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# The Czech parliamentary radical right and the West: Harnessing post-socialism to anti-liberalism

Intersections. EEJSP
10(1): 35–52.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i1.1179
https://intersections.tk.hu

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**Abstract**

The present article explores the dynamics behind Czech radical-right leader Tomio Okamura and his Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party's frequent criticism of the West. It argues that their attacks on the West should be seen as not only a critique of liberal democracy but also a denunciation of the post-socialist socio-economic and political order in Central and Eastern Europe. The transition from socialism to liberal democracy in this region has closely tied the concept of liberal democracy to 'the Western model', turning discussions about the West into debates about the post-1989 transition. Using a qualitative analysis of social media communication and drawing on the insights of critical discourse analysis, the article shows how Okamura and his party use their denunciation of the West to fight against both the Western liberal democratic model and the Czech post-socialist regime. By doing so, they tap into post-socialist tropes and challenge the West–East hierarchy of knowledge. The Czech case sheds light on the regional specificity of radical right movements in Central and Eastern Europe and how their anti-Western, anti-liberal stance is influenced by issues related to the post-1989 transition.

**Keywords**: Czech politics; Tomio Okamura; Freedom and Direct Democracy; anti-Westernism; anti-liberalism; post-socialism

## 1 Introduction

Scrolling through Czech radical-right leader Tomio Okamura's Facebook page, the amount of material on the West truly amazes. Barely one day passes without a post about asylum seekers in Greece, demonstrations in France, street gangs in Sweden, or anti-racist struggles in the United States. Why would a radical right politician and their party devote so much attention to other countries' internal socio-political affairs? Why do they constantly criticise the West? I argue that Okamura's and his Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*, hereafter SPD) party's attacks against the West should be understood not only as a criticism of liberal democracy but also as a denunciation of the post-socialist

socio-economic and political order. Because of the dynamics of the post-socialist transition, liberal democracy is closely tied to 'the Western model' in Central and Eastern Europe, and discussions about 'the West' are thus closely intertwined with views about the post-1989 transition.[1] Through its denunciation of the West, the SPD is not only fighting against a – real or imagined – Western liberal democratic model with minority protection, tolerant mores, mass migration, globalising tendencies and a highly institutionalised democracy with checks and balances but also against the Czech post-socialist regime, its geopolitical orientation and local elites.

Tomio Okamura's and the SPD's obsession with the West deserves more attention as it reveals a particular aspect of radical right and national-conservative politics in Central and Eastern Europe: the use of post-socialist tropes that draw on the State socialist past, the post-89 transition and the region's peripheral position in relation to the Western core. In their attacks on the West, Okamura and the SPD are not only expressing their opposition to many features of contemporary liberal democracy, something that is also expressed by many political actors across the world, but they are also harnessing a criticism of the post-socialist transition to their assault on certain aspects of the liberal democratic project. Interestingly, the party's communication on the West also subverts the West-East hierarchy of knowledge, turning Western voices of authority against the Western model and showcasing critical 'Eastern' voices, such as those of Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński and even Vladimir Putin. I suggest that the Czech case can help with understanding the regional specificity and appeal of radical right and national-conservative movements and discourses in the wider Central and Eastern European region. Ultimately, I suggest that the strong anti-Westernism promoted by the radical right for its domestic struggles feeds on problems linked to the post-1989 transition and also helps explain geopolitical standpoints critical of Euro-Atlantic institutions, from Euroscepticism and anti-Americanism all the way to sympathy for the Russian and Chinese regimes.

## 2 Liberal democracy as a Western geopolitical project in Central and Eastern Europe

Despite the active participation of Central and East European intellectuals, politicians and citizens in the history of liberalism, and despite the presence of liberal currents in the region in the past, such as in the Czechoslovak First Republic (1918–1938), the establishment of liberal democratic regimes in the region following the fall of state socialism came under the strong influence of external, Western actors. This is not to say that the new socio-political elites, and even the local populations, did not want to build liberal democratic regimes after 1989, but rather that the process quickly took the form of compliance with conditions for Euro-Atlantic institutional membership.

[1] I use the terms 'Western Europe' and 'Eastern Europe' in line with the Cold War division of Europe after 1945, a division deeply anchored in European imaginaries and beyond. According to the same logic, 'the West' is also meant to include overseas countries with a majority Anglo-Saxon population.

