

**Shaping EU Presidency Priorities: National
Challenges in a European Context
A Path Forward Under New Political Realities**

Ed. by Lucie Tungul



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 **Wilfried
Martens Centre**
for European Studies





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Culture Wars Are a Dead End

Zora Hesová

Summary: Just like the other Visegrad countries, Czechia has experienced culture wars over abortion, minority rights and feminism. Although Czech predisposition to national-populist politics is limited, Czechia could not avoid a progressive culturalisation of politics and the illiberal turn. In times of crisis, Czech debates have repeatedly sunken into symbolic disputes and restricted the capacity to solve existential challenges. Culture wars are ideologically framed as a dispute between liberals and conservatives. While this image reflects the collapse of the liberal-conservative consensus that emerged after 2004, it is misleading. Culture wars have to be understood in the context of several structural changes and conjunctural phenomena.

Keywords: culture wars; migration; populism; polarisation; Czechia; globalisation

Introduction

The war in Ukraine, energy insecurity, the social impacts of inflation, energy scarcity, and above all climate crisis: Czechia faces new crises and challenges every year since the two relatively peaceful decades after 1989 came to an end. However, Czech political debates had focussed on completely different issues: hostility to Islam and gender, minority rights or attitudes to vaccination. Whether Czechs will be able to face the existential challenges depends on the path taken: either they will engage in a rational debate and focus on political compromise or they will waste political energy on struggles over symbols and social norms. The above would sound like cheap moralism if there was not a gradual change in political conflicts happening not only in Czechia, but everywhere in the West. The so-called cultural wars, i.e., moral, symbolic or value disputes, have at times shadowed all other social and political conflicts. Typical examples are fights about rights of minorities, marriage, feminism and, in Central Europe, abortion. Why is this so and what to do about it?

Culture Wars as a New Reality

Czech public had literally split into two camps in 2015 between those who categorically rejected migration and Islam, and those who called for solidarity with refugees (Gelnarová 2018). The two camps seemed to clash over their relationship to Islam. Some were afraid of Islam, others were not; some defined themselves against it (Czechia as a country of Christian tradition), others considered migration and diversity a consequence of natural development, and even an advantage for the national economy. Questions of cultural orientation, whether one stands against Islam and migration or not,





entirely overshadowed material and political issues, i.e., legal, technical and financial aspects of integrating foreigners, reform of asylum policy and border security. As a result, no solution-oriented debate took place. Czech government would not accept even a few dozen unaccompanied minors from Greece. Instead, it agreed to accept a few Christian Iraqi families and placed all arriving migrants in paying detention centres. If the 2015 migration crisis hardly even touched Czechia, virtual wars surrounding Islam and migration caused long-term damage to the country by dividing it into two mutually hostile camps.

A closer look reveals that in fact, there are no opposing camps. Many of those who spoke against Islam were willing to help the refugees in some way, while students who went to help on the Balkan route did not hide the fact that they were partially driven by concern and fear, which they wanted to confront. The author of this chapter participated in several public debates about Islam in the context of the migration crisis, and her anecdotal but consistent conclusion is that few people maintained a very strong opinion during the discussions, and that their initial attitudes were a manifestation of various emotions: insecurities in a changing society, fear of the future, general resentment, or mistrust in institutions and organisations such as the European Union. Polarisation is in fact performed by a culturalised formatting of political issues (Hesová 2021b). Articulating the problem (war refugees on the poorly secured Balkan route) in the black-and-white format of culture wars, as a threat to collective identity and not as a problem to be solved, led both to social polarisation and the inability to face the challenge.

Culture wars divide societies and radicalise positions. They render negotiation and compromise impossible and lead to zero sum politics. Instead of confronting various solutions, culturalised disputes express the alignment and group identity of their actors. Either *liberals* or *conservatives*, antagonised parties stand for or against feminism, the Istanbul Convention¹⁸ or expanding the definition of marriage. The aim of culture wars is not to promote a certain policy, the legal regulation of family relations, instruments for reducing violence, etc., but to enforce a certain *attitude* ('plea for the traditional family') at the expense of another (diversity and 'gender perspective'). The camps formed this way consist of unexpected allies: for example, the right and the conservative wing of the Catholic Church unite with the extreme right or communists.

