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Exploring Populism Through the Politics of Commemoration

JOHANA WYSS

Abstract

This essay investigates whether the way in which Czech citizens relate to the commemoration of the fall of the Iron Curtain can shed light on the strong support for the currently dominant political party ANO, often labelled by political scientists as ‘centrist’ or ‘managerial’ populist. Based on ethnographic research in Czech Silesia, analysis of contemporary political discourse and follow-up fieldwork during the thirtieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution in November 2019, the essay provides a case study of increasing political polarisation as a new form of populism emerges.

IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF the Velvet Revolution on 17 November 1989 was marked by manifestations of public discontent. Dissatisfaction with the current political situation in the country culminated in a rally attracting over 200,000 protestors. The main target of the biggest demonstration since 1989 was the Prime Minister, Andrej Babiš, successful businessman and alleged subsidy fraudster. Despite the overt opposition of the cultural and intellectual elite, or perhaps because of it, Babiš and his centrist populist political movement ANO enjoy an extraordinary popularity with the general public. In the academic literature, and in political science especially, there is an emerging body of literature which describes and theorises the increasing popularity of populist politicians on a macro level (Mouffe 2000; Pelinka 2013; Dawson & Hanley 2016). However, the deeper questions of why people, according to their own understanding and narrative accounts, relate to and support populist leaders and parties are often trivialised. I suggest that such neglect hinders an in-depth understanding of populism and the social dynamics associated with it. Vernacular memories of 1989 shed light on complex entanglements of economy, culture and politics, and point towards explanations for the emergence and strength of centrist managerial populism in the Czech

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Republic. In what follows, I present an ethnographic study of how ordinary people narrate and make sense of their own reasons for supporting political parties and movements advocating a populist agenda.

Empirically, this essay focuses on rituals of public commemoration. It explores how my informants, the citizens of Opava, commemorated the anniversary of the Velvet Revolution during the bank holiday weekend of 17 November 2019, and how, in this context, they narratively reconstructed their everyday experience of the past 30 years. The Opavians with whom I spoke openly expressed feelings of frustration and dispiritedness rather than any sense of joy and accomplishment. Consequently, they decided to disregard the celebrations rather than participate in them. Based on their narrative accounts, I identify three main interlinked themes. Firstly, people talked about the relative economic deprivation that they had experienced since the Velvet Revolution. Secondly, they maintained that they had been betrayed by the intellectual and political elite. Finally, they voiced a sense of a cultural threat linked to the ‘danger’ of migration, which they articulated in xenophobic and racist terms. As I show below, the perception of economic deprivation, the betrayal of the political elite and the anticipation of a cultural threat through immigration were sources of great frustration among my informants. This frustration provided fertile ground in which populist movements could cultivate support.

Conversely, the considerable appeal of centrist managerial populist movements in Opava and elsewhere can be fruitfully investigated by a careful examination of these sentiments and their political consequences. While the existing literature dealing with democratic backsliding in the Czech Republic is extremely useful in terms of its contextualisation and theoretical grounding, there has been comparatively less work on understanding and explaining the people’s emic perspective. Instead of making condescending judgments about the people who vote for the populist movements, and despite our own political views and convictions, I argue that as anthropologists, we need to try to make sense of the worldview and everyday experiences of the ordinary voters and citizens with whom we work (Buchowski 2006; Gagyi 2016).

Central European backsliders

For two decades after 1990, the former Eastern Bloc seemed to be moving forward on the road of liberal democratic progress. However, in the third decade, the 2010s, scholars increasingly observed difficulties on this trajectory, linked with people’s frustration and dissatisfaction with the current political and economic situation and resulting in the emergence and electoral success of populist political actors (Rupnik 2007; Dawson & Hanley 2016; Krastev 2018; Scheiring 2021). As Hanley and Vachudova pointed out, for the Visegrád countries ‘the narrative of [democratic] progress in the region is dead, replaced by democratic backsliding’ (Hanley & Vachudova 2018, p. 276). The former champions of neoliberalism and democratisation are now leading the ‘illiberal turn’.

Most of the literature dealing with these developments in the Visegrád countries has focused on Hungary and Poland, the most visible examples of illiberal turns. Compared with the implementation of the ‘Fourth Republic’ project of Jarosław Kaczyński’s Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*—PiS) in Poland and the Hungarian vision of illiberal democracy instigated by Viktor Orbán, the other two countries of the Visegrád Group have attracted much less scholarly attention. However, many argue that liberal

democracy is significantly under threat not only in Poland and Hungary but also in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Mueller 2014; Hanley & Vachudova 2018; Havlík 2019). How are we to explain the turn towards centrist managerial populism in a country which was at the forefront of the democratic revolutions three decades ago?

Since the Velvet Revolution of 1989, followed by the Velvet Divorce in 1993, the Czech Republic has been considered a successful example of democratic transition, transforming itself into a stable polity with entrenched liberal democratic principles and remarkable continuity in its political parties (Powell & Tucker 2014; Havlík 2019). However, the liberal narrative of Europeaness, falling walls and democratic progress is gradually being replaced by intensifying illiberal sentiments. After two decades in which politics were dominated by two stable political parties, the centre-right Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana—ODS*) and the centre-left Czech Social Democrats (*Česká strana sociálně demokratická—ČSSD*), the ANO movement (which means ‘yes’ in Czech and is also an acronym for Action of Dissatisfied Citizens, *Akce nespokojených občanů*) was founded in 2011 by the Czech Republic’s second richest man, Andrej Babiš.

