CHARLES UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism

Master's Thesis

2024   **Anna Tunková**

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Echoes of history: Reflection of the socialist past regarding the 2023 presidential election in selected Czech media

Master's Thesis

Author of the Thesis: Anna Tunková BA

Study programme: Journalism, Media and Globalisation

Supervisor: PhDr. Michal Dimitrov, Ph.D

Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 30.7.2024   Anna Tunková

References

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Length of the Thesis: 56 pages; 106,300 characters

Abstract

This study explores the media's portrayal of the socialist past in the 2023 Czech presidential election context. The research examines 5471 articles from six Czech media outlets with varying political orientations through a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative content analysis and qualitative narrative analysis. The aim is to identify and analyse the prominence and framing of narratives about the candidate's communist affiliations. By employing systematic keyword searches, the study uncovers the extent to which the socialist past is highlighted. The findings reveal that narratives about the socialist past are a significant focus in media coverage, with notable differences in emphasis across different media outlets. The narrative analysis of 24 articles revealed several dominant narratives across the selected media outlets. The study contributes to understanding the role of historical narratives in contemporary electoral politics and underscores the influence of media in shaping collective memory. The conclusions emphasise the critical role of media and their editorial policies in determining the portrayal of political figures' pasts. They also highlight the need for a nuanced approach to media analysis in post-socialist societies.

Abstrakt

Tato studie zkoumá mediální obraz socialistické minulosti v kontextu českých prezidentských voleb v roce 2023. Výzkum se zabývá 5471 články ze šesti českých médií s různou politickou orientací a využívá smíšený metodický přístup, který kombinuje kvantitativní obsahovou analýzu a kvalitativní narativní analýzu. Cílem je identifikovat a analyzovat prominenci a způsob tvorby narativů o komunistické příslušnosti kandidátů. Pomocí systematického vyhledávání klíčových slov studie odhaluje míru zdůrazňování socialistické minulosti. Výsledky ukazují, že narativy o socialistické minulosti jsou významným tématem v mediálním zpravodajství, přičemž jsou patrné rozdíly v důrazu na ně v různých médiích. Narativní analýza 24 článků odhalila několik dominantních narativů napříč vybranými médii. Studie přispívá k pochopení role historických narativů v současné politice a zdůrazňuje vliv médií na utváření kolektivní paměti. Závěry vyzdvihují zásadní roli médií a jejich redakční politiky při vykreslování minulosti politických osobností. Zdůrazňují také potřebu diferencovaného přístupu k analýze médií v postsocialistických společnostech.

Keywords

Socialist past, communist past, presidential election 2023, media, Czech Republic.

Klíčová slova

Socialistická minulost, komunistická minulost, prezidentské volby 2023, média, Česká republika.

Title

Echoes of history: Reflection of the socialist past regarding the 2023 presidential election in selected Czech media

Název práce

Ozvěny historie: Odraz socialistické minulosti ve spojitosti s prezidentskými volbami v roce 2023 ve vybraných českých médiích

Acknowledgement

I want to express my gratitude to my supervisor PhDr. Michal Dimitrov, Ph.D for his invaluable guidance and ideas.

I would also like to thank my family for their patience and support throughout this journey.

A special mention goes to my grandfather, who passed away during the thesis writing process. The socialist past was frequently a subject of our conversations, as I was always eager to hear about his experiences and perspectives. I completed this work in his honour, and I believe he was with me every step of the way, proud of my efforts and achievements.

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism FSV UK
Research proposal for Erasmus Mundus Journalism Diploma Thesis

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Student's surname and given name: Anna Tunková	**Registry stamp: / Razítko podatelny:**
Start of studies for EMJ (in Aarhus): September 2022	
Your faculty e-mail: 72511018@fsv.cuni.cz	
Study program/form of study: Erasmus Mundus Journalism	

Thesis title in English: Echoes of history: Reflection of the socialist past regarding the 2023 presidential elections in selected Czech media.

Expected date of submission (semester, academic year)
Spring Semester 2023/2024

Main research question (max. 250 characters):
How did Czech media portray the socialist past in their coverage of the 2023 presidential elections, and what are the key themes and narratives that emerge from this portrayal?

The current state of research on the topic (max. 1800 characters): The presidential election occurred in January 2023 and has not been the subject of much research due to its recent occurrence. However, a few theses defended at Charles University have explored this election. For instance, Nováčková (2023) compared selected Czech daily newspapers ahead of the 2023 presidential elections. The news media's presentation of collective memory has not been extensively explored; existing research primarily focuses on the media's effect on collective memory among the public (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2014). While there is significant research on how the Czech media depicts its socialist past post the fall of socialism, there is a lack of research on the current media sphere. The significance of studying the portrayal of the socialist past in Czech media during the 2023 presidential elections is that it can provide insights into how the media shapes public perceptions of historical events and political ideologies. By analysing the themes and narratives used in media coverage, the study can shed light on how the socialist past is remembered and interpreted in contemporary Czech society.

Expected theoretical framework (max. 1800 characters): Politicians and journalists rank among the most influential figures in modern society for shaping collective memory. Journalism serves as a 'site of memory reconstruction' because it is the primary source of information (Hoega, 2014). Simultaneously, political actors serve as official sources for journalists, and political remarks are generally considered newsworthy; hence, their voices are more likely to be represented in the news media (Zelizer, 2006). Czech media extensively covered the 2023 presidential election, where remarks about the socialist past were frequent. This was particularly notable because some of the candidates had connections to the communist party, or even the STB (State Security) and VKR (Military Counterintelligence Unit) in their own past. This research is crucial because socialism still lingers in the minds of people, whether they lived through it or heard about it from others. Journalists, serving as 'the mediators of collective memory' through their narratives, wield the power to shape communal memory and preserve their

positions as knowledgeable storytellers of public events (Zelizer, 1992).

Expected methodology, and methods for data gathering and analysis (max. 1800 characters):
This study will employ a mixed-methods research design that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the quantitative segment, the primary objective is to assess the extent to which a particular thematic element has been emphasized in comparison to other themes within the media coverage of the election. The textual content will be categorized into distinct thematic categories, and the frequency of each theme will be tabulated and visually represented in a table and graph.

The qualitative facet of the study will adopt a narrative analysis approach, aiming to identify recurrent themes and storylines present in the media coverage, including analysing the audio-visual aspects, if there will be any. This narrative analysis is instrumental in comprehending how events and issues are framed and interpreted within the media discourse. Consequently, this research approach significantly contributes to the process of framing and shaping the understanding of phenomena and the construction of social realities, as expounded by Hall (2002). In this phase of the analysis, four articles from each media outlet will be subjected to detailed examination and interpretation.

Expected research design (data to be analysed, for example, the titles of analysed newspapers and selected time period):
"The study focuses on a two-round election in 2023, featuring nine initial candidates and ultimately culminating in two finalists. For the quantitative aspect, the selected timeframe will span two weeks before the first election round, the time between the first and the second round, and two weeks after the second final round. The prevailing themes will be identified, and the frequency of each key theme will be tabulated and visually represented in a table and graph. Notably, the analysis will specifically focus on references to socialism among the identified themes.

For the qualitative aspect, the analysis will be conducted using the same timeframe as the quantitative part. The study will involve prominent Czech online media outlets known for their diverse political orientations: Alarm, Echo24, Forum24, Novinky, Deník N, and Aktuálně. Systematic keyword searches, utilizing terms such as "elections 2023," "president," "communism," "socialism," "communist party," "STB," and their variations and combinations, will identify relevant online articles. The names of the candidates will also be used in the keyword search. The sample will include news articles, opinion pieces, and commentaries.

Data for the analysis will be retrieved from Charles University's Newton and Anopress databases. This methodological approach aims to comprehensively examine the media coverage of the 2023 Czech elections across various online media platforms, enabling a nuanced exploration of the portrayal and discussion of specific themes and political figures within public discourse. Furthermore, the selected timeframe will allow me to determine whether the narratives have changed over time."

Expected thesis structure (chapters and subchapters with brief description of their content):
1. **Introduction**
   Background and Context: Introduction to the research topic and its relevance.
   Research Objectives: Clearly defined goals of the study.
   Research Questions: Specific questions to be addressed.
   Significance of the Study: Explanation of the study's importance.
2. **Literature Review**
   Media and Collective Memory: How media represents collective memory.
   Journalism's Role in Memory Construction: The pivotal role of journalism in shaping memory.
   Collective Memory of Socialism in the Czech Context: An overview of the socialist past's representation in the Czech collective memory.
   The politics of dealing with the socialist past: The Czech experience

3. **Methodology**

   Research Design: Description of the research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

   Data Collection and Analysis: Explanation of how data is gathered and analysed, including keyword searches and data sources.

4. **Analysis**

   Quantitative and Qualitative Findings: Presentation of research results, including key themes and narratives from media coverage.

5. **Discussion**

   Analysis: Comparison of themes and media's role in collective memory.

   Implications: Discussion of findings' significance.

   Contributions to Theory: How the research advances existing theories.

6. **Conclusion**

   Summary of Key Findings: Recap of main research findings.

   Recommendations for Future Research: Suggested areas for further study.

7. **References**

8. **Appendices**

   Data Collection Details: Elaboration on data collection methods.

   Tables, Graphs, and Excerpts: Presentation of quantitative and qualitative data.

Basic literature list (at least 5 most important works related to the topic and the method(s) of analysis; all works should be briefly characterized on 2-5 lines):

Edy, J.A. (1999). Journalistic uses of collective memory. *Journal of Communication*, 49(2), pp. 71–85. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02794.x.

Godole, J. and Danaj, S. (2015). Media transformation and collective memory in Albania. Tirana: *IDMC - Institute for Democracy, Media&Culture*.

Hoega, A., (2014). Collective memory and national identity in post-communist Romania: Representations of the communist past in Romania news media and Romanian politics. [online] Link: https://scholarshare.temple.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12613/3014/TETDEDXHogea-temple-0225E-11754.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Hogea. A., (2010). Coming to Terms with the Communist Past in Romania: An Analysis of the Political and Media Discourse About the Tismăneanu Report. *Studies of Transition States and Societies. 2*

Hogan, J. M., & Zelizer, B. (1993). Covering the body: The Kennedy assassination, the media, and the shaping of collective memory. *The American Historical Review*, 98(5), 1703. doi:10.2307/2167254

Kligler-Vilenchik, N., Tsfati, Y. and Meyers, O. (2014) 'Setting the collective memory agenda: Examining mainstream media influence on individuals' perceptions of the past', *Memory Studies*, 7(4), pp. 484–499. doi:10.1177/1750698014523443.

Rupnik, J., (2002) Politika vyrovnávaní se s komunistickou minulostí. Česká zkušenost. *Wiena: Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen*.

Zelizer, B., (2006). Has Communication Explained Journalism? *Journal of Communication.* 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01307.x, **43**, 4, (80-88).

Related theses and dissertations (list of B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. theses defended at Charles University or other academic institutions in the last five years):

Nováčková, M. (2023) *Srovnání vybraných českých deníků před prezidentskými volbami 2023.* Bakalářská práce, vedoucí Nečas, Vlastimil. Praha: Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta sociálních věd, Katedra mediálních studií.

Tomková, A. (2023) *Mediální obraz druhého kola prezidentských voleb v televizním vysílání.* Diplomová práce, vedoucí Chrenčík, Roman. Praha: Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta sociálních věd, Katedra mediálních studií.

Date / Signature of the student:

THIS PART TO BE FILLED BY THE ACADEMIC SUPERVISOR:

I confirm that I have consulted this research proposal with the author and that the proposal is related to my field of expertise at the Faculty of Social Sciences.

I agree to be the Thesis supervisor.