The new governments built on the idea that their region had been a 'kidnapped West' during the Cold War (Kundera, 1983) and framed their post-1989 project as 'catching up with the West' and 'returning to Europe', with Europe embodied by Euro-Atlantic institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (Vachudova, 2005, p. 84). However, considering the high socio-economic, political and symbolic stakes for Central and Eastern Europe, there was a strong 'asymmetrical interdependence' (Moravcsik, 2009, p. 5) between the East and the West during adhesion processes, with the West mainly defining the conditions, assessing results and, eventually, granting membership (Vachudova, 2005). These mechanisms led to a particular hierarchy between Western Europe and so-called 'Eastern Europe', whereby the former would teach and reprimand the latter. It rested on the assumption of a superior, modern West helping its inferior, backward neighbours in the framework of a logic that was baptised 'Western leveraged pedagogy' (Kulpa, 2014). Arguably, this asymmetrical relationship dates back several centuries (Wolff, 1994).

The West-East relationship has been increasingly interrogated in academia in recent years, and some scholars have drawn from postcolonial studies, seeing the effects of Orientalism (Said, 1978) towards Eastern Europe (Owczarzak, 2009) and within Eastern Europe (Bakić-Hayden, 1995; Kuus, 2004). Drawing on critical race theory's concept of Whiteness, some authors have also argued that some of the West-East dynamics at play in Europe are triggered by Central and Eastern European populations and political elites claiming – and often being denied – 'Europeanness' or 'Westernness' (Böröcz & Sarkar, 2017; Kalmar, 2022; Sayyid, 2018). As for Krastev and Holmes (2018), they rather see the rise of national-conservative anti-liberalism as a backlash against the post-89 dynamics of imitation. While those analyses tend to overly rely on simplistic psycho-social mechanisms to explain complex geo-political and socio-political developments, they do accurately show how central West-East relationships have been for contemporary developments in Central and Eastern Europe.

## 3 Does Czechia belong in the West?

In Czechia, the symbolic potency of the idea of 'the West' can clearly be seen in contemporary political and cultural debates. In addition to the aforementioned essay by Kundera, Ladislav Holý's influential anthropological study on Czech national identity remarks that Czechs see themselves as not 'Eastern', like their other post-socialist neighbours, but rather as modern, universalist, Western citizens (1996). He also notes that socio-political discourses opposing state socialism discarded the system as an Eastern, Asian import, and that the break-up with Slovakia in 1993 was welcomed by some in Czechia as getting rid of a part of the country that was not enough 'Western-oriented' (Holy, 1996, pp. 106–107).

In the latest decade, and especially since the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe in 2015–2016, the saliency of this debate has increased in the Czech public space and arguably also in the wider Central European space. The debate on refugee quotas for EU countries quickly took on civilisational aspects as some framed it as a struggle between a tolerant, post-nationalistic West and an intolerant, nationalistic East (Kalmar, 2018). In Czechia, as a consensus formed against refugees, the mostly positive image of the West was 're-

placed during that time by a stereotypical negative image of the West – migrant crimes in the streets, crazy Western universities, almost failed states within the EU' (Slačálek, 2021, p. 180). While it is not the only political force to exploit this image, the radical right has been aggressively pushing this narrative, as I will explain further.

Debates about 'Westernness' also reemerged in the context of domestic political struggles in the late 2010s, as self-appointed 'democratic' forces from the centre-left to the right mobilised against what they saw as democratic backsliding engineered by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and President Miloš Zeman. In addition to criticism about non-transparent governing, corruption and state capture, opponents drew from post-socialist memory politics to link Babiš and Zeman to the former regime. At times, opponents also framed their struggle as a pro-Western vs. pro-Eastern dilemma, with Babiš and Zeman depicted as anti-EU, pro-Russian and pro-Chinese forces.

In the 2021 parliamentary electoral campaign, the question of the country's geopolitical belonging was best exploited by the right-wing coalition SPOLU ('Together'). It put out posters throughout the country claiming, 'We belong in the West' (*Patříme na Západ*) and ended up beating Andrej Babiš's ANO party. While the irony of such a claim by a rather conservative political grouping with Eurosceptic tendencies was pointed out by some liberals and leftists, it nevertheless showed how belonging to the West is still a potent – albeit rather empty – signifier and an important point of contention in Czechia.

Thus, the centrality of the Western model as a key reference point in post-89 socio-political imaginaries is obvious in Czechia, and I suggest that it is the same for the wider region. What is important to add is that those political imaginaries surrounding the Western model are deeply interlinked with ideas of liberal democracy. As a sort of empty signifier, 'the West', understood as the liberal system in the West, does not have a completely fixed meaning, though, which explains why different political forces can claim it, as in the case of the conservative SPOLU. Nevertheless, it does signify some kind of belonging to a political system, and not just to Euro-Atlantic institutions.

