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Review article

The “Heretic” debate on European asylum quotas in the Czech Republic: A content analysis

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INFORMACE O ČLÁNKU

Received: 2017-08-30

Received in revised form:

2017-09-20

Accepted: 2017-09-25

Published online: 2017-11-21

Keywords:

Asylum

Migration

Quota

Politics

Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

This article examines the Czech political scene, by focusing on the attitude of the main political parties in the Czech Republic and their attitude towards the issue of migration quotas in the period between May 2015 and July 2017. It touches upon the migration quota issue by, first of all, shortly describing main characteristics of Czech political parties in terms of European integration in general and additionally by discussing the modes in which Czech political parties comprehended the migration quota issue and what sort of messages they communicate to the Czech public in this respect. Methodologically, the article rests upon both Content Analysis and, to a lesser degree, Discourse Analysis, and proves that Czech political parties did not only have negative views of the quota issue during the stated period, but some of them also referred to this particular matter when discussing the Czech position (and the future) in the European Union.

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Introduction

A large number of migrants entered the European Union in and by 2015, creating the so-called “migration crisis”. The EU had to address a number of problems connected with the crisis, inter alia also the fact that some countries were more heavily affected by it than others. Throughout the said year, the EU came up with several proposals on how to tackle the crisis. One of the solutions suggested was the European Commission’s proposal from May 2015 on the establishment of a fairer distribution system of asylum seekers throughout the Union – often referred to as “asylum quotas” by politicians in the member states. Terms

such as “migration quotas” and “migrant quotas” were also used. This method was to distribute asylum seekers to all EU states in order to ease the burden on Greece and Italy; the two states on the outer border of the EU which were the most affected by a high number of asylum seekers. The proposal thus tried to address the “injustice” of the Dublin system that put a huge burden on the countries on the EU external borders.

Although initially the scheme was opposed by a large number of European politicians, including some high-ranking politicians from large states such as Spain, France, and Poland [1], the proposal was nevertheless put to the vote in September 2015. An ordinary voting procedure was used, which meant that the decision was made by a qualified majority of the member states. The proposal was

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.kontakt.2017.09.010>

then approved by 23 member countries, with only four member states – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia – being against it, while Finland abstained.

The aim of this article is to, first of all, analyze the attitudes of the main political parties in the Czech Republic towards the quota system from the moment the proposal was put on the table until July 2017, and additionally to indicate the discursive meanings created and transmitted in this regard. The text will thus map the political situation and the discussion in the Czech Republic after the proposal was drawn up, before the decision of the Council, and finally right after the proposal was adopted by the Council. The article does not stop here, but also discusses the quota method in terms of its effect on the respective political parties' understanding of and their views on the relationship between the Czech Republic and the EU, ending in the beginning of the procedure against Prague (and also against Budapest and Warsaw) on the side of the European Commission in 2017. In order to achieve the goals of the article, the authors have decided to use both Content Analysis, and to a minor degree, Discourse Analysis in order to examine how Czech political parties communicated with the public on the quota system, how their attitude was related to it, and additionally how it influenced their general approach to the issue of European integration. This study is limited to the positions of party leaderships of chosen parliamentary subjects, it does not in any way discuss dissenting views within the respective parties, and the authors are well aware of this particular limitation. However, it was not the intention of the authors to cover or analyze the dissenting views in any shape or form.

Based on the above-mentioned proposal, the authors have set two research questions to be examined in this short study. The first is: "What was the attitude of Czech political parties towards the quota mechanism, and how did they refer to it while communicating with the public?" This particular question allows for the identification of how the parties addressed the issue of the quota in their public statements. The second research question is: "How was the party attitude to the quota mechanism related to the parties' general position towards European integration?" This question has been phrased in this manner so as to allow for an insight on whether the quota mechanism influenced the parties' general attitude on European integration. For the purpose of the study, the authors have addressed two sources of data: the main portion of data was acquired upon the analysis of national newspapers, both in their printed and electronic versions, in the period between mid-May 2015 and July 2017, where interviews and opinions of high-profile party members on the matter of the quotas were identified. These sources are listed in the bibliographical section of the article and were all accessed in the period between June and July 2017. Additionally, the second source of data were the official webpages of the political parties, as these pages included, among other documents, public statements, proclamations, and official positions of the parties on the quota mechanism. Last but not least, where possible, the authors also tried to address the social media, such as the Facebook and Twitter accounts of party leadership members, as these represent

ever more important channels of communication between politicians and the public.

