

POPREBEL: Digital Ethnography in the Czech online spaces

Phase I (Feb – April 2021):

The first phase of my ethnographic fieldwork consisted primarily of in-depth and semi-structured interviews, focused on the socioeconomic impacts of the covid crisis in the spheres of labour and care. I aimed at getting a snapshot into the nature and diversity of the lived circumstances and experiences of the pandemic and its effects. Developing from these insights, I set out to capture the participants' changing political attitudes, beliefs and behaviours and establish a broader connection between the covid crisis and the new emerging forms of populist politics. My participants have been sampled through a snowballing method, which targeted primarily non-city dwelling and non-university educated demographics.

Preliminary and generalised findings:

The covid crisis has deeply impacted all spheres of life. Alongside the material changes at work and household levels, participants commonly expressed its negative psychological effects→ feelings of isolation, anxiety and hopelessness, digitalisation of all their social interactions, loss of their futures and opportunities (particularly among the younger generation).

- In some cases (primarily middle-class participants who could work from home), the pandemic has brought some positive changes to their lifestyles - finding more time for themselves (new hobbies and interests) and for their families.



The household dynamics

- The extent of ease with which participants could adjust to the 'lockdown' measures has been largely dependent on their socioeconomic status (question of housing / space, available technology, childcare duties etc.).
- Very few female participants named the phenomenon of increased pressure /burden to perform household duties, even when it was clearly present.

Labour

- Large disproportion between those allowed to stay at home-office and those having to attend their workplace.
- Accounts describing lack of safety measures at industrial workplaces. Cases of management instigating their employees to lie at track and trace or even worse to keep attending work, even if tested positive.
- Direct exposure to the virus – shift in mentality – you cannot be scared of the virus, if your everyday work / livelihood necessitates being in close proximity to it.
- A wider societal debate on whether a full lockdown / shutdown of big industries should have been implemented. Economy > Human lives.

National identity

- Czech people described as inward looking, envious and individualistic (weak sense of collective identity).
- Lacking an international perspective + intolerant to difference.
- Tendency to always somehow circumvent the rules.
- Germany repeatedly described in the manner of an unfulfilled aspiration (politically, economically, socio-culturally)



Political views

- Regardless of socioeconomic standing, age, gender, or the extent to which corona impacted their lives, almost every participant expressed a sense of frustration and disillusionment with the current government and the political representation at large.
- The government has failed to manage the ongoing crisis and repeated the same mistakes over and over, due to a pressure from the public (and the parliamentary opposition) to ease the restrictions. It acted in a blatantly populist manner, which has cost thousands and thousands of lives.
- Those who have been dissatisfied with the government before, see this failure to deal with the crisis as telling of their incompetence.
- Those not so overly critical of the gov., account these failures to the strong pressure of the public and the opposition (anti-Babis movement).
- None could name any other existing party, which they think could manage the covid crisis better (we are faced with an unprecedented situation).
- Majority of the politicians are corrupt, incompetent and lazy. They should be doing much more for their citizens, considering how much they get paid (from citizens' taxes).
- Czech parliamentary politics hollowed of any morality or ethics.
- Sense of a large gap between the politicians / their manner of 'doing politics' and the people. Lack of representation – majority of the participants, when asked, said they did not know who to vote. There does not seem to be any political party which would represent their interests (however varied they are).



Political institutions

- Loss of trust in state institutions.
- The pandemic has unveiled to the “middle classes” (those who, often for the first time, found themselves in need of state support because of covid), that the social welfare system is designed in such a way, to make the receipt of benefits extremely difficult and invasive.
- Stigmatization around receiving state support.
*in Czech, as well as in other CEE countries, social welfare constitutes a lower % of the GDP, in comparison to western Europe. Recipients of state welfare are also subjected to more rigorous controls and checks ([source](#)).
- Widely circulating discussions on the extent, form and amount of state compensations during the pandemic. A notion that if the state paid the full compensation, people would abuse it.
*The discourse of nemakačenko - ‘lazy workers’ and ‘welfare abuser’ is extremely pervasive in the Czech context, and is part of the dominant neoliberal ideology, which has been strongly cultivated since the era of privatisation in the 90s.
- Fears over growing state debt – the Czech economy cannot afford to compensate for the loss of income (re: covid). Fear over the uncertain futures – global financial crisis.



Covid conspiracies

- Almost all participants mentioned to have been exposed to some disinformation campaigns and covid related conspiracies circulating in the digital sphere.
- A general sense of mystery surrounding the epidemic. There might be something 'bigger' going on behind the scenes that we (as regular people) do not know about.
- Covid as a tool to achieve a profound geopolitical transformation at a global scale.
- Bringing new opportunities for capital accumulation.
- Frequent mentions of covid as a biological weapon, artificially invented to curtail worldwide population growth.
- General mistrust and uncertainty around vaccination.

Phase II. (April 21 – present):

In the second phase of my fieldwork, I intend to focus explicitly on online spaces where, to put it more broadly, Czech netizens express their views re: the covid crisis and its political handling. While during the first phase of my fieldwork, I approached the research questions via the problematic of covid and its socioeconomic impacts, I now intend to shift the focus on their political expressions in the online spaces. In doing so, I will use the outcomes of my initial research to better contextualise the multiple interactions / discussions taking place on the web.

Participant focus:

- a. People expressing their political views on social media (Discussion forums on fb groups of key politicians and political parties, different media platforms and the main information channels)

- b. People seeking covid-related medical advice online (FB self-help groups, COVID-related health advice etc.)

// This method was chosen in order to try and emulate the Edgeryders platform where people would come and discuss their opinions re: covid and politics.