This liberal democratic system might be interpreted by some according to a minimalist definition, i.e. as a representative democracy with free elections, a market economy, civil rights, the rule of law and the division of power, while others might also embrace other aspects such as more open migration regimes, specific minority rights or freer socio-cultural mores. As I show in this article, the equation between the West and liberalism explains why the SPD devotes such attention to the West in its communication. Its anti-Westernism buttresses its anti-liberalism and also supports its critique of postsocialism. Ultimately, this criticism of the West serves as a criticism of the Czech system and its elites since they are identified as being submissive to the West and imitating it.

## 4 The SPD as a radical right-wing populist challenger

After a brief success in the 1990s, the Czech parliamentary radical right vanished from the scene until 2013, when it came back into parliament under the banner of *Úsvit přímé demokracie Tomia Okamury* (Dawn of Direct Democracy of Tomio Okamura, hereafter *Úsvit*) led by the charismatic Czech-Japanese entrepreneur Tomio Okamura, who has often used

his foreign background to fend off accusations of racism (*Nejsem rasista, vždyť jsem napůl*, 2014). The party mixed a critique of the political system and elites with nativism but fell apart amidst internal strife over finances in 2015 (Císař & Navrátil, 2019). Its leader, Tomio Okamura, left and founded the SPD in 2015, which played an important role in anti-refugee mobilisation and attracted most of the anti-refugee vote in 2017, finishing fourth with 10.6 per cent of votes.

The SPD can be considered a populist radical-right party according to the conceptual work of Cas Mudde: it professes right-wing views that present inequalities as natural, a nativist ideology that considers the state as exclusively for members of the ethnic nation, with foreign elements seen as threatening, authoritarian tendencies that advocate for swift, repressive policies, and a populist rhetoric that divides the country into corrupt elites and a pure people (Mudde, 2007). Tomio Okamura and his SPD became the main anti-EU political force, calling for a referendum to exit the EU, and it built the Identity and Democracy political group with other radical-right parties on the EU level. During the pandemic, the SPD became a leading voice against anti-COVID-19 measures, but it was also challenged by more radical groupings, and this explains its slight decrease in the 2021 elections when it won 9.6 per cent of votes. Following the renewal of Russian military operations against Ukraine in February 2022, it denounced military help for Ukraine, criticised policies for Ukrainian refugees and called for dialogue with Moscow.

## 5 Methods and methodology

The present paper is based on the analysis of a large sample of textual and audio-visual material from traditional and social media using the insights of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as developed by Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and other scholars (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak, 1997). While this approach does not claim that the whole social world exists only through discourse, it does insist on its importance in the (re)production of society (Fairclough, 2003, p. 2). Although a discourse can be understood as a simple social interaction, like an interview, I use it in the sense of a more or less coherent set of ideas expressed through texts, written or oral (Wodak, 1997, p. 5). Looking at discourses of belonging as a part of wider social practices, CDA insists on the way texts are anchored into a context (Wodak, 1997, p. 6) and are part of an '"order of discourse", the relatively durable social structuring of language which is itself one element of the relatively durable structuring and networking of social practices' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3). Drawing from these theoretical insights, I analyse the ways in which SPD discourses interact with West-East power dynamics and hierarchies of knowledge.

The core of this empirical research consisted of a close qualitative analysis of 644 posts published on the SPD's official Facebook page between September 13, 2019, and February 23, 2020. This timeframe indicates the beginning of my data scraping and stops shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic came to dominate the agenda, bringing up new topics and positions. I then searched for more content on the party and party leader's official Facebook pages based on keywords to explore some themes in greater detail, regardless of the time frame.

## 6 The West: Islamists, globalists and neo-Marxists

The image of the West conveyed by the SPD is one of a dominating yet declining power. According to the SPD, Western decay is caused by three interrelated problems: mass migration, corrupt political elites, and socio-cultural excesses. These messages are often glued together in virulent denunciations of the West and its institutions, particularly the EU, which are accused of favouring and even organising mass migration from other continents because of their ideological fanaticism. The SPD's communication constantly picks up pieces of news from the West to highlight negative aspects and aliment a gloomy picture of the model that Czechia is supposed to be imitating. The SPD then uses this information to directly or indirectly accuse Czech political, economic and socio-cultural elites of imitating the West and dragging the country into the abyss while it promises citizens a radical break with this politics.