Free of familiar party-political ideology, ANO’s programme is simply anti-establishment, accusing other political parties and their representatives of incompetence and corruption (Hanley & Vachudova 2018). ANO broke through in the October 2013 parliamentary election, when it received 18.7% of the vote to become the second largest party in the country. In January 2014 ANO entered a centre-left coalition with the ČSSD. Babiš held the post of finance minister until May 2017, when he was ousted over allegations of tax avoidance and fraudulent claims for EU subsidies, for which he was later indicted (Hanley & Vachudova 2018). In the October 2017 Legislative election, ANO won 29.6% of the vote and 78 out of 200 seats. No other party received more than 11% of the vote. Nevertheless, ANO struggled to find a coalition partner. Obligated to form a one-party minority administration, Babiš lost a vote of confidence shortly after. He then forged a minority coalition with the ČSSD, which, in a move unprecedented since the Velvet Revolution, was supported by a confidence and supply agreement with the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy—KSČM*).

The Slovak-born businessman-turned-politician was a member of the Communist Party from 1980 until the Velvet Revolution. According to Slovakia’s National Memory Institute (*Ústav pamäti národa*), he collaborated with the communist secret police called State Security (*Státní bezpečnost—StB*).¹ Despite this communist past, serious fraud allegations and an EU conflict-of-interest investigation, Babiš managed to cast himself as an anti-corruption crusader battling a remote, self-serving political establishment which, according to him, was incompetent and ‘unable to get things done’. His public image is that of a skilled technocrat and ‘protest figure’, fiercely fighting for the interests of the ‘pure people’ against the ‘corrupt elites’. Babiš promised that he would run the state ‘efficiently’ like a company (*řídít stát jako firmu*).² Beyond

¹ Andrej Babiš denies that he was an active agent of the StB, however Slovakian courts have repeatedly dismissed his claim that he was wrongly identified as the agent known as Bureš (Kovanič 2020).

² See for example ANO blog post from 10 August 2017, officially authored by Andrej Babiš, available at: <https://www.anobudelip.cz/cs/o-nas/blogy/35090/ridit-stat-jako-firmu-a-proc-ne>, accessed 27 September 2021.

this, ANO's programme remains as vague as it was when he formed the party in 2011. Unlike conservative-nationalist leaders such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán or Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński, Babiš has not engaged in nationalistic rhetoric asserting the cause of an ethnically defined Czech nation. There is nonetheless a clear anti-refugee and anti-migrant stance in ANO's campaigning strategy. Babiš's rhetoric is anti-elite as well (Babiš 2017). He is neither a left-winger nor a right-winger, and scholars have characterised his populism as 'managerial' (see Scheiring, this issue) or 'centrist' (Učeň 2004; Pop-Eleches 2010; Havlík & Voda 2018).

Centrist managerial populism

Populism is commonly defined as a form of politics predicated upon a fundamental juxtaposition between the 'corrupt elite' and the 'pure people' (Mudde 2007; Bonikowski *et al.* 2019). The vilified elites typically include privileged groups such as politicians and economic leaders, artists and other cultural figures, and senior civil servants. The 'pure people' category, on the other hand, is much broader and less clearly defined (Rooduijn & Pauwels 2011; Bonikowski 2017). Within this antagonistic moral framing, the 'corrupt elites' are seen as exercising undue influence on politics in pursuit of their own self-interest while the 'pure people' are cast as the only legitimate source of political power (Mudde 2007; Bonikowski 2017). This binary immediately problematises the relationship between populism and democracy. Is populism, as a political practice, fundamentally anti-democratic as well as being anti-pluralist and anti-liberal (Bonikowski *et al.* 2019)? I shall argue that 'thin populism' becomes anti-democratic only in combination with other ideologies. I agree with Stanley that the 'thin nature [of populist ideology] means that it is unable to stand alone as a practical political ideology: it lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent programme for the solution to crucial political questions' (Stanley 2008, p. 95). It is therefore easily combined with a 'thick' ideology such as nativism and right-wing populism (Mudde 2007) or left-wing populism (March 2012).

Centrist populism that remains free of any significant adulteration is relatively unusual (Učeň 2004; Havlík & Voda 2018). According to Pop-Eleches (2010), such parties emphasise their nonconformity, insisting that they represent a non-ideological, anti-political alternative to the established parties. This allows for a certain flexibility in their political programmes, which always boil down to promises to enhance the living standards of ordinary people (Pop-Eleches 2010). In studying a particular example of centrist populism in Slovakia, Učeň pointed out that such parties avoid extremist positions and locate themselves 'directly or indirectly [in] the ideological or geometric centre of the party system' (Učeň 2004, p. 47).

Populist discourse pitting the morally superior 'pure people' against the 'corrupt elite' becomes particularly lively around major commemorative events. The question of which memories to activate and which to ignore is an extremely important political decision which can directly help or hinder a political movement (Wüstenberg 2017). Constructing powerful myths that draw on the collective memory of an imagined past is a key element in the creation of political identities as well as in political legitimation (Cento Bull 2016). Selective historical memory is often explicitly crafted by populist movements in order to

cement the group's cohesion (Chiantera-Stutte 2005). This strategy is characteristic of both right and left populist parties. For example, right-wing parties generally avoid any discourse about fascism or Nazism and claim to represent a completely new agenda (Pelinka 2013). Galbraith (2019) has demonstrated how two different versions of the past were symbolically constructed by distinct memory agents in the celebration of Polish Independence Day.

