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Review article

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

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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.

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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 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, focusing 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].

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