MICHAL DIMITROV

Surname and name of the supervisor   **Date / Signature of the supervisor**

Further recommendations related to the topic, structure and methods for analysis:

Further recommendations of literature related to the topic:

The research proposal has to be printed, signed and submitted to the FSV UK registry office (podatelna) in two copies, **by November 15**, addressed to the Program Coordinator.
Accepted research proposals have to be picked up at the Program Coordinator's Office, Sandra Lábová. The accepted research proposal needs to be included in the hard copy version of the submitted thesis.

RESEARCH PROPOSALS NEED TO BE APPROVED BY THE HEAD OF ERASMUS MUNDUS JOURNALISM PROGRAM

Table of contents

1. Introduction

Men make their own history but do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past (Marx, 1936; p. 15).

The Czech Republic continues to have difficulty accepting its past, even years after communism was overthrown. The 2023 Czech presidential election, one of the country's most essential and watched elections, highlighted this ongoing struggle to reconcile with the communist legacy. Both leading candidates, Andrej Babiš and Petr Pavel, had past affiliations with the communist regime, which became a central issue in their campaigns and the media coverage. The differences in their approaches to addressing this history – Babiš's populist tactics of invoking fear and nostalgia versus Pavel's emphasis on personal transformation and democratic values – underscored this debate's complex and often divisive nature within Czech society. As the study will demonstrate, the media played a significant role in framing the election discourse within the context of this historical narrative.

This thesis will examine the Czech presidential elections, which took place over two rounds in January 2023. It was one of the country's most important and most watched elections. Czech citizens elected their future president and the government's direction in the upcoming years (OSCE Office for Democratic Institution for Human Rights, 2021). The coronavirus outbreak and the conflict in Ukraine contributed to a period of political unrest and social exhaustion that coincided with the 2023 Czech presidential election. From a domestic political standpoint, the election was defined as an attempt to break free from the discourse that had dominated Czech politics since 2017. It happened about a year and a half after populist forces narrowly lost the 2021 parliamentary vote (Kubát, 2023).

In the first round of the elections, there were eight candidates. According to the polls, Danuše Nerudová - an economist, university lecturer, and Rector of Mendel University in Brno from 2018 to 2022; Petr Pavel - retired general, former Chief of the General Staff of the Army of the Czech Republic and former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee and Andrej Babiš - the previous Czech Prime Minister, were the three leading candidates. (Fahler, 2023). In the second round, the two final candidates were Andrej Babiš and Petr Pavel.

Both of them had connections to the communist party, specifically the STB (State Security) and VKR (Military Counterintelligence Unit) in the past (Kubát, 2023). The Czech media have extensively covered the remarks about their socialist past. In this thesis, the terms „communist" and „socialist" are used interchangeably. This is acknowledged in the Literature review (1.2), *Post-totalitarian Generation* (1.2.1). The differences between the two leading candidates were visible in their distinct presidential campaigns. Petr Pavel conducted a very moderate one, adopting the tagline "Let us restore order and peace to the Czech Republic" and emphasising his desire to re-establish the presidential office's prestige. Babiš, on the other hand, took a considerably more aggressive tone. He attempted to evoke the idea that Pavel, as a retired general, would drag the Czech Republic into war or that he did not believe in peace by using billboards. This ad caused controversy and was considered deceptive, immoral, and unethical (Kubát, 2023).

By studying the critical literature extensively, the following research questions for this project were developed to answer:

1. How did Czech media portray the socialist past, and how prominent was that topic in their coverage of the 2023 presidential election?

2. What are the key themes and narratives that emerge from this portrayal?

The research hypothesis is that the socialist past will be a prominent topic in the media coverage of the presidential election. Additionally, it is expected that the media will adopt different approaches to covering the socialist past of various candidates based on their editorial lines, as well as how the candidates have addressed their past and conducted their lives since 1989. The research will employ the agenda-setting theory, which posits that the media does not merely reflect reality but actively shapes it by highlighting specific issues and topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). By emphasising the socialist past, the media can shape the electoral discourse and affect how the public perceives the candidates. Furthermore, the collective memory theory will be applied to understand how historical narratives are constructed by the media (Halbwachs, 1992). This theory suggests that the media plays a crucial role in shaping and perpetuating collective memories, particularly in post-socialist societies where the legacy of the past continues to influence contemporary politics (Olick & Robbins, 1998).

The study focuses on a two-round election in 2023, featuring nine initial candidates and culminating in two finalists. The selected timeframe will span from 31 December 2022 till 11 February 2023 - two weeks before the first election round, the time between the first and the second round, and two weeks after the second final round. The study will involve prominent Czech online media outlets known for their diverse political orientations: Alarm, Echo24, Forum24, Novinky, Deník N, and Aktuálně. Systematic keyword searches, utilising terms such as komunistická/komunista (communist), rozvědčík (intelligence officer), STB (state security), KSČM/KSČ (Communist party), agent (agent), estébák (state security collaborator), totalita/totalitní (totalitarianism/totalitarian) and their variations and combinations, will identify relevant online articles. The names of the candidates will also be

used in the keyword search. The sample will include news articles, opinion pieces, and commentaries. Data for the analysis will be retrieved from Charles University's Newton database.

This study will employ a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the quantitative segment, a thematic analysis will be used. This method is well-suited for identifying and quantifying recurring themes within the textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The primary objective is to assess the extent to which the theme of the socialist past has been emphasised within the media coverage of the election. Initially, the analysis will determine the percentage of articles that focused on the presidential election. Subsequently, from these election-focused articles, the proportion that references the socialist past will be calculated. The results will be systematically tabulated and visually represented in both a table and a graph. The findings will offer valuable insights into how historical narratives are employed in contemporary political discourse. It will enhance understanding of media practices in post-socialist societies (Demeter, 2022).

The qualitative facet of the study will adopt a narrative analysis approach, aiming to identify recurrent narratives and storylines present in the media coverage. This narrative analysis is instrumental in comprehending how events and issues are framed and interpreted within the media discourse (Ørmen & Gregersen, 2019). Consequently, this research approach significantly contributes to the process of preparing and shaping the understanding of phenomena and the construction of social realities, as expounded by Hall (2002). In this analysis phase, four articles from each media outlet will be subjected to detailed examination and interpretation.

This methodological approach aims to comprehensively examine the media coverage of the 2023 Czech elections across various online media platforms, enabling a nuanced exploration of the portrayal and discussion of specific themes and political figures within public discourse. The main objective of this research is to assess the extent to which the theme of the socialist past is emphasised in the election coverage, analyse articles that have covered the socialist past in detail and connect these results to the political discourse, discuss why the topics of socialist past have resurfaced in the public domain and highlight the importance of media to provide fair reporting.

2. Literature review and theory

The literature review is divided into two subchapters: the review itself and a theoretical framework. First, the theoretical framework provides an overview of the Agenda Setting Theory (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2014), the Collective memory theory (Hoftmannsthal, 1902) and the political landscape. After that, a review of the literature will follow.

2.1 Theoretical Framework and Background

2.1.1 Political Landscape

In the Czech Republic, the president primarily fulfils representative duties. However, the practical dynamics of political life in the nation reveal that the head of state substantially influences political and social matters. Notably, figures such as Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, revered as the "father of independent Czechoslovakia" and the country's first president (1918-35), continue to command respect and influence across political factions. Moreover, the presidency of the Czech Republic has historically been occupied by proactive personalities.

Václav Havel (1993-2003), an intellectual, former dissident, and advocate for human rights, left a lasting impact beyond national boundaries. Conversely, his successor, Václav Klaus (2003-2013), the first prime minister of the newly formed Czech state after the Czechoslovakia split, was instrumental in the country's privatisation efforts and opposed the adoption of the euro. After that, President Zeman assumed office through the first direct presidential election in 2013, a departure from the previous parliamentary process. Similarly to Klaus, Zeman had previously served as prime minister and, like him, has been a polarising figure in the Czech public discourse (Debiec, 2023). Zeman was then re-elected in 2018 and served as president until 2023.

In the 2023 presidential election, retired General Petr Pavel faced former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, who tried to demobilise Pavel's votes through a negative campaign focused on the retired general's communist past. Although Babiš was once a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, he pointed out that Pavel had undergone a course in intelligence in the former Czechoslovakia during the late 1980s and questioned his political inexperience. On the other hand, Pavel brought attention to the alleged abuses at Agrofert, the agri-food company that Babiš led before entering politics. However, just before the first round of the election, a court of first instance cleared him of the charge of extorting EU subsidies (Ogrodnik, 2023).

However, Pavel and Babiš were not the only ones with a communist past. For instance, Tomáš Zima, a Czech physician, chemist, and academic, had a past involvement with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. He joined the party in 1986 and remained a member until the Velvet Revolution in 1989 (Pšenička, 2022). Danuše Nerudová, one of the top three candidates in the first round, does not have a communist past herself. However, there have been discussions regarding her father's involvement with the Communist Party of

Czechoslovakia. Oldřich Peslar, her father, was identified in the archives as a party member and was under surveillance by the Czechoslovak secret police. Still, there is no evidence that he collaborated with them (Koutník, 2023). On the other side of the spectrum, another candidate, Josef Bašta, a politician and a diplomat, is known for his past as an anti-communist dissident. He actively participated in underground movements that opposed the regime and was a signatory of Charter 77, a critical human rights manifesto. His dissident activities led to imprisonment for over two years (Radio Prague International, 2023).

The role of communism in post-1989 Czech politics remains a critical topic of discussion, even more than 30 years after the Velvet Revolution. This transition period was marked by significant political and societal changes, including the fact that the Communist Party was not banned. Instead, it played an essential role in the post-revolutionary political landscape, maintained a presence in parliament and influenced government policies (Blokker, 2013). For instance, the Communist Party played a significant role in the election of Václav Havel as president in 2003. He won the presidency after two rounds of voting by the Czech Parliament, not by a direct popular vote. The KSČM supported him not because of ideological alignment but to prevent the other candidate, Jan Sokol, from becoming president. However, because their support was crucial in securing the necessary votes for Klaus, it highlights the continued influence of the communist-era political structures (Perknerová & Bek, 2003).

To sum up, the lustration process aimed to purge individuals associated with the former regime had mixed results. On one hand, it sought to replace the old elites. On the other hand, many former communists successfully navigated the new capitalist environment and gained economic influence through privatisation. This is exemplified by figures like Andrej Babiš,

whose career symbolises the continuity of communist elites adapting to and thriving in the new system (Beck, 2023).

The legacy of communism also surfaced in different presential elections in the country. For example, in the 2013 election, Jan Fischer, a former communist, was a leading candidate but did not advance to the second round. It is important to mention that one of the reasons Fischer did not advance to the second round was his failure to declare his membership in the Communist Party in his lustration certificate. This declaration is required for individuals seeking leading positions in the state administration, such as his role in running the Czech Statistical Office (Deník.cz 2012). Additionally, the introduction of direct presidential elections in 2013 added another layer to this dynamic, as seen with the election of Miloš Zeman, who had a contentious relationship with the EU and NATO and maintained a pro-Russian and pro-Chinese stance (Beck, 2023). These historical and political contexts underscore why the theme of communism remains significant in Czech society. The liberal segment of the electorate had to confront the reality of choosing between candidates with a communist past, which illustrates the long-term, generational impacts of the country's transformation (Grzyamala-Busse, 2002). This ongoing discourse is essential for understanding the broader implications of post-communist transitions in Central and Eastern Europe (Ekiert, 2017).

2.1.2 Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda setting is a way of seeing the world as constructed. This process is also closely related to examining the long-term effects of media related to the repeated selection of a single event in the news. In short, agenda-setting concerns how often and to what extent the press covers a phenomenon/situation is covered by media (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2014).