Uses and misuses of the past for present-day political purposes have obvious pertinence in postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe (Bernhard & Kubik 2014). In their introduction, Kubik and Bernhard divide 'mnemonic actors' into four ideal types: warriors, pluralists, abnegators and prospectives. Mnemonic warriors draw a sharp line between their version of history, which is the only 'truthful one', and the 'wrong' or 'false' interpretations of the other mnemonic actors. Mnemonic pluralists accept that in addition to their version of the past, there also exist other 'valid' interpretations. Mnemonic abnegators are either uninterested or see no political advantage in engaging in memory politics and thus simply avoid it. Finally, mnemonic prospectives believe in a post-historical end-state, and that only they have solved the riddle of both the past and the future. They are similar to warriors, but rather than focusing on the past, they put much more emphasis on the future (and the post-historical end-state) (Kubik & Bernhard 2014). The particular mix of mnemonic actors determines the 'mnemonic regime', which can be either fractured (if at least one actor is a warrior) or pillarised (when all actors are abnegators). The primary focus of their volume is 'official memory', which is the memory 'propagated by the state but also by political parties and other actors in the public space' (Kubik & Bernhard 2014, p. 8).

While such top-down investigations of memory politics are undeniably important, in order to understand how populist parties effectively use the past to their advantage we also need to investigate and reflect on bottom-up narratives of the past. How and why do ordinary citizens commemorate (or not) the radical regime change of 1989, 30 years later? How do they define and reflect on the continuities and discontinuities with the previous social, economic and political order? I argue that, in addition to studying official and transnational memories, it is incumbent on scholars, above all scholars of populism, to study localised vernacular understandings and interpretations of past and present. After all, it is precisely the populists who are ostensibly the most amenable to the sentiments of 'ordinary' people and, even more so, their resentments. My main question, then, is not how institutionalised mnemonic actors shape interpretations of 1989 within a given mnemonic landscape, but how ordinary people remember and commemorate (or ignore and fail to commemorate) that transformation.

The 30th Velvet Revolution anniversary: governmental and liberal-cosmopolitan accounts

The timing and location of the rally, which took place on 16 November 2019 and attracted approximately 200,000–250,000 protesters, were no accident. On the eve of the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of communism, citizens were invited to Prague's Letná field, where an estimated 500,000–800,000 people had gathered 30 years before to resist the

communist regime. The organisers of the 2019 rally, ‘Million Moments for Democracy’, led by a 26-year-old student, Mikuláš Minář, were protesting against Andrej Babiš, perceived as a threat to the liberal democratic ideals of the Velvet Revolution. In the spirit of Václav Havel’s iconic quote that ‘truth and love will prevail over lies and hatred’, the organisers issued a public appeal to Babiš in which they asked him to respect democratic rules and institutions and either resolve his conflict of interests or to step down from his role in the government.

On the day after this rally, commemorative festivities took place around the country, the largest being held in Prague. The programme included re-enactments of the student march, concerts, street parties and 3D light show performances projected on historical buildings. Former dissidents and public intellectuals delivered speeches invoking the name and legacy of Václav Havel, bringing into sharp relief the state of current affairs. During these commemorative activities much criticism of Czech postcommunist democracy was voiced, especially on the subject of the increasing acceptance of communist politicians and former collaborators in the government, although this criticism was less harsh than that of the Million Moments rallies. Leading politicians, including the prime minister, Babiš and the president, Miloš Zeman, kept a conspicuously low profile throughout these celebrations. The countermovement that pushed against active commemoration, represented by the prime minister and president, questioned and undermined the triumphant narrative of the Velvet Revolution, as championed by the liberal-cosmopolitan account. I shall demonstrate that this rival understanding of the anniversary’s (in)significance was less visible but more deeply internalised within the general public.

Neither the government officials’ downplaying of the legacy of the Velvet Revolution nor civil society’s campaign to reconnect with the legacy of anti-communist dissent in order to critique contemporary politics were new. A similar disconnection was noted in a study of the 2009 celebrations (O’Dwyer 2014). In Bernhard and Kubik’s conceptual framework used by O’Dwyer, the disparity between civil society groups and politicians could be theorised as the ‘pillarized coexistence’ of civil and political society (O’Dwyer 2014, p. 190). O’Dwyer documented a general apathy on the part of national-level political institutions as a defining feature of the official Czech commemoration. In the commemorative activities there was almost no involvement on the part of government representatives and state officials, such as the prime minister and the president. Nor were there any high-profile public debates between the representatives of different political parties over the meaning and legacy of 1989 in the Czech Republic. Across the political spectrum, politicians (except for the communists) were untypically united in opting to stay off the radar. As a result, the line of demarcation and contestation over the meaning of the 2009 anniversary was not between political parties, but between civil society and politicians (O’Dwyer 2014). Some of the noteworthy groups in the former camp were *Opona* (Curtain) and ‘Democracy Czech-up’, both non-governmental, non-profit and student-led initiatives. These precursors of Million Moments for Democracy organised public meetings, travelling exhibitions and numerous large-scale art and multimedia installations. Their *raison d’être* was the propagation of a moral critique of postcommunist Czechia. According to O’Dwyer (2014), the activists in these groups felt a deep sense of frustration with official politics and its disconnection from the initial ideals and hopes of the Velvet Revolution.

A decade later, the constellation is similar except that, with rising democratic deconsolidation (Guasti 2018), on the vernacular, local level, ordinary people are just as frustrated with ‘civil society’ (public intellectuals and pro-Western liberal democracy dissidents) as with their political establishment. Directly challenging the liberal-cosmopolitan memory, many of my interlocutors expressed a strong sense of alienation from public intellectuals. They cast doubt on the ostensible suffering of pre-revolutionary dissidents and resented their ‘triumphant ascendancy’ during and after the Velvet Revolution. Their perspectives can be grasped by attending to cultural historical aspects of Czech collective identity (Holý 1996). The idealised auto-stereotype of ‘the little Czech man’ (*malý český člověk*), epitomised by the popular character of Good Soldier Schweik, is characterised as a down-to-earth individual who survives no matter what. The ideal of ‘the Great Czech nation’ being constructed out of ordinary, unassuming individuals generates a strong sense of egalitarianism. The emphasis is on the collectivity. Individuality is undesirable: ‘The little Czech, the representation of the everyday and the ordinary, is the role model, and what is important about him as a role model is that he lacks individuation’ (Holý 1996, p. 62).