The Eternal Return of Culture Wars

If the so-called migration crisis has disappeared from the headlines, not so migration as a political issue. Populists seized it and turned the emotions into their political business model. Tomio Okamura was not interested in Islam before 2015. When Czech grassroots anti-Muslim movement brought enmity towards Islam to the public space, Okamura took over its anti-Muslim and anti-

¹⁸ Full title is The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. *Trans.note.*





migration discourse and completely marginalised its attempts at a creating a Czech ‘Pegida’ (Mareš 2015). Okamura has since successfully cashed on the fear of migration and Islam. In the 2017 parliamentary elections, he revived his rundown populist project called Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*, SPD). The same applied to the re-election of Miloš Zeman for President in 2018.

The so-called migration crisis and the rising of a broad anti-Muslim sentiment wave were in many ways unprecedented. The Balkan route disrupted what was considered solid, that is, national and European borders and migration rules. It made Islam a political issue in the year of the worst jihadist attacks in Europe. The issues of Islam and wars in the Middle-Eastern wars were so urgent, and at the same time so complex and unfamiliar, that it cannot come as a surprise that an ethnically and religiously homogenous country with limited experience of immigration would have hard time finding consensus on them. However, a similar polarisation has since been repeated in connection with other issues. Poles, Hungarians and Austrians were deeply divided into two camps during their presidential elections. Czechia gets regularly divided by smaller cultural battles: minority rights, marriage, abortion, and feminism. The concept of culture wars has become ingrained to such an extent that it has become a tool in hands of cultural warriors. It is now common for politicians to accuse one other of culture wars when they want to delegitimise one another.¹⁹

The persistence of the format of value disputes after 2015 is more surprising in Czechia than elsewhere. Czechia had not been involved in the kind of fundamental and permanent cultural wars unleashed by attempts to replace the liberal post-communist trend by paternalistic and identity politics such as in Kaczynski’s Poland and Orbán’s Hungary. Compared to its Visegrad Four (V4) neighbours, Czech cultural wars are limited by several differences. First, nationalism is weak, almost absent, which can be explained by national saturation. Czechs arose out of the twentieth century in a nationally advantageous position and do not carry with them a frustrating experience like Poland or Hungary. Second, Czech identity is not tied to the Catholic Church, whose conservative wing plays a pivotal role in the Central European culture wars. The Church had been significantly weakened at the establishment of Czechoslovakia and by Communism. Finally, Czech populists pursuing culture wars are not (yet) convincing nationalists or traditionalists: Tomio Okamura and Andrej Babiš are hardly Kaczynski or Orbán, and the current government led by Petr Fiala has largely avoided culture wars. Still, Andrej Babiš’s anticipatory campaign in the context of a multidimensional crisis gives cause for concern about the future.

However, the divisions that had been obscured by a common goal became fully apparent after Czechia became an EU member state. The broad liberal-conservative coalition that put disagreements

¹⁹ An ODS deputy rejected the single-sex marriage legal proposal as a ‘culture war’ (iDNES 2022).





aside during the Europeanisation process fell apart (Barša, Hesová and Slačálek 2021). Liberal conservatism split into liberal and conservative camps in all the Central European countries after EU accession; conservatives have moved towards nationalism and traditionalism and liberals oscillate between economic and social liberalism. Liberal-conservative parties have been severely undermined, non-existent, or tempted by populism (like the turquoise Austrian People's Party [*Österreichische Volkspartei*, ÖVP] under Sebastian Kurz, see Hesová 2021a). Centre-left parties held liberal positions for a long time, but they have disintegrated almost everywhere. The bulk of the political competition has moved to the right side of the political spectrum.

Partisan dynamics are also causing cultural disputes to return, and today's fragile five-coalition can be expected to suffer from them, whether it is the definition of marriage, the relationship to climate change or the ombudsman. It is also conceivable that Andrej Babiš will return to take full advantage of the mobilising potential of the culture wars, as he tried to do during his last campaign, when he directly involved Viktor Orbán. It is almost certain that the repertoires of the culture wars will be used by the populists around Okamura, who recently won the right to receive a state contribution to found a political foundation. Such a far-right think-tank would support and develop militant anti-immigration and anti-European positions, while at the same time enabling the establishment of systematic relations with similar organisations in Europe, notably the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) foundation in Germany, the so-called New Right and the strengthened National Rally (*Rassemblement National*, RN) in France. The current situation is therefore fragile.