Examining articles from Czech media regarding the presidential election coverage offers a nuanced understanding of how the socialist past is portrayed and addressed within the context of contemporary politics. The agenda-setting function of the media becomes apparent as journalists and editors select which aspects of the socialist legacy to emphasise, thus influencing public perceptions and priorities (Skolkay, 2016). Furthermore, this research will also determine the frequency of the socialism theme, among other topics covered by the media. In post-socialist societies like the Czech Republic, where the memory of totalitarianism remains vivid, media coverage of political events often clashes with the complexities of reconciling historical narratives with present-day challenges (Kubát, 2023). Articles may highlight candidates' stances on issues related to the socialist era, such as transitional justice, economic policies, or preserving historical memory (Kubát, 2023). Moreover, the media's portrayal of past regime representatives, their role in current political affairs, and calls for accountability can significantly shape public discourse and political agendas (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). By analysing how Czech media navigate these themes in their presidential election coverage, we gain valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of memory, politics, and media influence in post-socialist societies.

2.1.3 Collective memory

The end of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe resulted in a significant reappraisal of individual and community relations with the socialist past. Narratives of this past became essential at colloquial and everyday levels, serving as tools for understanding the post-socialist transition and emphasising an individual's sense of belonging and identity (Mihelj, 2017). The growing body of literature on post-socialist memory provided insight into how memory has formed in the region. It helped the understanding of mnemonic processes in

general, illustrating how they are affected by political, economic, and social changes (Mihelj, 2017).

The term "collective memory" was first used by Hugo van Hoftmannsthal in 1902. However, the news media's presentation of collective memory has not been extensively explored; existing research primarily focuses on the media's effect on collective memory among the public (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2014). Halbwachs' and Coser's (1925) work on collective memory has grown and expanded in various ways over the last few decades, bringing its driving premise into the world of media studies (Kitch, 2008; Olick & Robbins, 1998). The tendency for regional, narrowly focused studies has helped to clarify the roots of mediated memory in particular areas. Still, it has also resulted in divided discussion and little effort to generate a broader reflection on the nature of mediated memory in the post-socialist setting. There has also been little participation in broader discussions about the media's influence on mnemonic processes; studies have mainly applied pre-existing conceptual frameworks instead of drawing on post-socialist resources to offer fresh perspectives on memory mediation overall (Mihelj, 2017). This study applies the concept of collective memory to examine how the Czech media's coverage of the 2023 presidential election reflects the understanding of the country's socialist past.

2.2 Literature Review

The collapse of communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union in the late 20th century initiated a profound political, economic, and social transformation. As these nations shifted from socialist to capitalist systems, their media landscapes changed dramatically, evolving from state-controlled entities to more diverse, market-oriented models. Despite this shift, the socialist past continues to influence media in

post-socialist countries. The role of media in shaping historical narratives and societal perceptions has been the subject of extensive research in recent years (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018; Albu et al., 2021; Dragomir, 2023; Kostadinova, 2015). The Czech media landscape has undergone significant transformations since the fall of socialism, evolving through three distinct periods marked by rapid transformations: the establishment of the Czech Republic and its membership in the EU, the transformation of media ownership from foreign to domestic and its oligarchisation. These changes have been accompanied by shifts in the representation of socialist history and nostalgia in Czech media, with film and television serving as critical cultural reflections of the country's socialist past.

However, there is a notable gap in research on how contemporary Czech media portrays and engages with socialist themes, presenting an opportunity for further exploration within the academic landscape. This literature review aims to fill this gap by examining the complexities of memory, representation, and nostalgia in post-socialist contexts, focusing on the role of media in shaping socialist narratives in the context of the 2023 presidential election and societal perceptions in the Czech Republic.

2.2.1 The Post-totalitarian Generation

Alongside theoretical reflections on the fundamental structures and driving forces of democratic and liberal society, the post-totalitarian generation has reflected on totalitarianism itself. Hannah Arendt (1951) made one of the most important contributions in this respect. According to the philosopher and political theorist, the similarities between fascism and communism are more significant than their differences; both can be placed in a single category: totalitarianism (Nisbet, 1992). From her work and definition of the totalitarian system, one can bring to light the essential characteristics of communism (Lefort,

2002). She argues that totalitarianism differs in essence from all known forms of dictatorship or despotism (Nisbet, 1992).

Totalitarianism has created entirely new political institutions; it has destroyed all the social, legal and political traditions of the country. It matters little what the specific national tradition is or what the particular source of its ideology is: the totalitarian regime always transforms classes into masses, replaces the party system not with one-party dictatorships but with a mass party, shifts the centre of power from the army to the police, and implements a foreign policy openly aimed at world domination (Arendt, 1951, p.203). This definition is shared by Václav Havel, who considers post-totalitarianism, albeit not the most precise term, an appropriate one for the system in place before 1989, particularly when compared to dictatorship (Vaclav Havel, 1978).

Kitschelt et al. (1999) classify the legacy of the Czech Republic as bureaucratic authoritarian communism. This model comes closest to the totalitarian party-state model (Ibid, 1999, p. 25-26), in which the party has completely penetrated the public administration, and the latter has largely lost its ability to influence the political agenda. Despite the collapse of this model since the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the younger generation has not experienced communism directly. The historical legacy remains a starting point for liberal democratisation, particularly in the post-communist context (Pop-Eleches, 2007). The advent of constitutional democracy in 1992 and the market economy meant that the Communist Party monopoly and its implications for public administration had to be overcome. In addition, privatisation and liberalisation policies had to redefine the relationship between the state and the market. This led to fundamental changes in the structure and organisation of public administration on the ruins of the Communist nomenclature.

However, the central role of the communist past in understanding public administration in the post-communist context is also reflected in the general assumptions in much of the literature on public administration (Goetz 2011). It would be illogical to ignore the influence of history on current public administration and politics within the Czech Republic. As such, the legacy of the past is generally considered to be synonymous with the communist legacy. For this reason, the word communism is commonly used in Czech discourse for everything that happened post-1989. The terms "socialism" and "communism" are used interchangeably in this paper. Communism refers to a political and economic ideology advocating for the collective ownership of all property and means of production to create a classless society. It shares some similarities with socialism, but socialism typically supports social ownership and democratic control of the economy (Çam & Kayaoğlu, 2015). In the context of this paper, their interchangeability is justified as both terms broadly represent the legacy of the former regime. In addition, when it comes to legacy, one must outline that the communist party was not dismantled following the Velvet Revolution and has, on the contrary, established itself in the country's political scene. Undoubtedly, this decision directly impacted the post-November development through their continuing influence via the Czech parliament.

2.2.2 The role of media

Like other post-socialist European nations, the Czech Republic's media market has developed roughly similar paths. The same proliferation of media channels coincided with the collapse of the communist regime, primarily in print media, when communist newspapers threw off their Party uniforms and quickly rebranded themselves to assert a new identity that aligned with the changing circumstances. The post-socialist countries had a vast information hunger brought on by decades of restriction and misinformation. Despite

significant changes occurring at the top levels of government, Czech newspapers maintained uninterrupted publication by inheriting the requisite publishing equipment (Dragomir, 2023).

A common theme in the literature is the media's tendency to present a "nostalgic" portrayal of the socialist era by emphasising its perceived stability and security in contrast to the perceived failures and inequities of the current capitalist system. The emergence of post-socialist nostalgia in Czech film and television has served as a form of cultural reflection and a means of exploring the complexities of the country's socialist past. Through various cinematic and televised narratives, filmmakers and content creators have delved into themes of memory, identity, and societal transformation, offering audiences a lens through which to revisit and reinterpret historical experiences. (Pehe, 2015). However, as Mihelj and Huxtable (2018) argue, these nostalgic narratives go beyond simple nostalgia. They can serve as a "radical imaginary" – a way for people to articulate alternative visions of the future that draw on forgotten socialist ideals of solidarity, justice, and collectivism. In this sense, the media's invocation of the socialist party reflects public sentiment and an active political strategy to challenge the hegemony of Western capitalist modernity and propose alternative models of social and economic organisation (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018). As Ost (2005) observes, the media plays a crucial role in shaping and amplifying these alternative imaginaries, which can then be mobilised in contemporary political debates and electoral campaigns.

However, limited research has included contemporary Czech media and their references to socialism. The gap in research presents an area for further exploration within the academic landscape. While existing studies have delved into post-socialist nostalgia in Czech film and television, there remains a notable absence of comprehensive analysis of how the media in the Czech Republic portrays and engages with socialist themes.

This gap highlights the need for scholarly inquiry into how socialist history is represented, remembered, and interpreted in contemporary Czech media. Literature that could contribute to filling this research gap includes works that delve into the complexities of memory, representation, and nostalgia in post-socialist contexts (Ptáček, 2018; Pehe, 2015; Mihelj. 2017). For instance, studies focusing on the politics of nostalgia, retro aesthetics, and the cultural responses to the socialist past in the Czech Republic offer valuable insights into how historical narratives are constructed and mediated through various media forms.

2.2.3 Memory reconstruction and Politicisation

Nevertheless, the role of media in recent years has started to gain more attention. Journalism serves as a 'site of memory reconstruction' because it is the primary source of information (Hoega, 2014). Through their narratives, journalists wield the power to shape communal memory and preserve their positions as knowledgeable storytellers of public events. Simultaneously, political actors serve as official sources for journalists, and political remarks are generally considered newsworthy; hence, their voices are more likely to be represented in the news media (Zelizer, 2006). When social conflicts arise, they are frequently addressed through the media. However, as Edy (2006) observed, the media's coverage of conflicts is often uneven due to journalistic conventions such as reputable sources and information attribution. Both journalists and politicians see historical events as lessons from which a society may learn and direct its current and future behaviours (Edy, 2006). As a result, narratives about the past establish continuity and causality of events, implying that the past, present, and future are all logically related (Hoega, 2014).

Furthermore, several studies have examined how the media in post-socialist countries reference the socialist past in the context of elections and other contemporary political

affairs. Coman and Gross (2012), for example, analyse how Romanian media outlets used references to the communist era to criticise the failures of the current political and economic system during the 2012 parliamentary elections. Similarly, Holt and Sükösd (2013) explore how Hungarian media outlets invoked the socialist past to frame political debates and shape public perceptions during the 2010 and 2014 parliamentary elections. They found that these references were often used to articulate alternative visions of social and economic organisations and drew on the perceived strengths of the socialist system to critique the perceived shortcomings of the current capitalist model.

2.2.4   Transformation of Post-socialist media

Despite the lack of research on the current media sphere, significant research exists on how the Czech media depicted its socialist past after the fall of socialism. However, during the early stages of the post-socialist era, more comprehensive data and in-depth analysis were needed to focus on the conditions of the media and journalism sectors. In the absence of domestic research, it fell to foreign scholars to undertake the first significant examinations of the post-socialist media landscape (Waschková Císařová et al., 2024).

The post-socialist era in the Czech Republic was marked by significant changes in the media landscape, which can be divided into three periods. The first period (1989-1993) saw rapid transformations, including the establishment of the dual market, the emergence of public service media, the creation of new media laws, the privatisation of state media, and the entry of foreign investors and owners of media organisations (Waschková Císařová et al., 2024). As O'Neil (1997) notes: "The absence of communism does not alone lead to democracy by default. Rather, open societies must be built (or re-built), pulling down old state structures that served to centralise political power. One of these structures is the media." This

transitional period presented challenges and opportunities for the media landscape as it sought to shed the vestiges of the previous authoritarian system.

The second period (1993-2004) was characterised by the establishment of the Czech Republic and its membership in the EU 11 years later, leading to the concentration of media ownership, the establishment of foreign media owners, and media commercialisation (Jebril et al., 2013; Stetka, 2010). The post-transition period (2004-present) has been shaped by the transformation of media ownership from foreign to domestic and its oligarchisation, as well as the rise of authoritarian political parties, growing right-wing populism, societal polarisation, and the deterioration of media freedom, leading to an illiberal democracy (Surowiec & Štětka, 2020).