The ‘pure people’ of Opava

Opava (known as Troppau in German) is a city in the eastern region of the Czech Republic. The historical capital of Austrian Silesia, it was administratively and culturally linked to the Habsburg monarchy. After World War I, despite the significant resistance of residents and local politicians, Opava became part of Czechoslovakia (Žáček 2004). During World War II, Opava was one of the three capitals of the administrative districts of the Reichsgau Sudetenland, an administrative division of Nazi Germany. At the end of the war, Opava was heavily bombed by US, Soviet and German armies, resulting in the almost total destruction of the town. As a predominantly German-speaking town, it experienced a drastic and violent expulsion of its population after World War II, when two-thirds of its native inhabitants were subjected to anti-German ethnic cleansing (Müller & Šopák 2010). With the majority of its population having been forcibly removed, Opava was repopulated by Czech, Moravian and Slovak newcomers from 1945 onwards.

During the socialist era (1948–1989), the formerly Austrian town of Troppau became the socialist town of Opava. Consequently, it lost its standing as the cultural and political capital of (Czech) Silesia and was replaced by the neighbouring city Ostrava, 30 km away. Ostrava, dubbed the ‘steel heart’ of the country, offered plenty of job opportunities, including well-paid ones within Ostrava’s mining industry. Many Opavians opted for a daily commute to Ostrava, taking the better-paid and more socially valued employment which Ostrava offered while still living with their families in Opava, thus avoiding the considerable environmental pollution generated by the heavy coal and iron industries.

That said, there were still job opportunities available in Opava, particularly in the food, chemical and engineering industries, with the manufacturing companies that had been established in the pre-socialist era and then nationalised. For example, the chocolate factory, Fiedor, established in 1840, was nationalised and renamed Opavia; today, it belongs to the transnational corporation, Nestle. The chemical company, Gustave Hell et Comp., established in 1883, was nationalised and renamed Galena; today, it belongs to

the Israeli pharmaceutical company, Teva. Finally, Eduard Tatzel's Engineering and Foundry Company, established in 1878, was nationalised and renamed Ostroj, continuing today under the same name as a leading manufacturer of mining machinery. Opava's large hospital, as well as its cultural and tertiary sectors, also provided significant career opportunities. Given that more than 50% of the city's housing was destroyed during the 1945 bombing, and to accommodate the influx of new inhabitants, about 10,000 new flats were built in Opava between 1945 and 1973, as well as new schools, streets, and leisure and sport facilities (Žídek 1975). Thus, Opava is a mid-sized, provincial, residential town that provided, and still provides, a reasonable cultural, social and economic infrastructure for its inhabitants.

The first rumblings of revolt related to the Velvet Revolution in Opava took place on 21 November, four days after the civil unrest began in Prague, prompted by a violent clash between marching university students and the StB. In Opava, the first to go on strike were actors from the local theatre company and students from Mendel's Grammar School (*Mendelovo gymnázium*). On the evening of the same day, approximately 500 people gathered in Opava's main square. The city council were clearly taken aback by the social unrest spreading from Prague across the whole of Czechoslovakia. No orders came from the Communist Party headquarters, and thus no force was used against the Opavian demonstrators (Binar 2014). Three days later, on 24 November, a local branch of the newly created nationwide political organisation, Civic Forum, was formed. Its members were local political dissidents, creative and intellectual figures, and other civil society actors. In its early days, Civic Forum was a spontaneous and inclusive organisation that united anti-communist actors in organically formed local committees. In Opava, local committees were established within local factories and institutions (Binar 2014). Workers from all large Opavian manufacturing companies, approximately 12,000–15,000 people, took part in the general strike on Monday, 27 November. This event united Opavians across all social, economic and cultural levels (Binar 2014).

The transfer of power took place swiftly. The 'revolutionary' Civic Forum transformed into the Social Democrats (ČSSD) and the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which were, until recently, the two most stable political parties. Privatisation and a decline in the production capacity of manufacturing companies quickly followed. The first resulted in highly politicised cases of corruption; the second in the emergence of unemployment. Even though Opava, with its traditional focus on light industry and the tertiary sector, was not as severely hit by the turbulent and unstable economic transformation of the 1990s, the gradual decline of heavy mining and the steel industry negatively affected a number of Opavians. According to the Czech Statistical Office, in 1997, Opava's unemployment rate was 4.8%, in 2004, 11.3%, and in 2014, 8.21%.³ Further, poorly administered privatisation allowed for various types of fraudulent activities and resulted in the decline of some significant businesses that had previously symbolised the town's

³'Employment, Unemployment', Czech Statistical Office Public Database, available at: https://vdb.czso.cz/vdbvo2/faces/index.jsf?page=statistiky&katalog=30851&filtr=G~F_M~F_Z~F_R~F_P~_S~_U~301_-null#katalog=30853, accessed 27 September 2021.

prosperity and pride, such as the luxurious department store Breda & Weinstein, which is now closed.

