirmed by our analysis of the 2021 electoral manifestos above, plays a very important role. Most generally, almost all their entries demonstrate that both the Spolu parties (ODS, TOP 09, KDU) and Pir/STAN remained in the European Internationalist category. On the other hand, SPD and ANO preferred, as during the elections, Isolationism over Internationalism. Both parties also kept their preferred trajectory – towards Europe (but more reluctantly than during the 2021 elections) for ANO and a rather implicit and vague multilateralism for SPD.

The other interesting findings lie beyond this general conclusion and are associated with the specific political parties. The strongest preference for the European Internationalist category can be found in the case of ODS. Only a limited number of its entries deviated from a clear preference for the Internationalist approach and an EU-led trajectory. ODS continuously emphasised values-based policy and framed the conflict as a wider European problem to be solved with the active contribution of the Czech Republic. ODS did not omit the domestic aspect of the war – its impact on the Czech population

and Czech economy – but did not use it as a dominant theme. Neither did the party portray Ukrainian refugees as a threat to or risk for Czech society. Precisely to the contrary, the refugees were framed as culturally close to Czechia and a potential gain. Also, reference to the moral obligation to help people fleeing from war was made frequently.

Similar rhetoric was also used by the other Spolu parties – KDU and TOP 09. Nevertheless, the moral aspect, values-based arguments, and strong commitment were in both cases diluted by entries bearing neutral and rather practical information, such as where to seek help, where donations could be found, etc. Still, both KDU and TOP 09 framed the war as a European conflict in which the Czech Republic and the EU should play an active and pro-Ukrainian role.

The Pirates had a very similar profile as the Spolu parties. They also put a strong emphasis on the moral and ethical aspects of the conflict, supporting the active role of the Czech Republic and EU. The need to help Ukraine was never questioned. Interestingly, the Pirates put rather strong emphasis on the disinformation dimension of the war, repeatedly highlighting it both at the Czech as well as at the EU level. Similarly to TOP 09 and KDU, some of the Pirates' entries simply presented practical and neutral information related to the war.

In terms of entries, STAN was the least active governmental party. Even though it firmly supported the official cabinet line and never questioned the unconditional support for Ukraine, its entries were the most “practical” and informative among the coalition parties. Such an approach can be explained by the strong anchorage of the party in local and regional politics.

Whereas the governing parties – Spolu and Pir/STAN – clearly had a European Internationalist profile, the parliamentary opposition adopted a very different position. Although at the very beginning of the war both ANO and SPD MPs condemned the “special military operation” – all of the 166 MPs of the House of Deputies present did so on 24 February – hours later they started to create their own agenda. The common denominator was appealed to “our people”, though to a different degree, with different timing, and with different arguments. Neither ANO nor SPD supported Russia against Ukraine or claimed that Czechia should stand totally aside or refuse to help the refugees. But within a week, both parties – SPD more explicitly and openly – started to criticise the government for prioritising refugees over Czech citizens and for not “helping our people”.

The contrast between “our people” and refugees was often used particularly by ANO, highlighting specific vulnerable social groups such as pensioners and single parents as those “being neglected and ignored by the cabinet”. Moreover, in the course of time, both ANO (rather implicitly) and SPD (explicitly) started to portray the refugees as a threat – for health and security reasons. SPD and its leader T. Okamura repeatedly claimed that state assistance should be limited to only the most necessary services and the refugees should return home as soon as possible. Both parties thus visibly preferred Isolationism as their Approach. In terms of trajectory, ANO was still pro-European (but rather reluctantly), whereas SPD, with its strong focus on the domestic dimension, was quite silent on this. Nevertheless, in a limited number of entries, a kind of implicit support for a vague multilateral solution can be identified.

The remaining two non-parliamentary parties, both located on the left wing of the party landscape, took different positions. ČSSD, often through its two former Ministers of Foreign Affairs (T. Petříček and L. Zaorálek) committed themselves to an active role

for the Czech Republic and implicitly supported the official governmental position. Various ČSSD entries also focused on the practical assistance provided by the Czech regions where ČSSD still held a strong position – namely the Pardubický region. As such, the party can be classified as having a European Internationalist stance.