The availability of data sources focusing on media development in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was initially limited. Still, research-based information on media transformations has significantly increased, with a growing number of publications on the topic. Despite this growth, presenting a definitive view on mass media in post-communist countries remains challenging due to the rapid evolution of media systems and the region's complexity. In the post-transition period, comparative research from a European perspective addressed the Czech media system, highlighting the need for further analysis (Dobek□ Ostrowska et al., 2010; Głowacki et al., 2014; Jakubowicz, 2006; Rantanen, 2013). However, even after 2010, there was still a lack of research data and literature on changes in journalism and media in post-communist countries, indicating gaps in understanding certain aspects of media development in the region (Jebril et al., 2013; Waschková Císařová & Metyková, 2015). Some topics were more extensively covered than others during specific periods, reflecting the need for continued research and analysis in this field.

2.2.5   Broader Comparisons

Drawing a broader comparison, *Collective Memory and National Identity in post-communist Romania: Representations of the communist past in Romanian news media and Romanian Politics,* a dissertation by Constanta Alina Hogea (2014), examines how the media and political actors in post-communist Romania have used representations of the communist past and the Romanian Revolution to shape national identity and political legitimacy from 1990 to 2009, as revealed through an analysis of 5,378 newspaper articles. One of the study's key findings is that political communication in the news media operated on the public imagination of the past, present, and future, using the collective memory of the communist past to serve political interests in the struggle for power and legitimacy. Furthermore, it highlights that the public understanding of the break with communism played a crucial role in defining post-communist Romanian society. The revolution, as a schism between the communist regime and a new culture, acted as a prism through which Romanians understood their communist past and the subsequent developments in the country. The research provides a deeper understanding of identity formation in Central and Eastern European transitional societies. It highlights the complex interplay between media, politics, and collective memory in shaping national identity in post-communist Romania (Hoega, 2014).

Another article by Sabina Mihelj, "Memory, Post-socialism and the Media: Nostalgia and Beyond", explores how media shapes and conveys memories of post-socialist societies. She notes that current research often fixates on nostalgic portrayals and national narratives and misses broader and more personal dimensions of memory. She critiques the lack of integration with more comprehensive memory studies. She proposes new directions, such as examining the global context of Cold War memories and the interplay between personal and public memory in media (Mihelj, 2017). In her research, she argues that other contributors to

this topic emphasise the historical dimension of memory in understanding post-socialist media memories.

These memories are shaped by current conditions and global, national, and personal historical relationships and processes. The international aspects of post-socialist nostalgia, according to Mihelj, are often acknowledged but require more focused study. The expanding literature on mediated nostalgia beyond Eastern/Central Europe highlights its transnational nature. This is evident in recycling old media content driven by global commercial competition and the demand for inexpensive, high-rating media. She concludes by stating that nostalgia is a worldwide phenomenon, prompting us to explore what makes post-socialist nostalgia unique compared to other forms of longing for the past.

3. Research design and methods

The methodology section of this study outlines the research approach and methods used to investigate the portrayal of the socialist past in the Czech media during the 2023 presidential election. The study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyse media coverage comprehensively. This chapter describes the research technique used to complete this study and the reasoning used to make the choices made throughout the process.

3.1 Quantitative Segment

To adequately measure agenda-setting attributes, more than quantitative or qualitative analysis alone was required. Quantitative and qualitative research methods were combined to understand these attributes in context. Therefore, the first section involves quantitative content analysis, which is a methodical and selective approach. This technique enables

handling substantial data volumes while ensuring the outcomes remain highly verifiable (Schulz & Reifová, 2013).

Quantitative analysis of content variables in media messages has been a practice for over half a century, and its popularity has increased in the field of communication sciences (Neuendorf, 2002). The roots of quantitative content analysis methods can be traced back to the 1920s in the USA, originating from quantitative newspaper analysis. Many of these early studies primarily examined the quality of news reporting (Neuendorf, 2002). Quantitative content analysis is an effective method of reducing large data volumes. Riff et al. (2014) defined quantitative analysis: *"Quantitative content analysis is the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption"* (Riff et al., 2014, p. 19).

The Newton database was initially used to identify the number of articles each media outlet published about the presidential elections within the selected time frame. The following keywords and their combinations were used to search for the articles: prezident/prezidentské (president/presidential), volby (elections), volby 2023 (elections 2023), české (Czech), kampaň (campaign), kandidát (candidate). This step effectively narrowed down the number of articles for further analysis. Subsequently, the Newton database was utilised to generate a graph illustrating the periods with the highest number of articles about the presidential elections referencing the socialist past. This visualisation is crucial for the analysis, highlighting peak media interest and coverage. This aligns with literature emphasising the importance of media attention peaks in shaping public opinion and influencing voter

behaviour (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). The core of the quantitative analysis involved determining whether there is any difference in the number of articles referencing the socialist past among the selected media. This analysis aimed to identify which media outlets focused more on the socialist past in the context of the elections and to distinguish their respective stances. By considering the political orientations of these outlets, the analysis could reveal potential biases and the degree of emphasis placed on the socialist past theme. This approach allows for a thematic analysis of the prominence of the socialist past theme in media coverage, providing insights into how much the media focused on this topic during the election.

3.2 Qualitative Segment

Complementing this will be qualitative content analysis, which will help capture what the quantitative method cannot. Despite its widespread use, the qualitative case study approach needs to be better understood. Scientific accuracy can be hard to prove, and any subsequent conclusions might be difficult to defend due to contradictory epistemological presuppositions and the complexity inherent in qualitative case-based research (Baškarada, 2014). However, it is particularly suitable for this thesis, as it allows for a nuanced understanding of the media's role in shaping political discourse and offers a robust framework for the in-depth exploration of complex phenomena. The qualitative aspect of the study adopts a narrative analysis approach, which aims to identify recurrent themes and storylines present in the media coverage, including an analysis of any audio-visual aspects. This narrative analysis is crucial for understanding how events and issues related to the socialist past are framed and interpreted within the media discourse. The qualitative study will adopt an inductive approach to uncover research findings from recurring patterns in raw data without the constraints of structured methodologies. This method allows themes to

emerge naturally, providing a more organic understanding of the data (Thomas, 2003). By examining the narratives and themes that arise from the media coverage, this research aims to provide insights into how the socialist past is depicted and discussed in the 2023 Czech presidential election context.

Narrative analysis has become an increasingly popular qualitative research method across the social sciences. Researchers have recognised the value of capturing and examining individuals' verbal, written, and visual accounts to gain insights into social phenomena (Czarniawska, 2004). This type of research is distinct from other qualitative approaches as it views narratives as a research tool and a subject of investigation. By closely analysing the content and structure of personal stories, narratives can illuminate the lived experiences, perspectives, and meanings that individuals ascribe to their social worlds. When analysing media articles, narratives can be viewed as the fundamental building blocks that convey meaning, perspective, and social significance. Researchers can uncover the underlying intentions, assumptions, and sociocultural influences by closely examining the narrative structures, character portrayals, plot devices, and linguistic choices within media texts (Czarniawska, 2004).

Some analysts have explored the role of narratives, while others have examined the dynamics between the creator, audience, and performative aspects (Riessman, 1993). These diverse approaches are employed depending on the nature and type of text being analysed. Narratives serve as a means to shape our understanding and perspective of the world, allowing writers to organise and make sense of life's events and actions (Foss, 1989). Investigating narratives involves studying how humans comprehend their existence and identifying the overarching themes characterising each generation (Deal, 2020).

The study of news as a narrative assumes that journalism, as a textual practice, reflects broader social relations and cultural meanings. News does not present reality as it occurred; instead, it documents and represents it (Fürsich, 2009). In essence, a narrative serves to organise our understanding of the world, and analysing the significance of this organisation necessitates a diverse array of conceptual tools drawn from various philosophical and theoretical traditions (Buozis & Creech, 2018). Ørmen & Gregersen (2019) explained that narratives are central to understanding news stories. They have influenced how journalism scholars and practitioners understand news as a genre of public communication.

Additionally, scholars are increasingly interested in how narrative elements shape audience perceptions and engagement with views (Ørmen & Gregersen, 2019). It becomes evident that the media's portrayal of the candidate's communist past in the 2023 Czech presidential election is a prime example of how narratives are formed. By framing the candidate's histories within the context of communism, the media not only informs but also influences how the electorate understands and engages with the candidates' political identities.

The qualitative analysis uses an inductive approach. The main goal of the inductive approach is to enable research findings to surface from the recurring patterns found in raw data and free them from the limitations set by structured methodologies (Thomas, 2003). Often, key themes can be concealed or overlooked due to the biases introduced by data collection and analysis methods used in deductive approaches. The general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis aims to condense extensive raw text data into a concise summary (Appendix II.), establish clear and justifiable links between research objectives and findings, and develop models or theories that explain the underlying structure of experiences or processes evident in the data (Thomas, 2003). This method shares similarities with other qualitative analysis approaches and emphasises transparency in its findings. It ensures that

the connections between the research goals and the results are clear and justifiable.

3.3 Criteria for Articles

The data was collected using the Newton Media archives (https://newtonone.newtonmedia.eu), a platform that contains over 118 contributors from the Czech Republic. This platform allows users to select articles based on the desired criteria, such as the time frame, keywords, length, and media outlet. These articles were selected based on the following criteria, using purposive sampling. They had to be between 300-600 words and include news articles and opinion pieces. The chosen time frame is from the 31st of December 2022 to the 11th of February 2023 - 2 weeks before the first election round, the time in between the first and the second round, and two weeks after the second election round. This time frame was chosen because it is when the media coverage of the election topic was the most prominent. At the same time, it could have influenced voting decisions and shown the aftermath of the election once the second round was done.

Also, the number of presidential candidates was narrowed down to the two top candidates, and the media coverage was more concentrated around them. The following keywords were used to select the articles: election 2023, Petr Pavel, Andrej Babiš, komunista (communist), rozvědčík (intelligence officer), komunistická (communist), STB (State Security), KSČM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia), agent, estébák (derogatory term for a State Security collaborator), totalita (totalitarianism), socialismus, komunismus and different combinations of these keywords. The articles had to be from the following media outlets: Echo24, Forum24, DeníkN, Alarm, Novinky, and Aktuálně. The media outlets were chosen to ensure various political perspectives and differing stances. This selection was made to capture a comprehensive and balanced view of the media escape and to reflect the diversity of opinions that characterise the Czech media environment. By including sources with

varying political affiliations and editorial policies, the analysis aims to prove a nuanced understanding of how different media outlets covered the election and framed the narratives around the top presidential candidates. This approach ensures that the analysis is not skewed towards any political leaning and provides a robust examination of the media's role in the electoral process (Barkho, 2019).

Four articles from each medium were selected for the qualitative segment based on a systematic sampling approach to ensure representativeness and relevance. This number strikes a balance between being manageable for in-depth analysis and providing diverse perspectives. By focusing on four articles per outlet, the study can capture critical narratives and themes without becoming overwhelmed by data. Additionally, the four articles from each medium were selected based on their relevance to the topic and ability to understand the prevailing narratives comprehensively. The media outlets themselves were carefully chosen to represent a range of political perspectives and editorial stances. By including sources with varying ideological leanings, from left-wing (Alarm) to centre-left (Aktuálně) to centre-right (Echo24, Forum24), the analysis aims to provide a balanced and nuanced understanding of how the candidate's pasts were portrayed in the media landscape.