Czech political parties and their attitudes towards European integration

First, it is necessary to discuss the attitudes of Czech political parties to put the debate over the quotas into a broader political context. Therefore, this section of the article introduces a short examination of the general position of Czech political subjects towards European integration, focussing on the composition of the parliament and the individual perceptions on the EU by the respective parties. This concise information also allows for the second research question to be answered later.

The current composition of the Lower Chamber of Parliament consists of three governmental coalition parties (all acronyms of political parties referred to and used in this article are given in their original form as they appear in Czech language) – Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) with 50 MPs, ANO 2011 with 47 MPs, Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL) with 14 MPs, and the opposition parties; Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) with 33 MPs, TOP 09 with 26 MPs, Civic Democratic Party (ODS) with 16 MPs, and Dawn – National Coalition (Úsvit – Národní koalice) with 7 MPs (Dawn – National Coalition is the successor to the Dawn of Direct Democracy, party with 14 MPs who split from the original party in 2015 to create Dawn – National Coalition and Liberty and Direct Democracy) The Liberty and Direct Democracy (SPD) party does not have a club of its own in the Chamber, as it has only 3 MPs at the moment. Due to the fact that at the time of writing of this article it has been near to or over the parliamentary threshold of 5% in most of the polls, the authors have decided to include it in the study.

While we can consider ČSSD, KDU-ČSL, and TOP 09 as the pro-European parties [2], the position of both KSČM and ODS is significantly different; although not necessarily anti-European. ODS, often labelled as Eurosceptic [3, 4], has concentrated on the economic arguments and criticized a further transfer of competencies from nation states to the Union. However, the party has never contested the general principles of European integration, and it has never seriously considered a possible withdrawal of the Czech Republic from the EU [5]. The Communists, for their part, were not pro-European and were not in favour of Czech accession to the EU, but since 2004 when the Czech Republic entered the Union, they have never seriously questioned the Czech Republic's membership in the EU. The party position is in fact rather contradictory. While in general the communists are usually Eurosceptic, when it comes to the specific issues this party has actually preferred the EU's supranational mechanism [4]. This is mainly due to their acceptance of the fact that taking part in the EU decision-making process through participation in the European Parliament also means possible cooperation with clearly pro-European Social Democrats [2].

The positions of both ANO 2011 and the Dawn – National Coalition have not yet been adequately covered by the academic literature, as both subjects are rather new

political actors. To identify their position on European integration, one has to look into their own strategic documents. Analyzing the election programme of ANO 2011, one can easily conclude that the party is generally pro-European. The Dawn – National Coalition, emerging as a part of the former Dawn of Direct Democracy, does have a clear position on the EU according to its programme. However, being a spiritual successor of the Dawn of Direct Democracy, one must also address the party statements before the EP elections in 2014, where the party considered the “idea of a European House as good” and “did not want to destroy it, but to reform it [...] to be a functioning democratic body [...] while respecting the uniqueness of local and regional communities living in the member states” [6]. However, the migration crisis has heavily changed the attitude with the party being more openly anti-European.

SPD was formally established just after the start of the migration crisis in June 2015. As such, its opinion on the European Union was strongly biased by the crisis, and one of its goals was to call for a referendum on the possible exit of the Czech Republic from the Union [7].

Crucial domestic developments in the Czech debate over quotas

Although the migration wave largely missed the Czech Republic by and in 2015, a general perception of migrants coming with the then current wave of migration was and has remained largely negative. According to the polls carried out by the Institute of Sociology of Czech Academy of Sciences in 2016, 69% of the population answered either “definitely not” or “rather not” when asked: “Should refugees from the Middle East and North Africa be accepted in the Czech Republic?” [8]. Although migration has not been an important topic in modern Czech history, with the latest migration crisis this issue has become a magnet, attracting considerable attention, with large sections of Czech society considering migration to be no less than a (serious) threat. When translated into politics, this kind of attitude means that the topic of migration has indeed become a much-debated issue.