The Czech Communist Party, not surprisingly, was the most vocal opponents, together with SPD, of an active Czech role in the conflict and of the Czech support for Ukraine. The majority of the KSČM entries criticised the Western measures against Russia – for example sanctions – and often relativised the war by referring to historical parallels such as the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and in Yemen. Also, the Czech role in the war – for example weapons deliveries – was repeatedly criticised and the Czech government was portrayed as “warmongers”. KSČM also claimed that not only Russia could be blamed for the conflict, referring to events such as Majdan 2014 and the Minsk Accords. Thus, KSČM, based on its activities in the first month of the war, can be classified as Eastern Isolationist.

## 5. Discussion

In the Czech system, foreign policy positions are not among the most prominent aspects of party ideology or party manifestos. Nevertheless, they are a very important factor worth analysing since political parties are the key architects of any country’s foreign policy stance and orientation. Thus, and in particular in the context of the last decade – when the international order set up after World War II has been challenged from various angles – any analysis of changes and dynamics in political parties’ foreign policy is significant. In this article, we used the case of the February 2022 Russian attack on Ukraine – even in the current turbulent times an unprecedented event – to find out to what extent such an external shock can affect the foreign policy orientation of political parties. We investigated the case of the Czech Republic.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from our analysis. First, our analysis revealed that there has been a significant degree of stability in the thinking of Czech political parties about how Czech foreign policy should be oriented. Additionally, the trend of challenging the dominant European and International orientation, first visible in the 2013 elections, was confirmed for the 2021 elections, too. That means that from the party perspective, the prevailing European and International direction of Czechia is no longer the consensual and accepted path, as it was in the period between 1990 and 2013. Even though it may be argued that during the 1990–2013 period, there also existed political parties such as KSČM or Republicans which offered an alternative direction for Czechia, but they were never even close to the executive power. After 2013, this changed and the at least partial questioning of the Czech foreign (and EU) policy orientation started to become *new status quo*. These findings are in line with the existing literature on political parties and their role in foreign policy formulation. In this particular area, the parties seem to be stable and hesitant to change their long-term orientations.

This confirmation of the existing knowledge is even reinforced by the findings we identified in the immediate reaction to war in 2022. We argue that the war, a conflict that has no precedent in Europe since 1945, did not change the foreign and EU policies of the Czech political parties and does not represent a factor that could potentially change the parties’ stances. The war, no matter how close it is to the Czech borders, is not yet a “critical juncture”, since “national unity” on the issue (on 24 February) lasted only for days/

hours. Deeply rooted ideological factors still prevail over other considerations. Our research shows that even a substantial shift in the historical, geo-political or economic context and clear foreign threat – factors which we identified in the Czech case – had insufficient power over long-term lasting ideological preferences. Additionally, it appears that the two strongest parties – ANO and ODS – have been using their stances on the war as a source of reinforcement of their identities. For ANO it is the focus on “our people”. The European internationalist preference of the governmental parties made it easier for A. Babiš to stress the impact of the war on the Czech population and to accuse the government of not doing enough for “our people”. In this way, ANO is reinforcing its identity as a party “that cares”. In the case of ODS, this new identity building arises from its almost unconditional affirmation of Western values and EU membership. Even though the latter aspect does not mean unconditional support for any EU policy, ODS seems to seek new (and more constructive) approach towards EU that could replace its well-known (soft) Euroscepticism.

There are of course also other factors which could explain why the Czech parties reacted to the war as they did. First, the governmental/opposition status of a party plays a significant role (Calca and Gross 2019), as Hloušek and Kaniok (2021) argued for the period 1990-2017. The parties in the governmental coalition had to do things and issue statements as they did because of the country’s international commitments and responsibilities. As the opposition is traditionally free of such a burden, it can position itself differently. The clear ideological profile made things easier for the Spolu/Pir-STAN coalition and made the government more trustworthy, but it is hard to imagine that if ANO had been in power and A. Babiš had been the prime minister, the alternative cabinet could have – in substance – acted much differently. It would have perhaps supported Ukraine less, both rhetorically and politically, but one can hardly imagine that Czechia would, for example, oppose EU sanctions or support Russian activities. Even Hungary, the most pro-Russian state in the EU, has tried to keep a very low profile in its policy towards Russia. An alternative Czech cabinet would have hardly crossed such lines. Additionally, occupying important governmental or parliamentary functions related to foreign/EU policy has an effect on parties as well. The positions of Prime Minister and the Ministry of Defence are in the hands of ODS, and the majority of other relevant posts, such as the relevant parliamentary committees, are also under the Spolu parties. The opposition has very limited access to these positions, which apparently makes them less responsible for what they say. Last but not least, in Spring 2022 the forthcoming Czech EU Presidency called for an active and clear stance from the government.