### 6.1 Islamists

Its central criticism of the West is the issue of extra-European migration and Islam. Even before the so-called refugee crisis in Europe, Tomio Okamura and his party *Úsvit* were some of the first political actors to bring up the topic of migration on the Czech political scene. When *Úsvit* crumbled because of infighting just as pan-European debates and mobilisation on refugees became heated in 2015, Okamura sought to keep his position as leader of the radical right, and his newly born SPD made anti-migration and anti-Islam positions central to its political identity. The party took the most radical position possible on the issue by advocating for a total ban on Islam in the country (Okamura, 2017a). The party made these positions the second point of its programme under the heading 'No to Islam, no to terrorists – a safe country for everyone', a slogan that then appeared on billboards and promotional material ahead of the 2017 legislative elections (Okamura, 2017b).

Following the 2017 elections, the party kept the issue high on its agenda and brought it up repeatedly on its social media pages. In my analysis of the 644 posts published on the SPD's official Facebook page between September 2019 and February 2020, more than a quarter (175) referred to migration and Islam (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie* – SPD, n.d.). Most of its social media messages on the topic hammered home the same warning inspired by Western Europe:

> The SPD movement doesn't want us to end up like Islamised Western Europe, where many people are afraid to go out in the streets so that immigrants don't stab or kill them. We refuse mass immigration and request the possibility to control our borders so that illegal immigrants and terrorists don't get here. We have already proposed a law outlawing the Islamic veil in public and outlawing the propagation of hateful Islamic ideology. We protect our fatherland, we protect Czech citizens, we protect your families, your children, your households, your friends and your property.

This exact same message can be found more than 200 times on the party's Facebook pages and that of its leader, Tomio Okamura. As this message shows, the party describes the West as already Islamised. While it is too late for Westerners, Czechs can avoid meeting the same fate by supporting the SPD.

The simplest way in which Okamura and the SPD spread their knowledge of the West is through the constant diffusing of and commenting on selected events on Facebook, usually using the profile of leader Tomio Okamura, which are then systematically reposted on the party's official Facebook page. The SPD constantly shares negative news about the West, especially when Muslims or extra-European migrants and their descendants are involved. In addition to acts of terrorism involving Islamist radicals, the party often reports on crime, highlighting or suggesting a link to migration. When the discursive trope of migrant crime and Islamist terrorism in Western Europe does not come up in Czech media, the SPD produces its own analyses of the situation, often drawing from mainstream Western sources.

### 6.2 Globalists

The second main trope of Western decline is one that portrays the West as led by evil or out-of-touch elites, be these the European Union (EU), Western governments, the United States or less clearly defined international elites, which are often demonised as 'globalists', a term frequently used by the SPD after May 2017. A lot of the criticism accuses these elites of allowing mass extra-European migration and 'Islamisation' to continue unhindered and even of organising it. For example, in a Facebook post, Tomio Okamura claimed that the EU and states like Germany are trying once more to introduce relocation quotas for refugees, and he concludes his message with the following words: 'Germany, the EU and globalists want to flood Europe with immigrants and destroy the native European nations. We refuse that the EU decides about who gets to live in our country! Support us and we will resist together [...] the dictate of Brussels and Berlin' (Okamura, 2020f). Sometimes, U.S. American billionaire George Soros, who funds many liberal initiatives helping migrants, is presented as one of the leaders of the so-called globalists, and his collaborators and projects in Czechia are also denounced (Okamura, 2020d). These claims are an outright endorsement of radical-right conspiracy theories such as the 'Great Replacement Theory', which denounces an alleged plot to replace Europe's native inhabitants with non-European migrants (Zúquete, 2018).

The SPD presents itself as the only anti-EU political party and has advocated holding a referendum to exit the EU since its foundation. Thus, it relentlessly attacks the Union. The organisation is not only presented as a tool of globalists that favours migration but also as a non-democratic, authoritarian, bureaucratic and destructive union, 'a dictatorship of unelected bureaucrats', as Okamura repeatedly writes on social media (Okamura, 2019a). Another angle of attack against the EU is environmental measures taken by the organisation, which are denounced by the SPD as ideologically motivated and economically destructive. 'More bullying from Brussels', many of those posts start, such as in a post about the removal of old cars from the road (Okamura, 2020h) or one on new farming rules (Okamura, 2021c). Sometimes, such measures are portrayed as proof that multinational corporations are ruling the EU. In any case, the results of EU measures are announced in catastrophic terms, such as the 'destruction of the economy' or the 'destruction of agriculture'.

The Western geopolitical order is also attacked by the SPD in its communication, which reiterates long-term criticism of Euro-Atlantic foreign policy, and especially U.S.