Due to a relatively limited space, it is not possible to go into depth on the general position of Czech political parties on refugees and illegal migration within the context of the said crisis. There have been differing opinions in the Czech political spectrum, ranging from the relatively more open positions of ČSSD and TOP 09 at the start, through the stricter ODS position, the rather inconsistent position of ANO 2011, to the very hostile position of the Dawn – National Coalition which, by the way, would make (illegal) migration and stopping it as one of its key issues in domestic politics. For simplicity, you can find the authors’ evaluations of the positions of the Czech political parties towards the said crisis and the related issues based on the content of the parties’ statements in Table 4. However, the debate over the quota mechanism that the authors have analyzed started before the European Commission presented the quota proposal in mid-May 2015, with practically all of the Czech political parties siding against the mechanism. The then argument of the Czech Prime Minister, Bohuslav Sobotka, was that “resettlement cannot

solve the roots” of the problem, and that the “EU should help in the countries most affected outside of the EU” [9].

The debate naturally intensified once the proposal came up, and even more as the September Council where the mechanism was to be voted on, approached. All the Czech political parties at that time supported the government position to vote against the proposal, a move that Prague coordinated with its partners within the Visegrad Group – a group of four Central and Eastern European countries consisting of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. In the end, Poland voted for the proposal, accenting its general pro-European direction. Romania joined the other three Visegrad countries in voting against it, and Finland decided to abstain. The Council’s decision was then criticized across most of the political spectrum in the Czech Republic. What differed heavily were the rhetoric and the steps proposed by the individual parties. Therefore, the content of the parties’ communication with the public shall be analyzed in due course, leaving the possible legal steps to mostly be discussed later in the article.

The leader of ČSSD and the Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka put himself into a difficult position before the Council meeting, as he fiercely criticized the quotas as a possible solution to the crisis. After the decision, his main message was “not to be hysterical” and “not to further increase the tension in the Union” [10]. He also called for a cooperative position in order for “Europe not to break off due to the migration crisis” in an official PM statement [11]. Analyzing the other statements of the ČSSD leadership, the main message was the need for cooperation within the EU and a fear of isolation of the Czech Republic. At the same time, Sobotka pushed for solving the problems in the countries of the origin (of migrants) a number of times. Since 2016, the rhetoric has changed, and the ČSSD emphasized more the negatives of quotas and the security risks attached to it.

Another coalition member, ANO 2011, focused more on a security level of the migration crisis. The main message to the public in its statements, mostly through its leader Andrej Babiš, was “closing down the borders” [12] and quotas being a “nonsense” [13]. In 2016, Mr. Babiš further accentuated the security connotations of migration. Last but not least, the smallest coalition partner, KDU-ČSL, even threatened to initiate a lawsuit before the decision was even taken. Its main argument was that the decision was in breach of the principle of sovereignty [14]. “Sovereignty” as the focal point continued to be mentioned a number of times after the decision had been taken at the European level. The leader of the party, Pavel Bělobrádek, also later compared the quota mechanism to Munich in 1938, when Czechoslovakia was given to Germany by its allies (with the country having no voice in the decision) [15].

Of the opposition parties, it was TOP 09 that had a more conciliatory approach. While the party considered quotas as “a mistake” [16], its former leader, Karel Schwarzenberg, noted that despite the quotas not making sense, the result was an outcome of voting according to the valid rules and democracy within the EU and that the Czechs should stop with their “continuous bleating” [17]. Most of the leadership did not support the quota mechanism though. Other opposition parties were much more critical of the

decision. In the discourse of ODS, the main keywords were “sovereignty” and “security”. The leader of the party, Petr Fiala, asked the government to “use all necessary legal and political means to make the decision on quotas invalid” [16]. KSČM, for its part, made a similar claim by being even more critical on the topic, using the term “dictatorship” on a number of occasions, and once the KSČM leader Vojtěch Filip even said the Czechs are “not pupils of Brussels” [18]. The rhetoric of the Dawn – National Coalition was extremely critical as migration has been a core topic of the party. The party also often spoke about the “dictatorship” and even questioned the membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union; proposing an EU exit referendum [19].