By 2020, the town had a university, a theatre and the third largest museum in the country, all three bearing the regional designation ‘Silesian’ in their names. According to the official reports of the Opavian City Council,⁴ the city is prospering economically, and in 2019 operated with an annual budget of CZK1.07 billion (approx. €42 million). The three biggest local employers are the pharmaceutical company Teva (1,520 permanent employees), the Silesian Hospital (1,214 permanent employees) and the mining equipment factory Ostroj (900 permanent employees). As of October 2019, the unemployment rate was below 2.3%.⁵ The majority of companies in and around Opava are notoriously short of staff. In particular, they struggle to fill unskilled minimum-wage vacancies, such as for warehouse workers, cleaners and security guards. Despite economic growth and extremely low unemployment, Opavians, like other Czechs, are sinking into debt traps. Approximately every tenth Opavian is indebted and liable to foreclosure on a loan.⁶

The centre-right ODS won regional elections in 2000 and 2004, while the centre-left ČSSD won the regional elections in Opava in 2008 and 2012. In the 2016 elections, ANO came out as the winner with 25.15% of the vote, and then again in 2020, with 30.19% of the vote (Bernardová 2020). These figures are by no means exceptional. The tendency towards democratic deconsolidation and the increased influence of populist movements is visible, not only in large urban agglomerations such as Prague, Brno and Ostrava, but also in borderland peripheries, where some of the more insidious processes are often particularly noticeable.

The 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution in Opava

Fortunately for the organisers, the weather on the weekend of the Velvet Revolution anniversary was unseasonably sunny and warm for mid-November. The local branch of the Million Moments for Democracy movement (dubbed Million Moments Opava) mobilised its supporters to join an anti-Babiš demonstration at 5pm on Friday, 15 November 2019 in the main town square. This was a day before the massive anti-government rally in Prague organised by the main Million Moments organisation. When I asked the activists of the Million Moments Opava rally why they had scheduled their gathering for Friday instead of Saturday or Sunday, they said that they did not want to oblige protesters to choose between demonstrating in Opava and going to Prague for the main rally. Several did go to Prague the next morning to take part in the Saturday protests

⁴‘Opava bude v roce 2019 hospodařit s částkou téměř 1,07 miliard’, Opava City Council, available at: <https://www.opava-city.cz/cz/nabidka-temat/media/tiskove-zpravy/opava-bude-roce-2019-hospodarit-castkou-temer-107-miliard.html>, accessed 14 October 2021.

⁵‘Employment, Unemployment’, Czech Statistical Office Public Database, available at: https://vdb.czso.cz/vdbvo2/faces/index.jspx?_afPfm=statistiky&katalog=30851&filtr=G~F_M~F_Z~F_R~F_P~_S~_U~301-null#katalog=30853, accessed 27 September 2021.

⁶‘Sociodemografická Analýza’, *MAS Opavsko*, 2018, available at: https://www.masopavsko.cz/e_download.php?file=data/multipage/editor/editor-11-110-cs_9.pdf&original=Sociodemografick%C3%A1%20anal%C3%BDza_fweb.pdf, accessed 15 October 2021.

(and in some cases, Prague's Sunday celebrations as well). The Opavian organisers wanted to avoid Sunday, the actual anniversary, as the city council had already planned several events for that day, and Million Moments Opava did not want to clash with the official programme.

I arrived at Opava's main square a little before 5pm on Friday. Red candles placed in the shape of a heart, the symbol of President Václav Havel, had already been laid out and lit on the ground in front of the theatre and seven people were hastily installing two large speakers, an electronic keyboard and light refreshments on the theatre stairs which, for this occasion, functioned as a makeshift stage (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)). Shortly after 5pm, approximately 70 people had assembled. In the following hour, the number grew to approximately 120, but by 7pm the crowd had shrunk to under 40. The demonstrators were predominantly people associated with the local intelligentsia: writers and other artists, teachers, doctors, small entrepreneurs and students. The programme followed a simple pattern of a speech followed by a song. The speakers, all male, were cultural and intellectual elite figures connected with pre-revolutionary dissent. Two names were featured in all the speeches: Václav Havel, the liberal democratic hero, and Andrej Babiš, the arch enemy.

Two days later, Opava's official celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, organised by the city council, commenced at 10am. Approximately 35 people gathered in front of the Memorial to the Victims of Totalitarian Regimes and Fallen



FIGURE 1. 'HAVEL'S HEART', OPAVA, 15 NOVEMBER 2019, DEMONSTRATION ORGANISED BY THE MILLION MOMENTS FOR DEMOCRACY OPAVA

Source: author's photo.



FIGURE 2. OPAVA'S UPPER SQUARE, OPAVA, 15 NOVEMBER 2019, DEMONSTRATION ORGANISED BY THE MILLION MOMENTS FOR DEMOCRACY OPAVA

Source: author's photo.

Soldiers of World War I and World War II to pay tribute and lay flowers (see [Figure 3](#)). The majority of participants were middle-aged men in suits, many of whom I knew because of their work as local officials. Throughout the event, politicians, academics, public servants and local businessmen were shaking hands and talking casually. The ceremony evidently did not appeal to local people, who passed by without showing any interest. Two speeches were given. The first was delivered by Zbyňek Stanjura, an Opavian-born member of the Chamber of Deputies affiliated with the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), who spoke in very general terms about the heroism of the Czech people during both totalitarian regimes, namely, Nazism and communism.

The second speech was given by Opava's new mayor, Tomáš Navrátil, who is affiliated with the ANO movement. His speech contrasted sharply with the narrative of the Million Moments for Democracy movement, which Opavians might have heard at the Friday gathering, or on Saturday on television and social media. It also contrasted with Stanjura's triumphant victory narrative of a few minutes earlier. While the mayor expressed his gratitude for the revolution, which he felt was 'a good thing' on the whole, he made it very clear that, instead of revering the cultural and political leaders of that time, his thoughts, concerns and empathy were with those who had struggled during the turbulent transition, with those who had been negatively affected by the disorder and corruption of the 1990s, and with those who were still struggling to make their living,



FIGURE 3. OFFICIAL COMMEMORATION OF THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY, OPAVA, 17 NOVEMBER 2019, EVENT ORGANISED BY OPAVA'S MUNICIPALITY

Source: author's photo.

despite having honest full-time jobs. The mayor was careful not to show contempt for those who genuinely believed in the ideals of communism and a just society, or for those who had been ordinary members of the Communist Party.