American wars. Denunciations of Western military assaults on other countries are often set in contrast to anti-Russian discourses, which are more dominant in Czechia and are being challenged by the SPD, whose leading figures often diffuse ideas in accordance with the official Kremlin line. This kind of discursive mechanism is obvious in an interview Okamura published on his Facebook page, in which he warns that he is 'not an admirer of Putin nor a fan of Russia' and claims that he is 'neither pro-Russian nor anti-American' but then goes on to accuse NATO and the USA of provoking Russia, presents Russia's military intervention in Syria as directed against Islamist terrorists, and says the following:

> Millions of Muslim migrants have been sent to Europe not by Russian propaganda, but by the policies of Brussels and Washington. [...] And, as we all know, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda or Daesh were not created by Russian propaganda, but by American money and American advisers and the American government. The Maidan was not financed by the Russians but by the American government. (Okamura, 2016)

Since the renewal of Russian military operations in Ukraine in February 2022, the SPD has tuned down its sympathy for Russia but has doubled down on its criticism of NATO, the United States and the strongly pro-NATO Czech government, all accused of provoking or worsening the situation. While the SPD is less actively promoting an exit from NATO than it is the EU, it nevertheless advocates for an alternative foreign policy centred on Central Europe. Indeed, it promotes the idea of turning the Visegrád Group, an international organisation uniting Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, into a real political, economic and military union, but without delegating national sovereignty (Okamura, 2021b).

### 6.3 Neo-Marxists

Finally, the third main vector of criticism highlights socio-cultural changes in the West, which the party started to label as neo-Marxist starting in 2018. Multi-culturalism, anti-racism, feminism, LGBT+ rights and environmentalism are all denounced as drawing on neo-Marxism. The term 'neo-Marxist' is also actively used in combination with 'globalist' and the Czech neologism *'sluníčkář'* (literally 'sunny person'), which was used as a derogatory term to mock the naivety of Czech supporters of multiculturalism after 2013 and used in widespread fashion to attack proponents of welcoming refugees in 2015–2016 (Trachtová, 2015), and is perhaps best translated in English as 'do-gooder' (Slačálek & Svobodová, 2018, p. 489). The terms 'globalist', 'neo-Marxist', and *'sluníčkář'* are ubiquitous in SPD communication and are used against both local and Western opponents.

Despite the frequent mixing of terms, the term 'neo-Marxist' more often touches on socio-cultural issues, such as in a video where Okamura calls gender studies a 'neo-Marxist pseudo-science' (Okamura, 2018) or a post in which he denounces 'the perverted neo-Marxist gender theory that breaks up natural families and the normal world' (Okamura, 2020i). The terms 'globalist' and 'neo-Marxist' seem to be used interchangeably in SPD communication, and the EU is alternatively said to be in the hands of neo-Marxists, sunny-people or globalists, or all of them. In one paragraph, Okamura uses almost all these terms to attack the 'globalists and totalitarian elitists' and the 'globalist neoliberal and

neo-Marxist financial-political octopus' and to call on people to support 'the SPD in its struggle against the new totalitarianism and defend Europe, your motherland and your families against the disgusting poisonous sunny-people totalitarian multi-cultural gender cocktail that the elites have prepared for us' (Okamura, 2019b). In a way, these terms serve as empty signifiers that represent many aspects of the Western liberal system and its Czech version that are under attack by the SPD.

The picture of the West that the SPD diffuses is one of a declining yet threatening power. While it is in full decay because of mass migration, globalist elites and neo-Marxist ideology, it is also controlling countries like Czechia and dragging them into the abyss with the complicity of local elites. These discourses correspond to the idea of *declinism* identified by Slačálek and Svobodová in their study of the Czech anti-refugee movement, which serves as a powerful argument for radical and even brutal measures (2018, p. 494). Thus, attached to this idea of decline is the SPD's own radical project to overhaul the political system, detach Czechia from Euro-Atlantic institutions, and restore its national sovereignty.

## 7 Harnessing post-socialism to anti-liberalism

The SPD's anti-liberal discourses about the West are hardly surprising to anyone remotely interested in contemporary politics. After all, this criticism of liberalism as a Western system abounds in movements around the world, regardless of their credos, be they anti-colonialism or conservative reactionism (Aydin, 2007). Even in some European countries, anti-liberal, anti-Western movements may exist, such as in Vladimir Putin's Russia, where this has become a defining feature of state ideology (Umland, 2012), and in Greece, where parts of the Orthodox Church represent this trend (Makrides, 2009). A lot of criticism against the West as overly liberal is also embraced by various Western political and socio-cultural actors.