Tomio Okamura, the leader of the SPD, was probably the most vocal opponent of quotas, criticizing them in every possible way. Mr. Okamura often used his Facebook profile to do this. Having more than 250,000 followers, a number exceeding by far any other Czech politician, he often called quotas “treason” [20]. Based on the migration problems he also organized a petition to hold a referendum on the Czech exit from the EU and claimed to have gained more than 100,000 signatures [21].

Taking legal action against the quotas?

Soon after the favourable decision was taken in the Council a debate started in the Czech Republic about whether it should launch a lawsuit against the quota mechanism. Just after the decision had been made, two member states, Hungary and Slovakia, indicated that they would sue the Union, as according to them the mechanism was in breach of the principle of sovereignty, and the positions of national parliaments in the EU were not adequately taken into account. Czech political parties and even the government itself remained divided on the issue.

Shortly after the decision, two larger governmental coalition parties – ČSSD and ANO 2011 – were against the lawsuit, while the head of their minor coalition partner KDU-ČSL, Pavel Bělobrádek, said shortly after the decision that the Czech Republic should launch a lawsuit [22]. The situation changed in November 2015 when the leader of ANO 2011, Andrej Babiš, claimed that the Czech Republic should reconsider its position and join Hungary and Slovakia in the lawsuit. He stated that: “It is not possible that only the big states decide in the Union. They have to listen to the small states too.” [23] This change of attitude was rejected by the other two coalition partners. While the argument of the ČSSD was that “the Czech Republic would lose its position in the EU” [24], the argument of the KDU-ČSL was that the move was “late in coming [...] and the Czech Republic would look a bit silly” [23]. TOP 09 was the only opposition party that did not call for the initiation of a lawsuit throughout the period covered. All of the other opposition parties criticized the position of the government in not launching one. The main reason for this attitude could be the difference in their overall positions towards the EU. TOP 09, for that matter, has had a very different stance than the other opposition parties in this regard.

The situation changed in April 2016, when even the Czech PM Sobotka said in a TV debate that he did not rule

out the possibility of a lawsuit against the quota mechanism [25]. At the time of writing this text, the situation remains quite open as the European Court of Justice has not issued its ruling on the case brought about by Slovakia and Hungary. Moreover, in June 2017, the EU launched a formal infringement procedure against the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary for failing to comply with the 2015 agreement on migrant redistribution [26]. Only a few days before the start of the procedure, the Czech government openly declared it would not accept a single migrant based on quotas, with the reason being the “dysfunctional nature of quotas and the worsening security situation” [27].

Outright refusal of the quota system?

Having established a brief insight into the attitudes of the Czech political parties, the main domestic developments on the issue of the quotas, as well as the possibility of a lawsuit being initiated on behalf of the Czech Republic, it has become clear that the parties had a chiefly negative approach to the issue of the quotas. In that regard, this and the following section of the article will analyze this negative approach, as well as provide more detail by determining which negative meanings were created and transmitted to the public in this process. It is essential to note that issues framed and transmitted in political discourse may often be presented by political actors in such ways that can influence (crucial) changes in public attitudes in the so-called process of ‘securitization’. This is essentially the process in which socially sensitive issues tend to get exploited to the benefit of those who are engaged in the creation and transmission of such meanings, i.e. in most cases political actors/elites [28]. Last but not least, it is not only this negative approach that will be analyzed in this section of the article, but its relation between the issue of the quotas and Czech political parties’ comprehension of the EU integration as well, since, as is shown later, there was an important discursive link between the two.

In order to provide a more comprehensive answer to both research questions, a Content Analysis (CA) tool called *AntConc* [29] has been used, as it represents a very useful tool for computerized analysis of corpora. CA has been put to use in this particular research in a capacity to discover respective patterns of language, as well as its specificities used by the political parties in their discourse (the target discourse) on the given issue. The point here is that this sort of analysis allows for various quantifications of language patterns to be arrived at, which means that the words and expressions most often used can be identified. In addition to this, CA is also very helpful in not only discovering the frequently used terms, but can additionally indicate ways/modes and contexts in which respective terms were used. Last but not least, it should be noted that all data was treated as lower case, as is quite common in this kind of analysis.