The following media outlets will be analysed:

Novinky (https://novinky.cz)

Novinky.cz is the most visited news website on the Czech internet, operating under the umbrella of the Seznam.cz company. In addition to Novinky.cz, Seznam.cz owns and manages several other popular online platforms, including Super.cz, Maps.cz, Seznam Zprávy, and Sport.cz. Novinky.cz was initially launched in 1998 as an entertainment portal but later transitioned into a dedicated news server in 2003. At that time, the website became a

co-publication between Seznam.cz and Borgis, a company whose majority shareholder is Zdeněk Porybný, the editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper Právo (Seznam.cz, 2020). He was also the editor-in-chief of the communist newspaper Rudé právo during the November 1989 revolution, where he played a significant role in the media landscape of that era (Porybný, 2019). While Novinky.cz is known for its quick news updates rather than in-depth journalistic analyses, this approach has attracted a large audience. According to recent data, the website receives nearly 4.5 million real readers in the Czech Republic monthly, cementing its position as the country's leading news portal. The rapid dissemination of information is a crucial strength of Novinky.cz, as the website can publish news updates promptly, catering to the growing demand for instant access to the latest developments. This focus on speed and accessibility has contributed to the platform's widespread popularity among Czech news consumers (Netmonitor, 2017).

Echo24 (https://echo24.cz)

Echo24 is a Czech online opinion-focused, more right-leaning newspaper launched on March 14, 2014 (Balšínek, 2021). The website has steadily increased its user base, with 1.6 million real users as of February 2021, up from just 858,000 in February 2019 (Netmonitor, 2022). This growth has brought Echo24 closer to the user numbers of the thematically similar medium Reflex.cz, with the difference now being in the tens of thousands (Netmonitor, 2022). The departure of numerous journalists from Lidové noviny and Mladá Fronta Dnes following the acquisition of a stake in these publications by businessman Andrej Babiš in 2013 has led to a significant shift in the editorial landscape. The appointment of Dalibor Balšínek, former editor-in-chief of Lidové noviny, as the head of Echo24 has been seen as a move away from the influence of robust and political structures. According to Balšínek, this

trend is part of a broader phenomenon of oligarchisation in the Czech media, which manifests itself in varying degrees of content manipulation. This development is perceived to exert influence over public opinion. Echo24 positions itself as a medium that is not controlled by political structures and does not serve their interests (Balšínek, 2021). Despite its independent profile, Echo24.cz has significantly changed ownership since April 2021, with billionaire Marek Španěl becoming the majority shareholder (Echo24.cz, 2021).

Forum24 (https://forum24.cz)

The news server Fórum24, founded in 2015, is managed by the Free Czech Media organisation under the leadership of writer and journalist Johana Hovorková. Known for its sharp stance against Andrej Babiš and his supporters, the server emphasises its mission to protect free information management in a time when significant Czech media outlets are owned by individuals like Babiš, who have built their businesses on state contracts, subsidies, or other privileged positions in the economy (Forum24.cz, 2022). Forum24.cz identifies itself as a liberal democratic opinion newspaper, operating independently and funded through contributions to a collection account. Its editorial focus is evident from its initial marketing campaign, which included the slogan "Nebojíme se Babiše!" and a nod to the opinion newspaper Svobodné forum, now expanded to include news coverage (Forum24.cz, 2022).

Deník N (https://denikn.cz)

Deník N, a digital news platform, emerged as a new type of medium in 2018, focusing on a broad range of news and publicist content. Initially, editor-in-chief Tomášek aimed to recruit experienced journalists, but they declined for various reasons. He later saw this as advantageous, as younger, early-career professionals were more willing to take risks and

could afford to do so more than their older counterparts (Schröderová, 2021). The platform's articles aim to provide in-depth analysis by situating issues within a broader context. The company behind Deník N, N media a.s., is partially owned by the Independent Press Foundation. The other major shareholder is the Slovak company Denník N a.s., which publishes the Slovak version of Deník N (Deník N, 2023). Deník N stands out on the Czech media landscape due to its funding and ownership structure. The primary funding source comes from subscribers, ensuring the platform's complete independence from the interests of large businesses, politics, and advertising, as stated in their code of ethics (Deník N, 2023). According to editor Jan Kudlák, Deník N targets a general audience (Pavlíková, 2022). The platform's readers are described as individuals seeking information, looking for diverse viewpoints, and craving deeper insights. However, it also acknowledges that the audience is limited to those who can afford the subscription, which, although not high, presents a specific barrier (Pavlíková, 2022). It is often perceived as a left-wing or centre-left outlet (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2024).

Aktuálně (https://aktualne.cz)

Aktuálně.cz is the third most-read news website in the Czech Republic, boasting 1.9 million active users per month. The platform's audience demographics reveal that more than half of its readers are between the ages of 20 and 49, with nearly half having completed secondary education with a high school diploma and one-fifth holding a university degree (Netmonitor, 2017). It provides its readers with a diverse range of up-to-date information, covering domestic and international news and economic developments. This content is presented through various formats, including articles, videos, and multimedia graphics. Complementing the news coverage, the website also features commentaries and opinions from leading Czech journalists, offering readers deeper insights and diverse perspectives on

current events. In addition to its news and analysis, Aktuálně.cz includes lifestyle magazines, sports coverage, and a robust video offering. The platform's video content is hosted on the Aktuálně.TV portal, which serves as a hub for all the video productions from the Economia media group, to which Aktuálně.cz belongs—one of the flagship programs on the Aktuálně. The TV video portal is the DVTV project, a popular and well-regarded journalistic endeavour. The publication is part of the Economia media group, associated with a centre-left stance, focusing on issues such as human rights, democracy, and anti-corruption measures (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2024).

Alarm (https://a2larm.cz)

Alarm.cz is actively engaged in social issues and has been characterised as far left-wing or even radical left-wing in its approach (Borovan, 2021). Alarm, available on A2larm.cz, is a platform that focuses on opinion journalism rather than purely factual reporting. It is managed by A2, a non-profit organisation that also publishes the cultural fortnightly A2. The portal relies primarily on financial support from readers, who contribute regular or one-time donations. Additionally, it receives funding from various grant programs.

4 Analysis

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis of this study focuses on the extent to which specific thematic elements related to the socialist past were emphasised in the media coverage of the 2023 presidential election compared to other topics. Between the 31st of December 2022 and the 11th of February 2023, a total of 14691 articles were published in the chosen media (Echo24, Fórum24, Alarm, DeníkN, Novinky, Aktuálně). Out of these 14691 articles, 5471 articles

discussed the presidential election specifically. These articles were identified through a systematic keyword search using Newton Media. The following keywords and their combinations were used: prezident/prezidentské (president/presidential), volby (elections), volby 2023 (elections 2023), české (Czech), kampaň (campaign), kandidát (candidate). This is around 37%, which makes it a dominant theme in the media coverage. Most of the articles were published on January 16th between the first and the second round of the presidential election – around 1300 (Newton Media). This can be explained by the fact that the candidate selection narrowed down to the final two candidates, both with a communist past. On one hand, it can be argued that the campaign radicalised after the first round of the election, which was then reflected by the media. Immediately after announcing the first-round results, Babiš abandoned his previous tone, where he missed first place. He initiated an aggressive campaign, using billboards claiming that Petr Pavel intended to lead the Czech Republic to war. A surge of chain emails, Facebook group messages and Twitter bots emerged, actively spreading misinformation and false narratives. One of the most prevalent falsehoods was the claim that Petr Pavel's victory would result in the mobilisation of the army (Povýšilová, 2023).

On the other hand, it can be argued that the issue at hand was not that the campaign became more "radicalised" after the first round but rather that it up the fact that both candidates had past affiliations with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ). This historical connection became a focal point for journalists and commentators, providing ground for analysis and debate. The voters were faced with choosing between two former communists and were compelled to scrutinise which candidate's communist past was more palatable or had been more beneficial. The media's coverage inevitably influenced public perception and added complexity to the electoral decision.

Of the 5471 articles on presidential elections, 1316 articles contained references to the socialist past, around 24%. This high percentage underscores the relevance and dominance of the socialist past theme in media coverage and confirms the significance of this research topic. Key terms related to the socialist past were identified and quantified to assess their prominence within the election coverage. The key terms were: komunistická/komunista (communist), rozvědčík (intelligence officer), STB (state security), KSČM/KSČ (Communist party), agent (agent), estébák (state security collaborator), totalita/totalitní (totalitarianism/totalitarian). These critical terms were combined to achieve the desired selection criteria. The following graph illustrates the number of articles referencing the socialist past published on selected dates in the chosen time frame:
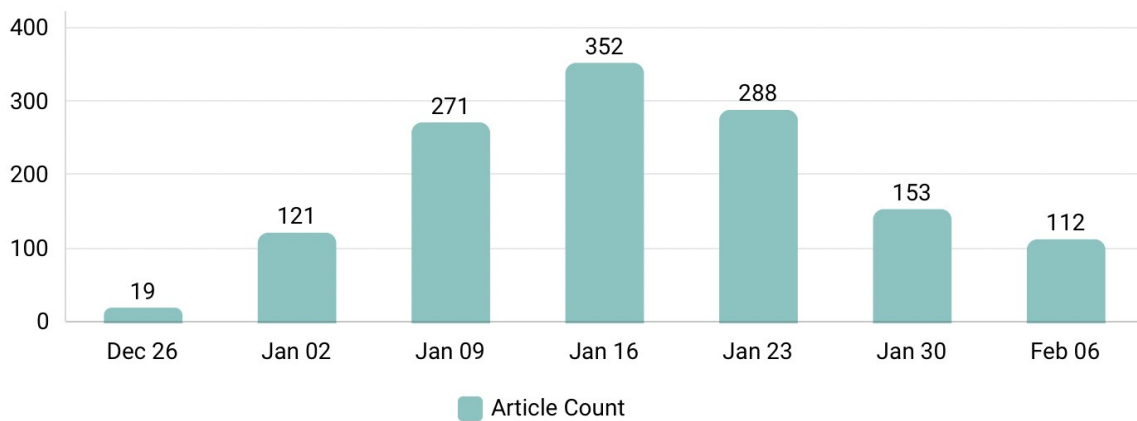
Graph 1: Number of articles with references to the socialist past (Newton media)

The next step of the quantitative analysis is determining the distribution of these articles across various media outlets. This was done by assessing the number of articles on the presidential election for each outlet through Newton Media, from which the number of
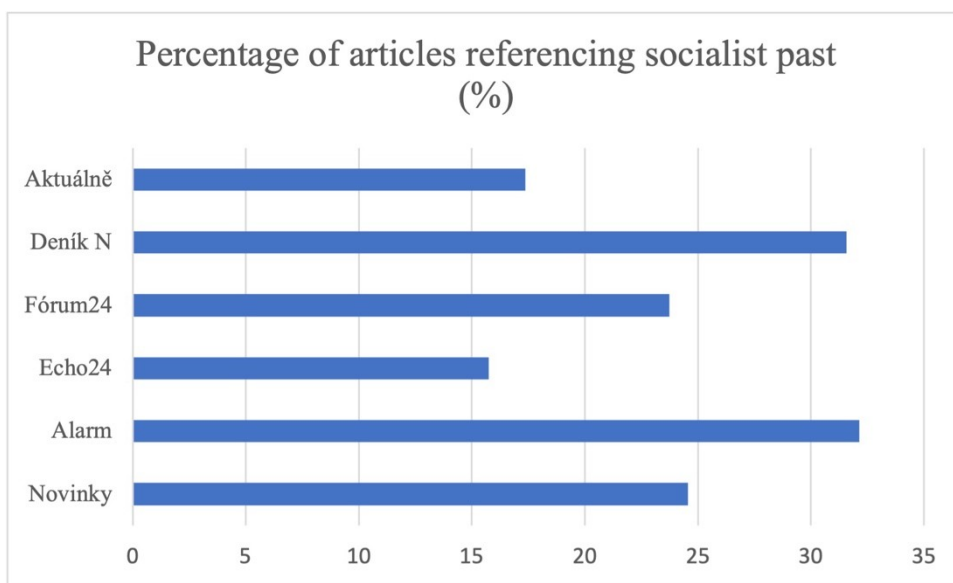
articles referencing the socialist past was determined. The data shows that references to the socialist past were not uniformly distributed, indicating a variation in focus or editorial stance among different media outlets. This uneven distribution aligns with existing media bias research, highlighting how news organisations may prioritise certain narratives or themes based on their ideological leanings or audience preferences. Other topics in the media coverage included future steps and viewpoints of the president, conflicts of interest, the presidential campaign and disinformation, the economic situation in the Czech Republic, and the personal lives of the candidates (Hillová, 2024).