What makes the SPD's use of anti-Westernism in its anti-liberal communication particularly interesting is its integration of elements of post-socialism. Post-socialism here is understood in broader terms than 'the time after state socialism' as a critical standpoint in several senses: critical of the socialist past and of possible socialist futures; critical of the present as neoliberal verities about transition, markets, and democracy were being imposed upon former socialist spaces; and critical of the possibilities for knowledge as shaped by Cold War institutions (Chari & Verdery, 2009, p. 11). I argue that the Czech parliamentary radical right is harnessing aspects of this post-socialism to its anti-liberalism to adapt its discourse to the local context and draw on widespread discontent with post-1989 affairs. The SPD uses post-socialism to critically draw comparisons with the state's socialist past, denounce aspects of the transformation, and question the country's geopolitical orientation.

While the SPD cannot be considered nostalgic for state socialism since it is a radical right-wing party with anti-communist accents, it nevertheless exploits widespread criticism of the post-1989 transition. It uses those elements to attack current national and international political and socio-economic elites and to feed the anti-liberal, anti-Western discourses sketched in the previous section. Reflecting on the 1989 revolution, SPD deputy

Jan Hrnčíř stated in an interview shared by Okamura: 'Despite many positive aspects [...] I cannot rejoice at seeing how our republic, which used to be an autonomous power in industry and agriculture, has become a colony of the EU' (Okamura, 2019e). The SPD often portrays Czechia as a country that was plundered by Western companies and whose economic autonomy has been dismantled by the European Union. It frequently appears in posts about agriculture, where the SPD underlines that the country used to be self-sufficient in food production until 1989: 'Now we have nothing. With our entry into the EU we voluntarily agreed to liquidate our agriculture and we enabled the arrival of foreign predators on our market' (Okamura, 2020g). In its communication, the SPD rarely fails to clarify that 'foreign predators' or other foreign opponents such as the EU are Western. Thus, while the party does not celebrate the socialist character of the past, it critically reflects on it and presents it as better in some particular aspects, especially regarding Czechia's position towards the West.

This accusation is further detailed in a post on capital transfers between Czechia and Western Europe. In a message posted about twelve times in the last three years by Tomio Okamura, the SPD leader uses the picture and findings of French economist Thomas Piketty to back claims of Western exploitation. The picture bears the heading: 'Where is money from Czechia flowing out? – We are feeding Western Europe – Czechs are a vanquished nation. They are losing the most from membership in the EU' (Okamura, 2021a). The text under the images compares the outflows of capital compared to EU subventions to prove this point. The text accompanying the image varies from post to post but inevitably resorts to a denunciation of the West with anti-colonial rhetoric and propositions of measures such as taxing more international Western corporations and eventually exiting the EU. Such criticism of neoliberal globalisation and core-periphery relations that draws on one of the most renowned left-wing economists might sound unusual from a radical right-wing party, but it exploits well the idea of unequal West-East relations associated with post-socialism. Obviously, the SPD does not go as far as to question capitalist relations in general, keeping its denunciation to the surface level of declared national interests.

In these discourses, the European Union is not presented as a pan-European union of which Czechia is a member but rather as a tool of the West. In addition to the vaguely defined globalist neo-Marxist elites, the SPD often denounces the EU as controlled by Western powers, especially France and Germany. Making a reference to the 1938 Munich Agreement by which France and the United Kingdom ceded parts of Czechoslovakia to Hitler's Germany, Okamura writes: 'As in 1938, we cannot rely on the now degenerate neo-Marxist so-called West represented by Germany and France, which have evil intentions towards us. To them, we are just a colony in which they see an outlet for their trash, cheap labour and a place from which they can siphon profits' (Okamura, 2020e). In the same post, he denounces Germany's alleged effort to control the EU as a new totalitarian project following Nazism and Communism. According to these views, the West not only dominates Czechia politically but also exploits it economically.

Negative aspects of the post-socialist transition leading to the transformation of Czechia into a Western colony come to support the idea of a stolen revolution in 1989 and the need to reverse the current course. In addition to peddling conspiracy theories about November 1989 and alleged collusion between the Communist regime and opponents, the

SPD uses the Velvet Revolution's imaginary to question post-89 developments. This idea is best put together by Tomio Okamura at a speech held in Brno in 2016 and posted on Facebook:

> The profits of the Czech branches [of multinational corporations] are used to increase wages for employees in Western Europe. That, my friends, is called economic colonialism. In 1989, people clinked their keys for 'freedom and independence'. After more than twenty years of Czech pseudo-democracy, we have neither freedom nor independence, but a plundered and indebted republic! (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie* – SPD, 2016).