Preliminary and generalized findings:

The series of covid-19 waves, changing governmental policies and official stances, confusing and hectic restrictions, one of the highest rates of covid-related deaths, the covid-related corruption and a strong pro-vaccination campaign (introduction of Green Passes) have significantly shaped people's perception of the pandemic, the government and its legitimacy.

This encouraged the creation of a series of new political movements and parties, defining themselves based on their sharp critique towards the government and its handling of the pandemic.

The ongoing online discussions re: politics and covid were largely shaped by the then upcoming parliamentary elections which took place in October 2022 and saw the loss of A.Babis' technocratic populist party ANO. I wrote a brief summary of the elections and its implications for the future [here](#).

Creation of new anti-covid political subjects – brief description

- The Czech online spaces dealing with the pandemic have seen a large increase of anti-covid fb groups, forums, civil society resistance movements and political parties: several of them entered the October parliamentary elections but none in the end made it to the parliament.
- Nevertheless, despite their electoral debacle they continue mobilizing both within and outside of the online spaces and have managed to organize fairly-large manifestations and demonstrations, focused primarily on active resistance towards compulsory vaccination, green passes and against school discrimination of unvaccinated children.
- While these groups are varied, it is possible to trace their links (of the main ones) to far-right groups (both financially and ideologically).
- Their public statements and discourses are often largely anti-globalist, anti-EU, against the 'big pharma' with features of anti-Semitism... they call for national sovereignty, rule of law, personal freedoms and building of one's own immunity.
- They are openly calling for the overthrow of current political elites, if necessary by the means of direct action, and mark the national and global elites as corrupt and against the needs of the 'ordinary people' (we can therefore characterize their discourses as highly populist).

Perspectives of the supporters of the new anti-covid political movements – common patterns

- For majority of my participants who sympathize with the emergent 'anti-covid' movement, the pandemic represents a turning point in their political and public engagement. While previously they haven't taken an active interest in matters of politics, the past months have forced them to start actively engaging.
- Many of them talk about a sense of 'awakening', 'break-through', 'enlightenment' as they were acquiring information from alternative sources (which are by the mainstream discourse marked as disinformation) and started understanding 'the real point' of this pandemic.
- The most commonly occurring theories about covid were following (from least to most extreme):
 - Covid was artificially created in Wuhan laboratories, certain individuals and institutions have largely benefited from it - business opportunity, 'big pharma' expansion, it was created to restrict our freedoms and test our obedience, the objective is to reduce population in the light of overpopulation and welfare state retrenchment, it is a 'biological war', the vaccination will make people infertile, it will modify their cells, make us obedient servants to the big pharma companies.
- While the extent to which the participant fully believe these theories varies, all of them are convinced that there are some hidden motivations behind the pandemic that 'us' normal people cannot see.
- While previously these participants were perceiving political developments in the country more passively and often did not participate in elections, this year they saw it as necessary to take more active stance in politics and in public life.

Perspectives of the supporters of the new anti-covid political movement – common characteristics

- Majority of the anti-vaxx supporters, particularly with the more extreme views can be generally characterized as of lower-class background, often from smaller towns, whose work or household situation has significantly worsened as a result of the pandemic.
- They view the 1989 capitalist transition very critically, particularly the early years of privatization, economic corruption and the thefts of the political class.
- While the majority views the socialist past equally critically and acknowledges that personal freedoms and rights were largely restricted, some of them also think nostalgically of the past times of 'order, security and equality'.
- The institution of the EU and our membership in it is seen very critically:
 - CEE countries hold inferior status to the rest of the western member states.
 - The quality of our products, particularly food has sharply declined, including the destruction of national agricultural produce.
 - EU bureaucrats are seen as detached from reality and needs of 'ordinary people'.
 - Highly sceptical of the progressivist ideologies – green, pro LGBTQ, migration etc.
- Strong sense of longing for the 'glorious national past' of being self-reliant, self-subsistent and when the Czech national production and industry had a national prestige.

Politics, political parties, elections

- Across social strata and political spectrum there is a strong disbelief, disillusion and skepticism towards formal parliamentary politics, its ability to positively influence current affairs or to do 'anything useful'.
- Politicians seen as corrupt, selfish, motivated by self-interest and despite some of them having good intentions, the political system always inevitably 'devours them' / corrupts them.
- Even if they choose a party to vote, they are never fully satisfied, constant expectation that 'something will go wrong' and that no party or politician can ever be fully "clean".
- The demise of traditionally defined political parties – people can no longer make a choice based on their ideological positions or civic needs – blurring of left and right, emergence of catch-all parties.
- People often make political choices based on personal preferences or 'momentary impressions' rather than long-term engagement or awareness of the different political programs.
- The participants I spoke to were often making very different electoral choices across the years – one year they would vote for CSSD (socialists) another year for ODS (conservative democrats) - there was a strong accent on personalities of the politicians or having direct connections to them.
- Populism as most frequently described by the participant understood in the sense of 'buying off voters with favourable policies' (e.g. increasing pensions) – this understanding is quite different from how we conceptualise populism in the project.

State institutions, welfare politics etc.

- Prevalent idea that the state should interfere into personal matters, civic life or the economy as little as possible.
 - State seen as corrupt, redundant, a 'burden'
 - Taking support from the state (in the form of welfare) seen as humiliation – even those who would qualify for state benefits or support from the job center do not ask for it – “I would rather take care of myself, then being monitored by the state.”
 - Critique of the justice system – large space for improvement.
- People in debt enforcement processes and the way it works in the Czech Republic are largely disadvantaged.