Media outlet	Articles on presidential election	Articles on presidential election referencing socialist past	Final percentage (%)
Novinky	2500	614	24.56
Alarm	56	18	32.14
Echo24	831	131	15.76
Fórum24	830	197	23.73
Deník N	567	179	31.57
Aktuálně	687	188	17.37

Table 1: Distribution of Articles Referencing Socialist Past Across Media Outlets

This table indicates that some media outlets, such as Alarm and Deník N, had more articles

referencing the socialist past. This suggests a greater emphasis on this aspect in their coverage. In contrast, outlets like Echo24 and Aktuálně had a lower percentage, indicating a relatively lesser focus on the socialist past within their election coverage. This analysis helps to understand the varying editorial priorities and potential influence on public perception during the presidential elections. The following graph shows the different percentages among the selected media outlets:

Graph 2: Percentage of articles referencing the socialist past

Based on the ideological and political backgrounds provided in this thesis, the following observations can be made about the percentages shown in the table:

Aktuálně (17.73%)

Aktuálně is known for its centre-left stance and focus on human rights and democracy. Its relatively low percentage of articles referencing the socialist past could reflect a more diverse editorial focus. This approach might provide a comprehensive view of the election while maintaining its commitment to critical journalism and democratic values.

Deník N (31.57%)

Deník N is positioned as a left-wing or centre-left outlet; therefore, its high percentage of

articles referencing the socialist past aligns with its focus on in-depth analysis and broader socio-political contexts. This suggests a deliberate editorial strategy to use historical narratives to inform contemporary political discourse and critique current political figures with past communist ties.

Fórum24 (23.73%)

As a liberal-conservative opinion newspaper, Fórum24's moderate percentage reflects its critical stance against populism, authoritarianism and communism. It references the socialist past to highlight the historical context of current political figures like Andrej Babiš. This aligns with its self-proclaimed mission to protect free information management and democratic values by drawing historical parallels.

Echo24 (15.76%)

Echo24, with a right-leaning orientation, had fewer references to the socialist past. This could indicate a strategic editorial choice to focus less on historical socialist themes and more on current issues or right-wing viewpoints that resonate with its audience. However, many articles still referenced the socialist past, and Echo24 was one of the most critical media outlets regarding Andrej Babiš's past.

Alarm (32.14%)

This media outlet is known for its far-left or radical left-wing stance. Its higher percentage of articles referencing the socialist past aligns with its ideological focus on social justice and critique of neoliberalism. This suggests an emphasis on historical narratives related to socialism to critique the current political dynamic and advocate for alternative economic models.

Novinky (25.56%)

As the most visited news website in the Czech Republic, Novinky's moderate percentage indicates a balanced approach and reflects its role in providing quick news updates. Its

coverage likely includes references to the socialist past as a part of a broader strategy to appeal to a wide audience by addressing various aspects of the election without a pronounced ideological bias.

The emphasis on themes about the socialist past suggests that the media played a significant role in framing the 2023 Czech presidential election within the context of political history. By frequently highlighting these narratives associated with communism and totalitarianism, the media may have influenced public perceptions and priorities and directed attention towards the candidate's historical affiliations and the broader implications of their potential leadership. Although, in many cases, it was the candidates themselves who were constantly bringing up the communist past of one another, the fact that the media chose to report on this specific aspect confirms the hypothesis as mentioned above. The application of agenda-setting theory in this analysis underscores the media's power to shape electoral discourse. Livingstone & Lunt (1994) argued that the selective emphasis on specific themes and narratives could lead to a heightened public focus on these issues, potentially affecting voting behaviour and the electoral outcome.

The percentages of articles referencing the socialist past in the table reflect the respective media outlets' ideological orientations and editorial strategies. Left-leaning outlets like Alarm and Deník N emphasise historical socialist themes more prominently, aligning with their ideological focus and critique of current political dynamics. In contrast, right-leaning and centrist outlets like Echo24 and Aktuálně have lower percentages, reflecting different editorial priorities and audience considerations. However, this does not give any definite conclusions about the respective stances of the selected media regarding articles that cover the socialist past. For example, Echo24 had the lowest percentage score; however, as the

detailed qualitative analysis that follows reveals, the articles from Echo24 were among some of the most critical ones from the whole analysis. This indicates that while quantitative data can provide insights into the extent to which the specific theme is covered, it does not necessarily capture the depth or tone of the coverage.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

The analysis of the media's reflections on the communist past in the 2023 presidential election revealed a few dominant narratives that persistently appeared across various sources. This detailed examination provides a comprehensive understanding of the prevailing narratives and their implications for contemporary Czech politics. The narratives were identified using an inductive approach. Initially, the articles were condensed into concise summaries and read multiple times to uncover recurring patterns and themes naturally. This method allows the narratives to emerge organically from the data without the constraints of predefined categories, ensuring a more authentic and nuanced understanding of the media content.

4.2.1 Describing the Communist Past as a Political Weapon

Most articles repeatedly highlight the ties of both candidates with the Communist Party before 1989. This narrative was classified as "Describing the communist past as a political weapon". It was present across all of the analysed media outlets. The Communist past is not merely a fact pointed out but an important political weapon for influencing public opinion or criticising the candidates in question. In this way, the Communist past has been used as ammunition by opponents and the media. The articles highlight that this political tactic, often used by Andrej Babiš, was aimed at discrediting Petr Pavel, casting doubt on his suitability for the presidency [1, 2, 5, 7, 12, 15, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24]. For instance, Babiš has repeatedly referred to Pavel as a communist spy [1, 20] and compared him to Vladimir Putin

[1, 20]. At the same time, Pavel has been criticised for not fully revealing his military intelligence past [5, 21]. Once again, the use of these words is not trivial. In Czech collective memory, a communist spy represents all that is dark and secretive about the totalitarian regime, all the power, mystery, injustice and evil that personifies it (Main, 2014). The comparison to Vladimir Putin is all the stronger given the Russian aggression on Ukraine.

It is apparent from the articles that Czech society remains deeply divided on how to reconcile with its communist past. The selected media reported on figures, such as Michal Kocáb, who expressed their frustration at the apparent indifference of voters to the candidates' communist past [22]. Others, like Michal Horáček, stress the importance of personal transformation and responsibility towards a positive change, as the communist past is inherent to the country's history [22]. The enduring influence of communism is evident, and the communist period continues to shape political identities and opinions 35 years after the fall of the regime. The debate over Eva Pavlová's communist past [23], the use of communist terminology by both candidates [18, 24] and Babiš's continued support by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia [18] all underline the lasting influence of this period. For instance, Babiš's reliance on communist support [18] while simultaneously and paradoxically playing the anti-communist card while discrediting opposition due to their past [2] demonstrates the complex ways the communist period continues to influence Czech politics.

4.2.2 Ex-Communist Fighting 'New Totalitarianism' while Courting Communist Party Support

This leads to a prevalent narrative in the analysis – "Ex-Communist fighting 'New Totalitarianism' while courting Communist Party support". For instance, Pehe, in his article

for Deník N [11], highlights that Babiš was trying to gain support from entirely ideologically different parties, such as the nationalist, right-wing populist party SPD, or the Communist party. Šplíchal (2023) was even more radical in his articles for Alarm [17, 2]. He describes that Babiš "presents himself as an anti-establishment figure fighting against new totalitarianism despite his involvement with the Communist party in the past and their support of him in the present". The article then follows, stating that this contradiction is absurd, as Babiš taps into the public's fear of communist resurgence while downplaying its history. Šplíchal extends this criticism even to Petr Pavel by pointing out the irony of Babiš, a former career communist and state security collaborator, playing the anti-communist card and warning against another former communist, Petr Pavel. The title "Estébák varující před rozvědčíkem" ("The former secret police agent warning against the intelligence officer") shows this contradiction. Given Alarm's ideological background, their critical stance towards the communist past can be better understood. As a far left-wing platform, Alarm is naturally inclined to scrutinise figures who exhibit hypocrisy and ideological inconsistency, particularly those who have ties to both communist and right-wing elements. For instance, Babiš's efforts to gain support from the Communist Party while positioning himself against "new totalitarianism" presents a clear target for Alarm's editorial approach, emphasising exposing perceived injustices.

4.2.3 Andrej Babiš Playing on Communist Nostalgia

The most repeated narratives include several stances on critiquing Andrej Babiš's populist and fearmongering tactics. One of the most common ones was "Andrej Babiš playing on communist nostalgia". By framing his opponents as threats to national security and stability, especially Petr Pavel, "he capitalised on public anxieties and positioned himself as the only viable option" (Šmejkal, 2023). These included references to the socialist past, specifically

the past of Andrej Babiš as the former secret police agent and Petr Pavel's past as an intelligence officer. The analysed media outlets provided similar perspectives on these narratives. Forum24, for instance, is known for its sharp attitude against Andrej Babiš and his supporters - its mission is to protect free information management in a time when significant Czech media outlets are owned by individuals like Babiš (Forum2.cz, 2022). This critical stance is reflected in their articles, which frequently highlight Babiš's manipulative tactics and authoritarian tendencies. For example, Forum24 described Babiš as turning into a "fear merchant", using manipulative tactics to scare voters and undermine his opponent (Šmejkal, 2023). This consistent critique underscores Forum24's commitment to holding Babiš accountable and protecting democratic values.

This stance is even more evident in their articles about the socialist past. One article in particular, "We need to stop with the twisted nostalgia. It was certainly not better under the Communists or Babiš," by Vilém Besser (2023), compares the nostalgia after the communist regime to Babiš's promises. The author argues that manipulation has led some people to replace the phrase "it was better under Communism" with "it was better under Babiš.". Lankauskas (2018) explains that in present-day Eastern/Central Europe, nostalgist reflections on the socialist era are crucial tools for individuals to detach from a disappointing present. They are characterised by a perceived breakdown in the daily fabric of life and the challenges of forming meaningful social relationships and identities. Instead of succumbing to despair, these disempowered individuals seek cognitive frameworks and strategies to navigate and counteract the changes they face (Lankauskas, 2018).

Mihelj (2017) explains that the media's role in memory typically focuses on the media as carriers of memory rather than subjects of remembrance themselves. From everyday

interactions with media in our daily routines to significant and memorable media events such as the election, communication tools have become integral to our experiences, thereby shaping what we recall about our lives (Mihelj, 2017). The author applies this theoretical perspective to Babiš by suggesting that he attempts to exploit this nostalgia similarly. By drawing a parallel between communist nostalgia and Babiš's promises, Besser demonstrates how both regimes leverage historical narratives to frame current political discourse and manipulate public sentiment. This connection underscores the media's role in shaping collective memory and influencing contemporary political dynamics.

4.2.4 Once a Communist, Always a Communist

Another crucial narrative has been classified as "Once a communist, always a communist". Several articles suggest that the candidates' pasts continue to define their present identities, implying that they remain unchanged from who they were in the past. This narrative suggests that the past affiliations and actions of the candidates continue to define their current identities and political behaviour, regardless of any changes or developments they may have undergone. For instance, in an article by Dostálová (2023) for Aktuálně, Babiš is compared to Gustav Husák, the former Communist leader of Czechoslovakia known for his repressive policies during the normalisation period following the Prague Spring. This comparison underscores Babiš's authoritarian tendencies and his use of populist strategies like those employed by Husák.