A lukewarm attitude towards the Velvet Revolution, a refusal to engage in the black and white, antagonistic dissidents/communists dichotomy, and the theme of sympathising with ordinary Opavian locals who felt they had been 'left behind' (*vybodli se na nás*) and betrayed by the corrupt elites were also articulated in the opinions and attitudes of my interlocutors, the majority of whom decided not to take part in any of the commemorative events. In terms of my positionality as a researcher, I was born in Opava but my family left when I was a child. I only returned to the town in 2013 as a master's student to conduct three months' fieldwork focusing on gendered divisions of labour in late socialism. In 2015–2016, I spent 14 months in the field as a doctoral student focusing on Silesian identity and the 'difficult heritage' of forced displacements. I conducted follow-up four month-long ethnographic fieldwork in Opava district (*Opavsko*) from mid-October 2019 until mid-February 2020 as a postdoctoral researcher. In addition to these three main stints in the field, over the last seven years I have also made many shorter trips. For this research article specifically focused on the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, I was able to draw on a range of previous contacts as well as new acquaintances made through snowballing. I spoke to approximately 45 Opavians about

the Velvet Revolution anniversary, including ten in-depth interviews with Opavian ANO voters not known to me previously. A majority of the 45 conversations were informal talks in spaces such as my interlocutors' homes, cafes and pubs, gym locker rooms and beauty salons. Just over half of my informants were females. Their age ranged between 19 and 81; only seven had a university education. During my fieldwork, I took part in all the public events related to the anniversary during the weekend of 15–17 November 2019 as a participant observer.

In response to my gentle probing about what they had been up to during the week (I was careful not to frame the question in a way that suggested they should mention the thirtieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution), the majority of my informants did not explicitly mention the anniversary. They preferred to tell me about their bank holiday weekend plans involving family reunions, Sunday family lunches, the last bike trips of the season or plans to work on their gardens, preparing flower beds for the coming winter.

My family and I will go on a biking trip to Hradec nad Moravici; enjoy the last warm days of the year.⁷

I don't have any big plans for the weekend. I'll have the family coming over this Sunday, so I am going to spend the whole day in the kitchen.⁸

The focus of their weekend plans was not the Opavian community of 'liberated citizens', nor state and national independence from the Soviet Union. Instead, the informants spoke of their families and emphasised the importance of spending quality time with them. The Velvet Revolution was seen as a potentially divisive topic best avoided. When I asked explicitly, I learnt that, for my informants, the promises of the Velvet Revolution and the subsequent transition from socialism to liberal democracy and capitalism had not been fulfilled. This disillusion, disappointment, frustration and sense of being left behind were reflected in the way they related to the commemorative events. Their narratives represented a variety of interpretations and understandings of the transition and its aftermaths, but three main themes emerged: economic deprivation; betrayal by political elites; and cultural threat represented by immigration.

Economic deprivation, elite betrayal and cultural threat

The first of the three interlinked narratives highlight the relative economic deprivation experienced by Opavians in the last 30 years. This narrative was more common in the older generation, those who were close to, or had already passed, the retirement age (60+). In their opinion, people working for the minimum wage (CZK13,350 per month in 2019, approximately €520), or even those with better qualifications and earning above this level, were unable to achieve living standards comparable to those they would have achieved during communism. While my informants agreed overall that it was not difficult to find employment in Opava, they also pointed out that it was very difficult to find well-

⁷Male real estate agent, 42, Opava, 12 November 2019.

⁸Female office worker, 60, Opava, 14 November 2019.

paid employment which would allow them to gain access to more expensive goods and services. The government's support for young families, or rather the lack of it, was a topic of particular concern:

They say that things are better [*už je líp*] but I don't think so. Nowadays I wouldn't be able to build a family house the way I could during socialism. Who can afford it nowadays? Back then, we were able to build our own house and move from the small flat in which we had lived previously. Almost everybody could afford it because young families were subsidised by the state. It was not normal that 30-year-old kids would still live with their parents, but nowadays it is normal. They cannot afford anything better, and their parents even need to support them from their retirement allowance.⁹

According to my older informants, the economic precarity faced by young people, and young families in particular, was the main reason why they left Opava and moved to bigger cities such as Brno or Prague. This narrative was reversed for the younger generation of Opavians, who cited more affordable housing and family support as the two main reasons for their decision to stay in Opava. While the present housing situation and the lack of state support were perceived negatively overall, older informants were more likely to see this as a reflection of the area's depopulation, while younger informants saw housing as a factor limiting mobility.

My partner and I, we considered leaving Opava to gain new experiences [*na zkušenu*]. But you know how expensive everything is in Prague or in Brno. You would need to have some savings to start somewhere new. We don't really have a financial buffer. We get by each month just fine, we can pay all our bills and stuff, but it's not enough to start saving. I wouldn't consider leaving and starting somewhere new with empty pockets. I would hate to share a flat with people I don't know, for instance.¹⁰

This theme of relative economic deprivation was expressed at the individual or family level, but also on community and national levels. As documented throughout the Central European region (cf. Vanhuyse 2006; Bohle & Greskovits 2012), my Opavian respondents thought that state-owned enterprises had been misappropriated and/or sold out to multinational cooperation in the 1990s. In their narratives, Opava used to have a plethora of well-functioning and profitable factories which not only provided employment for the locals but were a source of local pride. The fact that the state-owned companies were sold to large transnational investors and subsequently became privately owned by foreigners was a sensitive issue for many of my informants, often framed in terms of communal and/or national loss and injustice:

Opava used to be important, with all those factories and job opportunities. Do you know how many things were made here? We made everything, from varnishes to textiles, biscuits and heavy machinery. Everybody knew the name Minerva [a sewing machine company established in

⁹Female, retired head waitress, 81, Opava, 13 November 2019.