Why Are Culture Wars Successful?

Culture wars are highly polarizing political disputes that replace, displace, or rewrite hitherto common left-right political cleavage over resources, redistribution and programmatic visions. Culture wars are ideologically framed as disputes between the liberal and the conservative camps, but this framing does not explain them. It would be better to examine the vacuum they fill. There are several reasons for the aforementioned culturalisation of politics, i.e., the transfer of the centre of gravity of political disputes from material and programmatic issues to symbolic and value ones. There are structural causes - the transformation of communication and post-ideological politics, but also conjunctural causes (see Hesová 2021b).

First, political communication has been radically altered by decentralised social networks, which enable immediate, vertical and horizontal political contact, give advantages to simple messages and lead to the politicisation of people who used to be politically passive. Confronting Islam rather than addressing migration has in that way drawn masses of people into political debates who were previously uninterested in politics. Increasingly, political views grow dismissive to anti-systemic





(negative vote) and expressive rather than reflective. They are often expressions of other grievances than those explicitly mentioned (opposition to Islam, to ‘gender’).

The Czech public is only beginning to talk about hidden crises, including the enormous rate of foreclosures, the continuing precarisation of work, the unaffordability of housing, and the disappearance of infrastructures and opportunities from the peripheries. These are subjects of insufficient political efforts. Politics has been focused on the problems of elites and of large voting blocs (e.g. pensioners), while whole other groups (lower middle class, periphery, youth) remain outside the interest of politics, and they respond by anti-systemic behaviour. The hidden crises mentioned above are the result of an economic transformation that, in the long run, relegates the peripheries that are not involved in the global economy to the second rail of civilisation.

But there is no universalist political vision that would respond to this deepening divide, such as the earlier developmental, industrialisation or transformation visions, which aimed at societal integration through socio-economic transformation. The politics of staying the course favours those who are already advantaged, and the idea of progress is limited to the important issue of individual rights, but these are no longer part of some overall progressive vision. However, liberal impulses often come to us from the EU, the Istanbul Convention being a case in point. The sometimes militant hostility towards liberal issues is an expression of rejection of the direction of elitist politics, which remains without an inclusive political vision.

The second set of causes rests in recent political practice. Various culture war practices have become tools in the repertoire of populist parties in particular because of their great polarising and mobilising potential. These include scaremongering, delegitimising the opponent as the enemy and stigmatising social groups through public conflicts, dramatic gestures, polarising laws, etc. If in the countries around us during the last elections populists stigmatised relational and other minorities, the main Czech issue remains migration and the criticism of international solidarity.

A much more serious type of political practice is the national-conservative response to the structural changes, which focuses not on socio-economic but on a purely symbolic form of social integration and paternalistic management of social differences. In the Central European region, it is the nativist, Christianist ideology of Fidesz and Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) that defines the nation in opposition to the liberal West on the basis of traditionalist positions for which the constant antagonisation of feminism and LGBT rights is central. This traditionalist ideology further develops a way of ‘managing’ the emerging gaps between the integrated centres and the de-industrialised peripheries. The paternalistic social policy of PiS, but especially Fidesz, abandons emancipatory social policy and limits universal benefits. Instead, it concentrates social support on those who produce



and procreate, or place themselves within the paternalistic order. For example, Hungary pacifies its long-term unemployed ('surplus population') with undignified but stabilizing forced labour (Hesova 2022).

It is precisely the re-establishment of gender, family, ethnic and ideological hierarchies, in short, the introduction of conservative paternalism, that is the only sophisticated response to globalisation and liberal transformation in the region, and as such cannot be taken lightly. On the contrary, it must be well understood that it is rooted in the need to respond to the truly civilisational changes brought about by globalisation. But it is a response that leaves behind the emancipatory, universalist aims of modern politics, and therefore it is also necessary to recognise step against the divisive instruments and the discriminatory effects of these policies.