To explain the specific context of the positioning of the Czech parties, we have to consider various factors. First, taking a different position is a matter of strategic and market choice. In Czechia, around 15-20% of voters are always dissatisfied with the official policy, be it on Covid 19 or the war in Ukraine. Second, ideology plays a role as well. As in other countries, there are still groups of voters who really believe the West is dead and the East is the future. This group includes people who never accepted the 1989 turn of events. The third factor is undoubtedly money or other utilitarian “variables” – there has been growing evidence of Russian interference in the political processes in EU countries, and some Czech parties and Czech politicians definitely can have this sort of motivation for their stances.

The question remains what our findings mean for the broader CEE region or even the EU as a whole, and which directions future research should take. In CEE, one may well

expect very similar results in other countries even though various authors argue that there is a great deal of variation, e.g. in terms of populism (Kuba, Hudec, and Stejskal 2022). Yet it would be interesting to look more in depth at particular countries such as Poland or Hungary, where illiberal trends in foreign policy have already been identified (Varga and Buzogány 2021). However, the two countries reacted differently to the Russian invasion, with Poland joining the “hawkish” camp and Hungary being the strongest proponent of a soft approach. This is interesting because both Hungary and Poland share more or less a lot of factors – historical context, geopolitics, or economic dependency – that we identified as important in the Czech case. Yet, both countries and their politicians reacted totally differently which could mean that also other determinants as for example Russian interference or the degree of Russian economic and political penetration into the society may be of concern. Additionally, the most recent parliamentary elections in Slovakia lifting back to power Robert Fico, a politician with a very strong pro-Russian sentiment, turn into an attractive case Slovakia as well.

## 6. Conclusion

Analysis of foreign policy positions of Czech political parties confirmed a significant degree of stability about the Czech political parties’ ideas about the orientation of Czech foreign policy, as well as the trend of challenging dominant European and International orientation by fringe and populist parties. There are, however, broader implications that connect our research with previous research and theorising of foreign policy positions of political parties.

Government-opposition dynamics play a role (Calca and Gross 2019), making the positions of governmental parties more conform to the foreign policy mainstream. Our findings confirm the literature (Raunio and Wagner 2021) on the “hawkish” tendencies of the right and “dovish” tendencies of the left, represented in Czechia by ANO and KSČM. The Czech case confirms prior findings on the “dovish” stances of both the far right and far left (Ishiyama, Pace, and Stewart 2018; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017; Wagner 2020), represented by SPD and KSČM, respectively. In a broader context, our findings support literature arguing that the long-term predictors, like ideology (Raunio and Wagner 2020; Wagner 2020) shape and cement existing politicisation patterns over the crisis’s imminent impact, even that the Russian aggression could have – at least intuitively – had shock creating potential.

Focus on a single case of Czechia creates an obvious caveat of our paper. Therefore, further research on if and how Russian aggression shaped foreign policy positions of political parties must focus on comparative studies, focusing either on more countries or on diverse party families represented in European party systems. Existing data (Manifesto project) and operationalisations, we offered, dealing with approach and direction, would serve as a solid ground for comparison.

## Notes

1. We are well aware of a fact that foreign and EU policies differ. Nevertheless, as almost all Czech political parties treat both as a single topic, we analytically approach them as one inter-linked problem.
2. Both the PM and Minister of Defence were ODS nominees.

3. The detailed operationalisation of each CMP code can be found in the CMP codebook (Volken et al. 2018).

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