¹⁰Female beautician, 23, Opava, 19 November 2019.

1881]. We used to have one at home. But now, what products do you know that are made here? Opavia biscuits? That's not even ours anymore.¹¹

Even though Opavia, the Prague-based confectionery manufacturer and the largest producer of cereal biscuits and snack food in Central and Eastern Europe, has its main plant in Opava, Opavians rarely speak about it as a source of local pride. The reason is clear from the above vignette (and many other similar narrative accounts that I have collected during my longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork since 2013). In cases such as these, there is a distinction between 'being made in Opava' and 'belonging to Opavians'. In other words, Opavians still make Opavia biscuits, but they feel that they do not 'own' them anymore. This 'ownership' is collective and symbolic, not individual and literal. Holý (1996) demonstrated this native understanding of collective ownership with the example of how Czechs generally refer to their 'homeland', as their *vlast*. The word *vlast* is etymologically connected with the verb *vlastnit*, meaning 'to own'. 'Ownership' of one's *vlast* is an innate and inherited right linked to three criteria: being born in the Czech Lands, speaking Czech and being born of Czech parents (Holý 1996, pp. 64–5). As tempting as it might be to contextualise and analyse the Opavian case in Marxist terms of alienation from the means of production and from the product of workers' labour, this reading would be misleading. Rather, I suggest that the sense of their collective ownership—now lost due to the widespread privatisation of the 1990s—is derived from Czech nationalism, marked by its emphasis on homogeneity, cultural commonality and the notion of egalitarianism.

They embezzled all the wealth. All the politicians and the oligarchs. We had many well-functioning factories, mines, smelters ... and what happened to them? They were sold or embezzled during privatisation. Nothing is Czech anymore; we lost everything. And these people are still in power. And that's why they are against Babiš, because he finally holds them to account.¹²

The quote above is particularly interesting not only because of the reference to Babiš but also because it relates directly to the second narrative explaining why the 'revolutionary promises' had not materialised, namely, accusing the *polistopadovou* (post-November) elite of incompetence, corruption, arrogance and, ultimately, betrayal.

I don't watch the news because I cannot stand the faces [of politicians] and I won't celebrate the Velvet Revolution because I cannot stand that either. They are all criminals and should go to jail for what they've done to this country. They sold us out.¹³

The grand rhetoric of dissident intellectuals is a particular trigger. The Czechoslovak dissidents who acted as public leaders during the revolution and, very often, as elected politicians afterwards, were not seen as admirable or exemplary by my interlocutors. Firstly, they represent 'Pragocentrism' (Prague centrism). Generally, my interlocutors maintained that the historical narrative and commemorative activities highlighted only the

¹¹Retired male soldier, 74, Opava, 3 December 2019.

¹²Retired female factory worker on disability pension, 51, Opava, 18 November 2019.

¹³Retired female accountant, 68, Opava, 17 November 2019.

achievements and importance of the capital and its intellectual and cultural elite, while unfairly dismissing the sacrifices and accomplishments of citizens living in industrial and agricultural regions of the country.

I think it is still the same, you have those who talk and those who work. Prague attracts the former, the layabouts, while the rest of the country must slave to provide for them. I don't understand it.¹⁴

The privileged economic and social position enjoyed by the dissident intellectual elite during the socialist period was often mentioned. They were also accused of self-importance, of making unjustified claims of moral superiority, and of obsessively seeking veneration for their clandestine and, to some extent, 'antisocial' activities. When asked what they meant by 'antisocial' behaviour, some interlocutors referred to the fact that many dissidents did not have stable jobs and did not contribute to the nation's wellbeing through their labour. For example, Václav Havel's affluence and privileged, Prague-based, lifestyle was often mentioned by my informants:

What upsets me is the arrogance. You hear the same thing all the time. This one was a dissident, this one was a political prisoner, this one was publishing *samizdat*. And who the hell was working? These people with their money and protection from the West, with all their luxuries. Havel in his Mercedes. Who could have afforded it back then? They think that they are something better.¹⁵

Finally, the narrative of the cultural threat posed by immigration was in sharp contrast with the liberal rhetoric of the commemoration and its ideals. Anti-immigration and xenophobic sentiments are openly expressed by the inhabitants of Opava. The Velvet Revolution was often pinpointed by my interlocutors as a moment from which the cultural and social homogeneity and autonomy of the Czech nation became threatened, either by foreigners [*cizinci*] buying and/or destroying Czech factories and Czech products, as noted above, or by foreigners and migrants [*migranti*] being allowed to settle in the Czech Republic and thus threaten its cultural homogeneity:

Other cultures are incompatible with our values. These people are unable to assimilate. This *multikulti* [multikulti has a strongly pejorative connotation in Czech] can never work. It is unnatural.¹⁶

And,

I don't want any immigrants here. They don't want to work; they just want to take benefits. We need to take care of our own people first. Why don't we support orphanages, old people and people with handicaps instead?¹⁷

The frustration and discontent channelled through the narratives of economic deprivation, elite betrayal and cultural threat are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. They reflect

¹⁴Male builder, 39, Opava, 5 December 2019.