Additionally, *AntConc* as the analytical tool provides an insight into the broader context of the language used, permitting for wider and more in-depth conclusions to be arrived at in this regard. Additionally, results of the CA provide basis for a more complex analysis, for instance Discourse Analysis (DA), to be performed if

needed. Discourse analysis is an umbrella term for various approaches to analyzing the use of language in context, i.e. it essentially stands for “the analysis of language ‘beyond the sentence’” [30]. The authors have decided to use CA in this particular research, although there are several points which may be characterized as belonging to a set of methods as used in the DA. For that matter, the article affords rather brief information on the dominant meanings used/created in the political parties’ discourse on the given topic, by analyzing the information provided at these three meaningful levels of language: 1 – Lexemic (level of a word), 2 – Phrasemic (level of a phrase), and finally 3 – Proposemic (level of a sentence).

As for the analysis itself, it is, first of all, necessary to mention that all primary data had to be converted from .html format (common for internet pages) into doc. files, which were then converted to .txt files that were fed into AntConc. This means that some unnecessary content had to be removed from the files, for instance technical notes, which resulted in the pure text left behind. In order to make the analysis more plausible, the authors asked for the permission to use Czech National Corpus [31] and received it, for which they are more than grateful. Since the corpus file was in a format inappropriate for AntConc, several operations aimed at the conversion of the file had to be done in order to make the file usable for this research. Without this particular file, used as the reference corpus to identify the unusually frequent words (keywords) in the target discourse, this article could not have been possible. Additionally, the authors used Stop Words List. This consisted of *function words* that are most widely used in languages in general, but bear little meaning for this research, such as conjunctions, pronouns, etc. Listing most common terms and expressions and showing their frequency did not only provide a sense of direction for further investigation, but chiefly resulted in an initial understanding of the language used.

To start with, the authors identified the following words that were the most commonly used in the target discourse. The results clearly indicate that the political parties spent considerable time discussing issues related to the quota system by deliberating in more depth on the other terms chiefly related to it. As suspected by the authors, upon initial screening of the primary data, terms such as “immigrant”, “migration”, “freedom”, “member (states)”, “negotiations”, “refusal”, “illegal”, “borders”, “security”, “refugees”, “Islam” and “EU” heavily dominated the target discourse at that particular time. It is obvious that the political parties aimed at communicating an important message to their voters on the given issue, and thus engaged in the construction of particular (negative) meanings on the issue of the quotas.

Although all of the political parties analyzed here referred to the quota system in largely negative terms, only one political party, Tomio Okamura’s SPD, used almost every occasion possible to touch on the respective issue.

Additionally, the authors decided to inspect the context in which the term “quotas” was used, and the result is as follows: in most cases, the term was used in a negative context, outlining the overall refusal of the political parties to accept the mechanism. The term was often used in the

context with negative expressions, where phrases and expressions such as “the quotas are the wrong way”, “the quotas cannot solve the crisis”, “the quotas are not the solution”, “the quotas cannot/will not work,” and others that also appeared are shown in Table 1. There was an almost unanimous acceptance across the Czech political spectrum that the quota system would not be the right solution to the crisis, and that it was essentially worthless. In that regard, the quota system was by some of the parties – mostly KSČM, Dawn and SPD – communicated and presented to the Czech public in highly negative terms, thus constructing an image of the Czech Republic refusing the “dictatorship of Brussels,” which was the most common collocation of the term “dictatorship.”

Table 1 – Immediate context of the term “quota”

1. Quotas are the wrong way
2. Quotas are not the solution to the crisis
3. Obligatory quotas are not the solution
4. We have the right to decide
5. Quotas do not solve the real problems
6. Quotas will not work
7. Quotas are nonsense

Negative perceptions of the quota system and the immigration issue were often discursively presented as being “security threats,” as Table 2 suggests. Therefore, the expression of “security” was in most cases examined and presented in the context of “security of our citizens/our country/Europe/EU”. This is an interesting example of how discursive opposition between “us” as Europeans (and additionally EU citizens), and “them” as the incomers and immigrants, is created and transmitted in the target discourse. This can potentially lead to, as already mentioned, the securitization of sensitive political and social issues and unfortunately also to the exploitation of these.