Aktuálně also highlights this theme by scrutinising Andrej Babiš's inability to effectively use Petr Pavel's past as a communist intelligence trainee against him while misrepresenting Pavel's military training. However, another article [10] by Poláček and Hromková (2023) frames Pavel's victory as a symbolic end to post-revolutionary anti-communism, contrasting

his transformation with Babiš's inability to overcome his controversial past. Pavel's detailed background and achievements further challenge the notion that past communist affiliations define present identities, showcasing his evolution and dedication to democratic values. Given Aktuálně.cz's centre-left stance and its focus on issues such as human rights, democracy, and anti-corruption measures, its critical portrayal of Babiš aligns with its broader editorial mission to promote transparency and accountability in political discourse while highlighting the significance of personal growth and integrity over historical affiliations.

4.2.5 The Bad Communist versus the Good Communist

The media often portrayed a simplistic narrative that "once a communist, always a communist." However, they frequently made distinctions between communists they deemed "good" versus "bad" rather than condemning all communists equally. While the media tended to oversimplify the nuances of communism, they did acknowledge that some communists were more acceptable than others in their eyes. For instance, Petr Pavel received significantly less critique than Andrej Babiš in all the analysed media outlets. "The bad communist versus the good communist" is a narrative that was present to a large extent. Among the provided articles, the one titled "Historian Blažek demands an apology. Petr Pavel admits in his biography that he belonged to the intelligence service" from Echo24 was the most critical about Petr Pavel and his past. It delves deeper into Pavel's history with Czechoslovak communist military intelligence, an aspect of his past that has been a point of contention during his presidential campaign. When discussing the "Who is a better communist" narrative, the media generally took a different approach when criticising Andrej Babiš's past than Petr Pavel's. They acknowledge that Petr Pavel was open and honest about his past affiliations, giving him a more nuanced critique of transparency and accountability.

In contrast, Babiš was often accused of lying and manipulating information about his past, leading to harsher criticism. This distinction in media treatment highlights the importance of honesty and transparency in political discourse and how these factors impact public and media perceptions. This notion is supported by academic literature, which suggests that there may be value in a more nuanced, less ideologically charged approach to dealing with this complex historical legacy (Dubček, 1993; Szczerbiak, 2018; Blaive et al., 2013). The literature indicates that simply rejecting or demonising the communist past may not be the most productive path forward. There may be merit in fostering open dialogue and transparency about individual experiences and perspectives. There seemed to be no crucial distinction among the selected media regarding this perspective, as they all mainly portrayed Andrej Babiš as "the bad communist". It can only be included which ones were more critical or less. For instance, the web Novinky adopted a more relaxed approach to the topic. In this analysis, Novinky stood out for its approach to covering Babiš's past because it opted for a less critical tone than the other outlets. Their strategy can justify this, emphasising a quick news delivery without the ideological intensity seen in different media.

Although the articles by Novinky followed the general trend present in the other analysed media outlets – Babiš as the bad communist and Pavel as the good communist, they provided a more balanced portrayal of the socialist past compared to the other media outlets chosen for this analysis. On the one hand, there were articles such as by Mitrofanov (2023) and his "Act of Electoral Hygiene", which follows the regular pattern – criticising Andrej Babiš for his paradoxical support from the Communist party in his presidential campaign, his disdain for NATO, and other controversial remarks. On the other hand, articles by Beranová (2023), or Právo (2023) were more critical towards the past of Petr Pavel. In article 11, Beranová

highlights how Danuše Nerudová, another presidential candidate, labelled Pavel as a "former career communist, agent, and a spy". This strong language underscores the tension in the election. It highlights her efforts to distinguish herself from Pavel by focusing on his controversial history and suggesting that his past disqualifies him from leading the country. However, like most articles from Novinky.cz, this article is not opinion-based—the author merely states what happened and what was said at the debate and after. This article situates Nerudová and Pavel as key contenders in the presidential race alongside Andrej Babiš. Furthermore, the article by Právo (2023) highlights that the necessity of choosing between two candidates with communist pasts is a poor reflection of Czech society's reconciliation with its history. This narrative highlights the complex interplay of past political affiliations in the current presidential race. It underscores the shift from a strict focus on past communist ties to a more nuanced evaluation of current political stakes.

4.2.6 The portrayal of NATO in the context of historical communist values and propaganda

Another recurring narrative is "The portrayal of NATO in the context of historical communist values and propaganda". The article "The peacemaker Babiš promoted an aggressive NATO. He forgot where Yugoslavia is and how the UN works" from Forum24 notably discussed this. It explored how contemporary political figures, particularly Andrej Babiš, leverage fears of international alliances and commitments, drawing parallels to the Cold War's communist rhetoric. The alignment of modern political rhetoric with historical communist values reflects the ongoing struggle within Czech society to reconcile with its communist past. It shows how unresolved historical legacies continue to shape political strategies and voter behaviour. The media's role in highlighting these contradictions and manipulative tactics is crucial in maintaining an informed electorate and fostering a more

nuanced understanding of the country's geopolitical stance. This is supported by substantial empirical evidence, which indicates that media coverage enhances accountability. Research has demonstrated that media outlets report on the actions of elected officials, which leads to a more informed electorate and, consequently, greater accountability of politicians (Snyder & Strömberg, 2010; Besley & Burgess, 2002; Ashworth, 2012). This aligns with the widely held belief that journalism serves as a public watchdog, holding elected officials to account (Hamilton, 2009; McChesney & Nichols, 2011; Waldman, 2011).

4.2.7 Conclusion of Qualitative Analysis

To conclude, the qualitative analysis of media reflection on the communist past in the 2023 Czech presidential election reveals several dominant narratives that persistently appeared across various sources. These narratives highlight the enduring influence of communism on contemporary Czech politics and society. The media frequently employed the "Describing the communist past as a political weapon" narrative, using the communist past to discredit candidates and influence public opinion. This tactic was particularly evident in Andrej Babiš's attacks on Petr Pavel. The media also perpetuated the "Once a communist, always a communist" narrative, which suggests that past communist affiliations define present identities. However, they often made distinctions between "good" and "bad" communists, making it seem like some communists were better than others. This nuanced approach was evident in the media's treatment of Petr Pavel, who was criticised for his past affiliations but was seen as more transparent and accountable than Babiš.

The analysis also revealed several prevalent narratives surrounding Andrej Babiš's political tactics. One critical narrative is Babiš's portrayal of himself as an "Ex-Communist fighting 'New Totalitarianism' while courting Communist Party support". He attempted to position himself as an anti-establishment figure fighting against new forms of totalitarianism. The

analysis highlights the contradiction in Babiš simultaneously seeking support from the Communist Party. Additionally, the media showed other narratives criticising Babiš, such as Andrej Babiš portraying himself as a saviour who can protect the nation from threats" or "The portrayal of NATO in the context of historical communist values and propaganda". This analysis underscores the complex interplay of past political affiliations and their impact on contemporary political dynamics. The media's role in shaping collective memory and influencing political discourse is crucial, as it helps maintain an informed electorate and fosters a more nuanced understanding of the country's historical legacies.

4. Discussion and Limitations

First, the quantitative analysis reveals several important insights into the media's coverage of the communist past during the 2023 Czech presidential election. The data shows that a significant portion of the media coverage – 1,316 out of 5,471 articles on the presidential election (24%) contained references to the socialist past. This indicates that narratives about the candidates' communist affiliations were a prominent focus within the broader election discourse. The analysis of the article distribution across different media outlets highlights that the emphasis on communist-related narratives was not uniform. Outlets like Alarm (32.14%) and Deník N (31.58%) had a higher percentage of articles referencing the socialist past, while others like Echo24 (15.76%) and Aktuálně (17.37%) had a lower percentage.

The varying percentages of articles referencing the socialist past seem to align with the known ideological leanings of the media outlets. Left-leaning outlets like Alarm and Deník N emphasised these narratives more. This likely reflects their editorial priorities and desire to examine the candidates' historical ties to communism critically. At the same time, right-leaning and centrist outlets like Echo24 and Aktuálně had a lower focus on these themes.

The prominence of communist-related narratives in the media coverage suggests that the media may have played a significant role in framing the 2023 Czech presidential election within the context of political history. By frequently highlighting these narratives, the media may have influenced public perceptions and directed attention towards the candidates' historical affiliations.

At the same time, while the quantitative analysis provides insights into the extent to which specific themes were covered, it does not necessarily capture the depth or tone of the coverage. The qualitative analysis reveals that even outlets with lower percentages of communism-related articles, such as Echo24, produced some of the most critical coverage of the candidate's past. Therefore, the quantitative findings should be interpreted in conjunction with the qualitative ones to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. The quantitative findings offer a broad perspective on the prevalence of these narratives. At the same time, the qualitative examination delves deeper into the underlying motivations, biases, and implications of how the media selectively invokes and frames historical themes to influence public perceptions and political dynamics. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this study provides a more holistic assessment of the media's coverage and potential impact on the electoral process. This approach underscores the need to move beyond simplistic numerical comparisons and examine the complex interplay between media, collective memory, and contemporary political discourse in post-communist societies (Lund, 2011).

To anchor the narratives found in the media coverage of the country's social, political, and economic developments after 1989, it is essential to understand the broader context in which these narratives emerged. The fall of communism in 1989 marked a significant turning point

in Czech history (Blokker, 2013). The subsequent years saw the country navigate the complexities of democratisation, economic restructuring, and the establishment of new political institutions (Grzyamala-Busse, 2002). In this context, the media's portrayal of the communist past and the candidates' affiliations with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) can reflect the ongoing struggle to reconcile with this historical legacy. The narratives identified in the analysis, such as "Describing the communist past as a political weapon," "Once a communist, always a communist," or "The bad communist versus the good communist", highlight the influence of communism on contemporary Czech politics and society. The media's election coverage can be understood as a manifestation of the broader societal debates and tensions surrounding the communist past. The candidate's past affiliations with the KSČ became a central issue in the election, with both candidates being former communists.

The recent communist past still haunts former Soviet satellites and is a crucial point of contention within the political and societal arena. There appears to be widespread unease among the public, albeit unacknowledged. This discomfort with communism is revealed through the media's rhetoric and political tactics. Representations collide, and there is resentment towards a system where all are the victims, nostalgia among the older generations, or possible indifference among the younger generation. On this occasion, one observes the phenomenon seen in countries with a heavy past: France after Vichy, Chile after Pinochet or South Africa after Apartheid (Fink, 2001). A community can only regain a minimum consensus when light has been shed on its recent history. When the victims and perpetrators have been clearly identified, the guilty denounced and punished, and, equally, when most of the population has been relieved of guilt for its inescapable participation in the fallen regime.

This created a complex dynamic in which the media had to navigate the nuances of these affiliations and their implications for the candidate's current political stances and credibility. The broader social and political climate influenced the media's portrayal of the communist past. The context of the transition from communism to democracy created a ground for the media to frame the election as a choice between different visions for the country's future, with the communist past serving as one of the key dividing lines. This coverage was, of course, also shaped by the candidate's own strategies and tactics. Andrej Babiš, for instance, leveraged his past affiliations with the KSČ to appeal to voters who were nostalgic for the stability and security provided by the communist regime for some. This approach was met with criticism from the media outlets. They highlighted Babiš's hypocrisy in using the communist past to his advantage and, at the same time, discrediting his opponents for their past affiliations with it. To sum up, the narratives identified in the analysis reflect the ongoing struggle to reconcile with the communist past and the complex interplay of historical affiliations and contemporary political dynamics.

Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that a simple reference to the past, the former position of the candidates or their supposed links with communism becomes a symbol of the past. The collapse of communism is also that of its symbols. Thus, we are witnessing a more pervasive phenomenon, complex to apprehend, extending to the whole of society and to which President Havel referred when he said: *"I have the firm conviction and hope that the younger generation ... will not be affected by this terrible post-communist syndrome, and I look forward to the time when these people take over the administration of public affairs. That time has not yet come, and we are still living in a situation that forces us to ask ourselves how long it will take society to adapt to the new, more natural conditions of life and how deeply the totalitarian era has affected our souls"* (Havel, 1997). This section aims

to bring to light this imprint of communism and the crucial role of democratisation. The construction of Czech democracy is not achieved solely through holding free presidential elections and the confrontation between different political parties. As such, observations cannot be limited to a formal definition of democracy, which is confined to the electoral process and institutions but must also include establishing a democratic political culture (Perron, 2001). Therefore, democratisation depends as much on the outcome of elections as on the dissemination within the Czech population of liberal and democratic representations capable of driving the political process and institutions.

The role of language goes beyond that of undermining political adversaries. Manipulation and fear are at the centre of the presidential campaigns. Several articles repeatedly criticised Andrej Babiš for employing fear-inducing tactics and messages. When it comes to the use of manipulative language, a parallel is formed between Babiš and former president Miloš Zeman. A further parallel can be drawn with communism, notably how communist propaganda uses language to manipulate public perceptions (Fidelius, 2016). The rhetoric of Babiš focused on external threats, particularly war and migration while presenting himself as the protector and holder of peace, reminiscent of Soviet or American propaganda during the Cold War era. Propaganda or misinformation to win public support and incite rejection (or even hatred) of an enemy or adversary is nothing new. However, the role of the media is crucial in the fight against disinformation, and political tactics that play on fear and lies should be pointed out. Populism may well be to the twenty-first century what totalitarianism was to the twentieth: the main danger to democracy. Since democracy is essentially representative, the crisis of representative democracy, of which populism is a clear symptom, is a crisis of democracy. Nonetheless, populism is less an ideology than a rhetoric and differs from propaganda.

In addition, and according to several articles, Babiš claims to be able to solve economic, social, or political problems quickly. Playing on collective sensitivities and emotions. Advocating for nationalism seems to be intrinsically combined with populist politics (Benjamin de Cleen, 2017). On the one hand, there is an increasingly pronounced questioning of the relationship between national sovereignty, security, and international obligations, and the issue of immigration on the other. For instance, the articles highlight Babiš disdain for NATO, playing on the fear of the collective defence regulation. One should note that only once was the Article invoked following the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Many articles highlight the crucial role of NATO in the national security of the Czech Republic and its international standing. As such, the controversial statements around NATO and not fulfilling potential obligations [11, 18] were met with widespread criticism, underscoring the importance of maintaining solid international alliances.

This certainly reflects the broader anxieties regarding the role of the Czech Republic in the face of Russian aggression. The legacy of Soviet-era conflicts is still present, and the Soviet invasion of 1968 had a significant impact on the regime in place until the Velvet Revolution. Yet, there is a search for unity, and the depiction of the presidential campaign of 2023 highlights one particular narrative: progress and transformation. Both candidates have a communist past. However, it appears that the transformation of Petr Pavel, his qualifications, acts and prominent role in NATO are all a testament to the hope and change envisioned by the Velvet Revolution [9]. Article 9, in particular, frames the victory of Pavel as a sign of progress and transformation, which contrasts with the inability of Babiš to overcome his controversial past fully. While the popularity of Babiš is indisputable, it is also clear that voters valued personal growth and integrity over fear-based politics. Pavel's victory is also

that of national unity and is perceived positively on the global stage, with endorsement from international allies reinforcing this sentiment. While traces of the communist regime remain today, it is clear that the path is only one of transformation and progress if one considers the past in political analysis. For the reason above, the power of media and public perception must not be taken lightly. As we have mentioned above, the growing influence of disinformation and manipulation of media narratives in Czech politics has been highlighted in several articles [2, 6, 14, 17, 23].

There is a need for critical thinking as well as media literacy, where historical narratives can be weaponised in political battles. There is a need for accountability and transparency to address historical legacies and move forward. The narratives which emerge from this analysis reveal that Czech society is still grappling with its complex and painful past. This is compounded by anxieties about the future and a desire to move forward. The 2023 presidential election was not merely about choosing a candidate but defining the Czech identity and charting a course for the future. It also sends a message on the international and European stage. The articles show that the debates surrounding the election were not just about politics but about values, history and the very soul of the Czech Republic, to quote Havel. In many ways, the election reflected the ongoing struggle to come to terms with the past, navigate the present and build a future in line with the direction set following the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The research project has its share of limitations. For instance, while diverse, the selection of articles and media outlets may only partially represent the breadth of public sentiment and media discourse. This analysis focused on six media outlets that were selected through purposive sampling. Although they were chosen for their diverse political orientations to

reflect the Czech media sphere thoroughly, the analysis may not capture the full range of public sentiment and media discourse as it does not include alternative media outlets that might present more narratives. As Strömbäck and Esser (2014) note, media systems can vary significantly in their structures, practices, and orientations, which can lead to divergent coverage of political issues. Similarly, Hallin and Mancini (2004) highlight how media systems are shaped by historical, political, and cultural factors, which can result in media outlets catering to specific ideological leanings or audience segments. The exclusion of these alternative perspectives in the current analysis may limit the ability to fully understand the breadth of public discourse surrounding the communist past in the 2023 Czech presidential election. This limitation aligns with Sabina Mihelj's (2017) proposal about current research that lacks broader dimensions of post-socialist media. Future research would benefit from a more comprehensive examination of the media landscape to capture a broader range of narratives and sentiments the public expresses.

Another limitation could be any researcher's pre-existing political bias. The researcher's ideological leanings, especially political views, can influence how the media narratives are interpreted (Crow & Lawlor, 2016). Researchers are themselves products of particular media systems and political cultures, which may shape their perspective on the role of the media in shaping collective memory (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In this study, the researcher's experiences and background as a Czech citizen may introduce certain biases in how they perceive and analyse the media's portrayal of the socialist past. For example, suppose the researcher has personal connections to individuals who suffered under the communist regime. In that case, they may be more inclined to view any positive portrayal of communist figures as unacceptable, even if the media intends to highlight the nuances of personal transformation. Conversely, suppose the researcher has a more left-leaning political

orientation. In that case, they may be more sympathetic to narratives that seek to rehabilitate specific communist figures or acknowledge the positive aspects of the regime.

As with any research, one's personal beliefs, values and prejudices can impact the results' design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Despite the efforts to maintain objectivity and rigour throughout the process, it is crucial to recognise factors which may have influenced the selection of literature, the formulation of research questions, the interpretation of results and the overall conclusions drawn from the study. To mitigate these potential biases, objectivity and transparency were strived for in this analysis. The researcher's own political views were acknowledged, and how they may influence the interpretation of the media narratives was determined. In this research, a conscious effort was made to avoid bias by not selecting articles that were overly critical of the researcher's preferred candidate. To ensure objectivity, articles discussing the pasts of all candidates were chosen, providing a balanced perspective on the coverage of their histories. Furthermore, diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical studies were used to help contextualise the findings and provide a more balanced understanding of the complex interplay between media and political discourse in post-socialist societies.

In conducting this thesis, the researcher is fully aware of the negative impact of the communist regime on many lives. This awareness does not compromise the objectivity of the research, as there is also a deep personal interest in the topic. This perspective is influenced by the fact that, having not experienced the regime firsthand, the researcher relies on second-hand accounts and various sources. This background ensures a balanced and unbiased approach to analysing the historical narratives presented in the media coverage. However, if someone else were to replicate this research using the same search criteria and results, they could potentially draw different conclusions. Although this research provides a detailed

analysis, it should be viewed as a preliminary study that lays the groundwork for future, more extensive research on media narratives. Future studies could involve a larger sample size, extend the analysis over a longer period, or compare multiple presidential elections in the Czech Republic or other post-socialist countries.

5. Conclusion

This thesis examined how the media portrayed narratives related to the socialist past in their coverage of the 2023 Czech presidential election and how prominent the articles referencing the socialist past were within the election coverage. The quantitative analysis revealed that 24% of articles on the election referenced the communist era, which indicates a significant emphasis on these themes. However, the distribution of such articles varied across media outlets. Some, like Alarm and Deník N, dedicated more coverage to the candidates' socialist past than others, like Echo24 and Aktuálně.

The qualitative analysis identified several dominant narratives that persistently appeared in the media coverage. These included „Describing the communist past as a political weapon", with both candidates' opponents using their historical affiliations to discredit them. The media also addressed the ongoing societal struggle to reconcile with socialism. This was evident through narratives like „Once a communist, always a communist" or „The bad communist versus the good communist". Andrej Babiš, in particular, was portrayed as leveraging nostalgia for the communist era and fearmongering tactics to position himself as a saviour. The media highlighted the contradiction in Babiš courting support from the Communist Party while also warning against the „new totalitarianism". In contrast, Petr Pavel received more nuanced coverage, with outlets acknowledging his transparency about his past and personal transformation

Overall, the media played a significant role in shaping the discourse surrounding the socialist past and the suitability of the presidential candidates. This research addresses the gap in scholarly inquiry regarding the representation, remembrance, and interpretation of socialist history in contemporary Czech media. By examining how these historical narratives are portrayed, this study enhances our understanding of the ongoing influence of the socialist past on current media practices and public discourse in the Czech Republic.

Summary

Tato práce zkoumá, jak média ve svém pokrytí českých prezidentských voleb v roce 2023 zobrazovala narativy spojené se socialistickou minulostí a jak často se články odkazující na socialistickou minulost objevovaly v rámci volebního zpravodajství. Kvantitativní analýza odhalila, že 24 % článků o volbách odkazovalo na komunistickou éru, což svědčí o podstatném důrazu na tato témata. Distribuce těchto článků se však napříč médii lišila. Některá, jako například Alarm a Deník N, se socialistické minulosti kandidátů věnovala více než jiná, jako například Echo24 a Aktuálně.

Kvalitativní analýza identifikovala několik dominantních narativů, které se trvale objevovaly v rámci zpravodajství. Patřilo k nim „popisování komunistické minulosti jako politické zbraně", přičemž odpůrci obou kandidátů využívali jejich historickou příslušnost k jejich diskreditaci. Média se také zabývala pokračujícím společenským bojem za vyrovnání se se socialismem. To bylo patrné prostřednictvím narativů typu „Jednou komunista, navždy komunista" nebo „Zlý komunista versus dobrý komunista". Zejména Andrej Babiš byl vykreslován jako ten, kdo využívá nostalgie po komunistické éře a taktiky vyvolávání strachu, aby se postavil do role spasitele. Média zdůrazňovala rozpor v tom, že se Babiš uchází o podporu komunistické strany a zároveň varuje před „novou totalitou". Naproti tomu

o Petru Pavlovi se psalo vyváženěji a média oceňovala jeho transparentnost ohledně minulosti a osobní proměny.

Média celkově sehrála významnou roli při utváření diskurzu o socialistické minulosti a vhodnosti prezidentských kandidátů. Tento výzkum zaplňuje prostor ve vědeckém bádání, pokud jde o reprezentaci, připomínání a interpretaci socialistické historie v současných českých médiích. Zkoumáním toho, jak jsou tyto historické narativy zobrazovány, tato studie rozšiřuje naše chápání přetrvávajícího vlivu socialistické minulosti na současnou mediální praxi a veřejný diskurz v České republice.

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List of Appendices

Appendix 1 - Citations of Analysed Articles

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Appendix 2

Table utilised to display the narratives in the articles.

The file was too large for the Appendix; therefore, here is a link:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1nec09zhITUDUV9PqR3EdV-cRe5JkpBvX/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=11553483638068641266O&rtpof=true&sd=true

Appendix 3

Article summaries

Link to the file:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MXJMyXpFQD1vUw9zTBT6s4UzjlWJRVOH/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=11553483638068641266O&rtpof=true&sd=true