What Is to Be Done?

First and foremost, the language of the culture wars must be avoided: talk of enemies, the dramatisation of threats, the denigration of the others as those who wage culture wars. For every 'war' has two sides and stigmatizing the other as an 'enemy' only deepens it. Even some liberal and centre-right parties have long played this game, contributing to the culturalization of political disputes. In contrast, Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová succeeded, among other things, because she did not participate in the culture wars played out by her then opponent from the Smer party, who styled himself as a conservative Christian politician. She acknowledged her liberal positions but formulated them inclusively, subscribing to more general values of respect and care.

Secondly, we need to better understand the political, communicative transformations that societies are going through; to look critically at the effects of transformation and to uncover those hidden crises that are indirectly manifested, for example, in anti-systemic voting and culture wars, i.e., manipulative communication and open hostility against one's own fellow citizens.

Thirdly, it is necessary to acknowledge the 'crisis-ness' of the present, i.e., to name and take seriously the trends that threaten social cohesion and stability; furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge that we have little or no answers to these trends and no vision of how to counter them. There is no fundamental social debate on the subject of social, geographical or educational inequality. Indeed, it must include a debate on the cost of these inequalities and on the distribution of the costs that a deteriorating living, agricultural and also global environment will demand in the future.



Conclusion

Not only in Poland and Hungary, but also to a lesser extent in Czechia, politics is regularly determined by various cultural struggles. Since 2015, when these struggles flared up around migration, they have regularly returned, and it is conceivable that they will dominate the campaigns during the next elections. However, their mobilising and polarising effects are a constant temptation for many politicians, and not just extremist or populist ones. The politics of the culture wars are destroying the factuality and inclusiveness of political decision-making and ultimately democratic culture, and it is therefore necessary to try to understand these struggles.

Culture wars are an ambivalent phenomenon: they are an unwanted manifestation of the transformation of politics, but they are also a conscious tool of political struggle. They reflect the social consequences of globalisation and the transformation of the economic and communication model, which contemporary centrist or liberal politics cannot cope with. At the very least, the hidden crises will have to be named and made the subject of social debate, as social, geographical and even civilisational differences in society continue to widen. Culturalised solutions of the type of paternalistic nationalism that culture wars purposely employ do not solve the problems, only mitigate them, and abandon the liberal and emancipatory ideals of modernity.

Cultural antagonisation of a political opponent in civilisational terms is dangerous, but so is ignoring the context in which this culturalised politics displaces programmatic and substantive politics. Already today, in the face of the war in Ukraine, the budget deficit and the increasingly obvious effects of the climate, energy and supply crises, it is clear that cultural battles represent a fundamental weakening of the political capacity to face and resolve the crises ahead. Therefore, political practice needs to be consciously cultivated as well as oriented towards addressing the fundamental, rather than proxy, challenges of the day.

Recommendations

- Avoid all hostile rhetoric. Despite the different opinions, most politically active people bond by their interest in the common good.
- Systematically promote inclusive rhetoric and politics. Social unity is a prerequisite for functional institutions.
- Do not abandon liberal and universalistic premises in politics. Politics should not overtly privilege one group at the expense of others.
- Emphasis on substantive and scientifically based policy. Only in this way can the credibility of institutions be built for later difficult decisions. Public support for debate on the impacts and costs of the climate and energy crises, as well as the hidden crises mentioned above. It must be acknowledged that the inarticulate motive behind many of the phenomena that threaten liberal democratic rules are socio-economic processes for which we have no good answer. Specifically: the political representation and state authorities should systematically create pressure for the resources invested in the National Recovery Plan to produce real results in the form of social debate, innovative formats of public communication and practical proposals.
- Seek allies in the EU, but especially in neighbouring countries, for joint solutions to the impacts of climate, supply and energy transformations, and invest in these diplomatic, academic and also regional and business partnerships.
- Use the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union to strengthen Czech capacities for EU negotiations. Proactively explain the functioning of the EU and the role of the EU for Czech interests.
- Create a Ministry to coordinate the climate and energy transformation policies.