The speech refers to the 1989 demonstrations in Czechoslovakia, at which protesters clinked their keys to tell the regime that the bell was tolling for it. The idea of the betrayed ideals of 1989 also comes up in a meme posted by Okamura to denounce 'gender madness'. The meme is a picture of an androgynous-looking fashion model with flamboyant and revealing attire, and the text asks the rhetorical question: 'This is the gender "progress" from the West. Did we clink our keys in November for that?' (Okamura, 2020c). This is a telling example of the way post-socialism is harnessed to anti-liberal ideas, whereby unconventional gender performances are denounced not only as a foreign import from the West but also as a betrayal of the Velvet Revolution's popular ideals.

Drawing on the changes that followed 1989, Okamura and his SPD criticise and exploit particular aspects of the transformation that are unpopular, at least among some population groups. These aspects relate to certain elements of liberal democracy, but they are often framed in the language of post-socialism by making reference to the pre-1989 past, problematising the neoliberal transition and denouncing its underlying logic of unequal West-East relations. Of course, the SPD articulates its discourses with its radical right-wing lens, which means that its post-socialism is subordinated to an anti-Western discourse entrenched in anti-liberal ideas such as nativism and conservatism.

## 8 Subverting West–East hierarchies of knowledge and authority

In addition to critical assessments of the socialist past and subsequent developments, the SPD targets another aspect of post-socialism by subverting West–East hierarchies of knowledge and authority according to which the East must learn from the West (Krastev & Holmes, 2018; Kulpa, 2014). In its challenge of the Western model, the SPD subverts this hierarchy in two ways. On the one hand, it uses it to buttress its anti-Western, anti-liberal message by showcasing mainstream Western sources, alternative Western institutions of knowledge and alternative Western political actors, and on the other hand, it inverts the West-East hierarchy by championing non-Western figures of authority who are challenging the West. Through its communication, the SPD is thus both exploiting and undermining the intellectual authority of the West. In some way, this comes close to one of the aspects included in Chari and Verdery's definition of post-socialism, i.e. the critique of 'the possibilities for knowledge as shaped by Cold War institutions' (2009, p. 11).

What is truly interesting about SPD's social media communication is the level of detail and the explicit use of sources like foreign mainstream media and experts. Contrarily

to what some academic works that adopt a denunciatory tone claim (Charvát et al., 2022; Filipec & Charvátová, 2022), and notwithstanding some cases of outright manipulation, the SPD tends to work cleverly with information and back it with numerous sources, arguably making a rather convincing impression. Many of the posts about Muslims and extra-European migrants and their descendants in the West contain detailed information citing mainstream Western media or established experts. For example, in an approximately 200-word long post on the 'Islamisation of Europe' Okamura cites one mainstream German tabloid, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, one mainstream Swiss daily, one well-known German professor, a study by the University of Freiburg, the mainstream think-tank Pew Forum and one German mainstream daily (Okamura, 2022). Whether this use of sources is deliberate or not, these messages about Western Europe that use details and renowned sources do produce a convincing impression and certainly benefit from the idea that Western sources of knowledge are to be trusted.

Another strategy used by the party in its communication is the use of alternative Western sources. Radical-right think tanks promoting racist, anti-Muslim and anti-migrant theses like the Great Replacement conspiracy theory are thus widely used by the party in its communication. In a post about extra-European migration to Italy, Okamura quotes the Italian think tank named *FareFuturo* (MakeFuture), which claimed that half of the Italian population could be Muslim by 2100 (Okamura, 2019c). In another post, Okamura writes a long text about how 'Safe and idyllic Sweden is becoming a war zone because of immigrant gangs', and he quotes a Swedish think tank called *Det Goda Samhället* ('The Good Society') to prove that Swedes with migration backgrounds have committed most crimes (Okamura, 2019d). In this post and about twenty others, the Great Replacement theory serves as the main analytical lens through which to look at all these events. The facts are provided by local think tanks and the US American Gatestone Institute. All those think tanks have in common that they are closely or loosely related to the local and international radical right, with Gatestone being well integrated in the United States as one of the main anti-migrant lobbies. While they are not well-known, especially not in Czechia, their scientific outlook and Westernness lend credibility to the facts and numbers provided by the SPD and Okamura in their analyses. Being presented solely as think tanks, without any mention of their ideological orientation, they serve as objective, scientific sources that have insider knowledge because they are based in the West.