Table 2 – Immigration and quotas as the “Security issue”

1. Security of our citizens
2. Security of our country
3. Security and defence
4. Security of Europe
5. Security of the EU
6. Security of Czech Republic
7. Security for us
8. Security and illegal migration
9. Security and threats
10. Security and interests

The quotas and Czech membership in the EU

As for the second research question on the party attitudes towards the European integration issue in the light of the quota mechanism, the analytical tool has indicated that the quota mechanism was likewise very commonly associated with the (current) Czech position in the EU, as well as the

future of the country in the bloc itself. This is something that the authors also suspected upon initial analysis of the primary materials, and the AntConc analysis has proved the authors' assumptions correct, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 – The quotas and the Czech Republic in the EU

1. Czech exit from the EU
2. External borders of the EU
3. Member states of the EU
4. Referendum on exiting the EU
5. To prevent council decision
6. Union forced the quotas upon the Czech Republic
7. Wrong decision
8. Czech interests in the EU

The most vocal proponents of the Czech Republic leaving the Union has been the SPD of Tomio Okamura, who have called for a referendum on leaving the Union many times (and almost in every one of its official statements). Overall the terms such as “quota”, “EU”, “integration”, and “illegal immigration” were often brought into direct association, whereby the context was almost always negative. Hence, these messages by the political parties were framed not only along the (hard)line of SPD's referendum on leaving the Union (in all honesty, this is the only party having gone this far in its anti-EU rhetoric), but predominantly along the lines: 1 – the need “to protect the EU borders”, 2 – “the EU forcing the Czech Republic to accept the quotas”, 3 – the need for the Czech Republic to “defend itself against the quotas”, and 4 – the need for the Czech Republic to “defend its interests in the EU”. In that respect, it may be concluded that the political parties clearly invested effort in communicating the issue of the quotas to the Czech

public in negative terms, but also by evaluating the Czech Republic's position in the EU through the respective quota lens and depicting it accordingly. Consequently, there was an obvious link that was established between the two issues and discursively repeated as such. The quota issue was directly associated, or at least mentioned in such a context, with “illegal immigration”, and the two issues became tightly linked in the target discourse. Once linked, they continued to create one specific and highly negative meaning that was transmitted to the public.

Last but not least, the political parties also often equated the quota system with the need to have the ‘voices of smaller EU states’ (V4 states, for instance) heard and respected. In that regard, it is certain that the issue of the quotas has influenced the political parties to see the functioning (and possibly the future) of the bloc in a different kind of way; as they had seen they could be overvoted within the structures of the EU on an issue they perceived as important. For the sake of the argument, it is also necessary to mention that Czechs, more than any other EU nation, see illegal immigration as one of the biggest problems the EU has been facing, with more than 96% of people considering the creation of further measures to stop illegal migrant flows as a must [32]. This attitude, as mentioned earlier, is indeed peculiar, primarily given the fact that the country has not experienced any major problem stemming from the said crisis, apart from the ongoing proceedings against Prague in refusing the quota system. In that regard, this short examination of the quota and migration issues will hopefully serve as an invitation to a much broader and more in-depth examination of the anti-immigration attitudes in the Czech Republic, as well as the country's political parties' attitudes to the broader context of the EU integration process (Table 4).

Table 4 – Positions of the Czech political parties towards European integration and the quotas

	ČSSD	ANO 2011	TOP09	ODS	KSČM	KDU-ČSL	Úsvit	SPD
Mandates	50	47	26	16	33	14	8	3
Position towards EU	Pro-European	Partly pro-European, populist	Pro-European	Euro-realist	Divided	Pro-European	Strongly eurosceptic	Strongly eurosceptic
Lawsuit	NO/possible	NO/strong YES	Strong NO	Strong YES	Strong YES	YES/NO	Strong YES	Strong YES
Keywords	Isolation, cooperation, EU, security	Security, borders, nonsense	Principles, EU	Sovereignty, borders	Dictate, sovereignty	Sovereignty	Sovereignty, dictate	Treason, sovereignty
Solution	European	European	European	European	European	European	EU exit	EU exit

Note: Source building on Hrabálek [33], with new AntConc results and years 2016 and 2017 covered.