¹⁵Female factory worker, 42, Opava, 18 November 2019.

¹⁶Male research assistant, 29, Opava, 13 November 2019.

¹⁷Female trainee nurse, 21, Opava, 19 November 2019.

people's general dissatisfaction with the performance of post-1989 elites, as well as with the socioeconomic developments of the past 30 years. These concerns and growing resentments are well understood by the ANO political movement. The salience of anti-elitism is conducive to the narrative juxtaposition between the 'pure people' of Opava and the corrupt, post-1989 elite in Prague who have patronised, neglected and betrayed them. From the point of view of many of my interlocutors, the fact that Andrej Babiš was a member of the Communist Party actually worked to his advantage. Rather than claiming moral superiority like the dissidents of the socialist era, he had experienced the revolution not as an intellectual and political dissident but as an active communist—as did approximately every seventh adult person in the country.¹⁸

Many of my Opavian interlocutors with whom I interacted during my ethnographic fieldwork thought that Andrej Babiš could bring about positive change or, at least, they thought he stood a better chance of doing so than the established political elite. Despite their overall scepticism that the most important sociopolitical issues (migration, poor wages and social insecurity) could be addressed, they reflected positively on Babiš's general efficiency and managerial skills. His proclaimed work ethic, dubbed 'we don't chatter, we work' (*nekecáme, makáme*) reflects traditional Czech self-identity as a diligent and highly skilled people with industrial and technical talents, enshrined in the notion of 'golden Czech hands' (*zlaté české ručičky*). Drawing on this national self-conception and pride, Babiš portrays the Czechs as 'an able nation led by dullards' (*Jsmo schopný národ. Jen nás řídí nemehla*).¹⁹ Being 'hardworking' and 'able' are adjectives associated with the 'pure people' while the incompetent 'corrupt elites', who sold out the people and their wealth, are portrayed as 'leeches'. This moral dichotomy between the homogenised elite and the sphere of 'hard work' is embodied by the ordinary Czech people. In his autobiography, Andrej Babiš astutely constructs himself as a hard-working, self-made businessman who 'started his business from scratch and who worked from morning till evening and who slept in an office at Wenceslas Square' (Babiš 2017, p. 8).

Engaging in centrist managerial populism allows the ANO to garner support and votes from a variety of groups who have different reasons to be discontented, without the need to directly articulate a clear or consistent political programme. In comparison to the Polish PiS or the Hungarian *Fidesz*, ANO does not assume the typical radical populist role of a "purifier" fighting a lone and mostly unsuccessful battle against an allegedly corrupt, collusive post-communist establishments, on behalf of an ordinary people bearing the brunt of the upheavals of transition' (Stanley 2017, p. 143). ANO's position is moderate in comparison. It focuses primarily on the exploitation of voter dissatisfaction with the corrupt and incompetent political and intellectual elites who, according to my informants and ANO voters, are the ones to blame for relative (as opposed to absolute) economic deprivation and the looming cultural threat of migration.²⁰

¹⁸As of 1 January 1989, 11 months before the revolution and a little over 19 years since the Warsaw Pact army invaded Czechoslovakia, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had approximately 1.7 million members (Štverák 2018). Nearly every Czech citizen had a 'card-carrying communist' in the extended family.

¹⁹See the post on Andrej Babiš's Twitter account, 2 September 2013, available at: <https://twitter.com/andrejbabis/status/374423212165058560?lang=en>, accessed 4 October 2021.

²⁰Absolute deprivation refers to the lack of capacity to maintain basic necessities of life, such as food and shelter, whereas relative deprivation refers to a social phenomenon arising when individuals cannot afford what most others in their environment can (Bourguignon 1999).

Conclusion

Just below the surface of the general joviality of the celebration on Sunday, 17 November 2019, one could feel a note of anxiety and tension radiating from civil society actors, such as Million Moments for Democracy, who advocate liberal democratic values. From the perspective of a country with a history of parliamentary democracy, followed by decades of a totalitarian regime, the demise of the Velvet Revolution's promise is dispiriting. These concerns were expressed by a rally that took place on 16 November 2019 in Prague and attracted over 200,000 demonstrators.

The 'liberal-cosmopolitan' way of commemoration, advanced by memory agents such as Million Moments for Democracy, does not resonate well with the governing political elite, who made sure to stay out of the limelight as much as possible. During the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain, leading politicians seemed content to shun the commemoration. The reason for this general apathy on the part of the political elite is twofold. Firstly, because of the communist past of politicians such as the prime minister, Andrej Babiš, they cannot claim dissident intellectual credibility. Furthermore, a government that depends on the Communist Party's political support can hardly adopt the rhetoric of anti-communism. Secondly, and more pragmatically, there is limited political advantage in doing so.

As I showed in the localised case study of Opava, a peripheral town in the east of the republic, few citizens related to the triumphalist liberal-cosmopolitan narrative advanced by social actors such as Million Moments for Democracy. They felt that the celebration of Prague-based dissidents and intellectuals rather than the achievements of ordinary people was unjustified. This builds upon deeply entrenched images of Czech identity, emphasising a homogenous community of ordinary and equal individuals (Holý 1996). The feeling of being underappreciated, betrayed and left behind by the capital and politicians was palpable. It is this frustration and dissatisfaction that made Opavians unwilling to take part in public commemorative activities. Rather than being dissatisfied with democracy *per se*, my interlocutors questioned liberal democratic values such as the protection of minority rights (especially concerning Romany people, economic migrants and refugees). Above all, they expressed dissatisfaction with the performance of post-1989 intellectual and political elites and articulated their subjective experiences in terms of relative economic deprivation.

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