In addition to using seemingly objective Western sources, the SPD also profiles 'dissident' Western voices. In doing so, the SPD engages with another 'West', a Western world opposed to multiculturalism and liberal modernity, far from the image which inspired the transitions to democracy during the 1990s. This alternative West that is resisting multiculturalism and the liberal democratic hegemony is best represented by the Western politicians allied with the SPD on the European level. Amongst them, Matteo Salvini of the Italian *Lega*, Marine Le Pen of the French *Rassemblement National,* and Geert Wilders of the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* figure prominently as authoritative figures of knowledge. As such, they are often featured in social media posts, where Tomio Okamura and the SPD highlight their friendship ties with them and report on their local struggles and successes. In April 2019, ahead of the EU parliamentary elections, the SPD invited its Euro-

pean allies for an electoral meeting in Prague's central square, and the leaders addressed the crowd. Geert Wilders said the following in English with Czech subtitles on a big screen:

> Let me tell you something about my home country, the Netherlands. […] In three of the largest cities in Holland, the majority of the people under the age of 25 are now already non-Western immigrants, mostly Islamic. Our own people are already strangers in their own town and later in their own country. The Netherlands is given away by the elites on a silver plate. (Chmel, 2019)

European leaders of the radical right, like Geert Wilders, serve as alternative sources of knowledge for a party like the SPD. In addition to repeating what the party has been saying for years, they add the weight of their own experience and authority. They are presented as insiders who know the truth about the West, who are resisting local and international elites, and who are not afraid of telling the truth. In a similar way, Donald Trump has been featured in SPD communication as a positive example of political resistance to the Western hegemonic model.

Last but not least, the SPD has also been more openly challenging the West–East knowledge hierarchy by championing non-Western leaders such as Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński and even Vladimir Putin. This is especially true of Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, who became the European radical right's (and other parts of the right's) darling during the so-called refugee crisis when he hardened his rhetoric and took radical steps to stop extra-European migrants. In SPD's communication, Orbán is presented as an exemplary leader who is standing up for his country's interests against migration and the EU. In one of the countless posts featuring Orbán, his endorsement of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory is cited: 'It is forbidden to say that Europe is threatened by the migration of peoples, that migration brings [to] the continent criminality and terror, and it is forbidden to say that "it's not a coincidence", but rather a "planned, organised action"' (Okamura, 2020a). Polish vice-premier and de facto leader Jarosław Kaczyński also serves as an example of a non-Western leader standing up to the West, and it is mostly his fight against the EU that is celebrated by Okamura and the SPD. Worthy of mention is also Vladimir Putin, whose criticism of the West is featured in several posts, like one from January 2020, in which his words on migration are cited: 'We see that the majority of Euro-Atlantic countries have in fact taken the road of rejection of their roots, including the Christian values that have made up the fundaments of Western civilisation' (Okamura, 2020b). His words comparing same-sex marriage with Satanism are also cited. All the Putin memes were discretely deleted after Russia's renewed aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The diffusion of the words of these non-Western leaders is telling in the way that they serve as alternative sources of knowledge and authority about the West, as well as embodying examples of rulers apparently resisting the Western hegemony. The SPD can draw on their legitimacy to back its own arguments and prove the realism of its political project. Finally, the widespread use of foreign references by the SPD can also be seen as yet another example of the radical right's internationalisation, not only through organisational bridges but also through borrowing from each other's playbooks and discourses (Caiani, 2018).

## 9 Concluding remarks

The goal of this article has been to use the Czech example to suggest some key explanations of the Czech radical right in particular and, more generally, anti-liberal, national-conservative political movements in Central and Eastern Europe. As I have shown, the centrality of the Western liberal democratic model – as an actual model or symbol – in post-1989 developments in the region has turned 'the West' into an important point of contention. Radical-right parties like the SPD, and national-conservative forces in general, have thus increasingly engaged in discourses about the West as a way to question and challenge post-1989 developments. As I have argued, the SPD harnesses post-socialism to its anti-liberal critique of the West by skilfully exploiting critical discourses about the transition in terms of uneven West-East power relations. This has allowed them to shape a compelling narrative about their country as a victim of the liberal West and pro-Western elites in socio-economic, political and cultural terms and to present themselves as resistance fighters fighting for their people. Subverting the existing West-East hierarchy of knowledge, the party exploits the authority of mainstream and alternative Western sources and also champions non-Western figures of authority challenging the West. Ultimately, I suggest that these tendencies explain other aspects of the anti-liberal challenge in Central and Eastern Europe, such as geopolitical sympathies for the Russian and Chinese regimes.

## Acknowledgement

This article was written with the financial support of the French Research Centre in Humanities and Social Sciences in Prague (CEFRES, UAR 3138 CNRS-MEAE)

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