Conclusion

The quota mechanism was negatively perceived by all parliamentary Czech political parties, yet their rhetoric and their positions on how to proceed with the Council decision differed heavily. The aim of this article was not only to indicate the attitudes of the main political parties in

the Czech Republic towards the quota system in the given period, but additionally to present a more comprehensive insight into the main meanings of the negative attitude of Czech political parties in this regard. Furthermore, the article has also indicated a considerable correlation in the target discourse of Czech political parties on the issue of the quotas and the Czech position (as well as possibly its future) in the EU. Two research questions have been

answered in the article: on the one hand, the issue of the attitude of Czech political parties towards the quota mechanism and respective communication to the public in this regard. Additionally, the party attitude to the quota mechanism in relation to the parties' general position towards European integration has also been approached.

Therefore, in terms of the conclusions reached, if one was to evaluate the individual positions of Czech political parties and their attitude to the quota system, one would notice that the position of the ruling parties was the following: ČSSD, to begin with, was heavily affected by their general pro-European stance. Even though the party did not agree with the quotas, its leadership chose a rather moderate rhetoric from the start, with the European interest often being mentioned and a European solution often being sought. The stance did evolve though, with the ČSSD PM later admitting the possibility of a lawsuit, and being more strongly against the mechanism since 2016. Evaluating the position of ANO has proved to be much more difficult, as the party lacked consistency both on the issue of the migration quotas itself and in terms of the possibility of a lawsuit – the party, however, changed its position in the direct aftermath of the Council decision and also in the long-term perspective towards more critical, with its leader Andrej Babiš often calling it “nonsense”. The position of KDU-ČSL on the quotas was in contradiction to their general attitude towards the EU. Normally, KDU-ČSL is a strongly pro-European party, but its position towards the quotas was negative, with “sovereignty” being the most important message in their discourse, with the party stating its readiness for a possible lawsuit early after the decision.

As for the opposition parties, TOP 09 followed its generally pro-European line, being unhappy with the outcome of the voting and against the mechanism, yet respecting the European rules more than other Czech parties. It was the only Czech party that actually never openly mentioned the possibility of a lawsuit against the quotas. In the case of ODS, in general a very similar rhetoric about the quotas and about the EU was seen. “Sovereignty” was often mentioned in the discussion about the quotas, with sovereignty and the transfer of competences being matters that ODS was very concerned about in the process of the European integration. This particular position was also the main reason for the support of the lawsuit on the ODS side. KSČM, Dawn – National Coalition, and finally the Party of Direct Democracy heavily criticized the decision, all calling it nothing less than a “dictate”. All three parties also called for a lawsuit against the quota mechanism. The difference in this respect was their position on the EU membership: while KSČM did not question the EU membership as such, the Party of Direct Democracy and Dawn – National Coalition both intended for a referendum on an exit from the EU. Both the SPD and Dawn – National Coalition have been strongly Eurosceptic parties and their “hard” position on the quotas at that time, and even now for that matter, should not be surprising at all.

Last but not least, it is also important to note that the Czech political parties engaged in generating a negative image of the quota system as the preferred way of solving the migration crisis in the EU, and opposed this solution

bitterly in their discourse. Additionally, they also engaged in transmitting chiefly negative images to the Czech public and formulated such an understanding of the quota issue by discussing and tagging it as being essentially anti-Czech, against national interests, and ultimately anti-European. More than that, they also repeated on numerous occasions the grave security risks in terms of accepting the quota system, and also portrayed the perils of the then immigration waves. Additionally, they also discursively managed to link the quota system to the overall (future) of the European project and debated the Czech position in the bloc itself. Hence, it is clear that there was a strong relation between the position of Czech political subjects on the European integration and their position on the immigration quotas. Overall, it is certain that Euroscepticism in general tended to prevail, and largely affected the target discourse on the quotas and the Czech future in the European Union. In that regard, it will indeed be interesting to follow the evolution of the procedure started by the European Commission, and its further effect on the respective discourse in the Czech Republic.

Conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Internal Grant Agency of the Mendel University, via the grant: “Role Evropské unie v mezinárodním prostředí se zaměřením na vztahy s rozvojovými zeměmi a řešení problémů související s jejich rozvojem” (IGA 3/2014). The authors would like to thank Dr. Eva Taterová for her precious comments on the article.

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