

Reviewer's report

Lydie Kárníková, Discourse(s) on Communism in post-socialist Czech Republic: Memory, Heritage and Media

Reviewer: Veronika Pehe, MA, PhD

Lydie Kárníková's thesis tackles the question how media discussions have approached the socialist past in the Czech Republic on the example of two case studies: the passing of the law on the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes and discussions about the renaming of a set of streets in Ostrava. The study reveals how the media debate around these events drew on and in turn reinforced what Kárníková terms "the dominant discourse on communism" and how the media function as a significant mnemonic actor that shapes shared notions of the past. Methodologically, the two case studies are based on critical discourse analysis of a selected corpus of mainstream printed media articles about the two events, which are robustly contextualized within the more general public discourse on the socialist past in the Czech Republic.

Overall, the thesis adds a valuable empirical contribution to the scholarly literature on anticommunism and dealing with the socialist past in the Czech public sphere, none of which has, to my knowledge, been based on such an extensive empirical study of how anticommunist discourse actually works on the textual level as a covert ideological operation. In this sense, I find the project undertaken in the thesis novel. As I have already had the opportunity to read a prior version of the thesis submitted for the internal defence, some of my comments will address the changes made. I was particularly impressed with how the new conclusion has been improved compared to the previous version, which did not sufficiently highlight the study's original contribution and relied on secondary literature; the new version now does justice to the thesis' original findings, laying them out and summarizing them clearly.

The thesis makes an original contribution to the analysis of the memory of the socialist past in the Czech Republic. It argues persuasively that the debates around the national memory institute offered a crime-centred notion of the socialist past, while the discussion around renaming streets in Ostrava rather revolved around notions of discontinuity with the past. Through careful analysis, the thesis reveals the nuances of the "dominant discourse on communism" and the different strategies of rhetorical separation from the past in the Czech public sphere. Of the two cases, I found the second one on Ostrava street names particularly insightful, as it reveals a complex picture that takes into account unexpected and non-ideologically driven factors in memory politics at the local level (such the reluctance of the population to go through the administrative burden of having streets renamed).

The presented text is logically structured, moving from the more general to the particular. The theoretical apparatus is laid out clearly and comprehensibly, the choice of the two case studies is explained and justified. Lydie persuasively demonstrates that she is well read in the relevant literature on both memory and heritage, the extant literature on anticommunism, and the literature on the methods applied. I do, however, have several critical comments.

As is often the case with theses at various levels, the text includes a robust theoretical apparatus that bears only partially on the actual analysis and discussion. Of course, the purpose of a thesis is also to demonstrate the candidate's familiarity with the relevant literature, theories, and methods in the field and this thesis does so abundantly. Although some effort was made (e.g. in chapter 2.6.1.) in comparison to the previous version to link the theoretical part to the actual subject of enquiry, more could still have been done in this direction. It is also a question if the discussion sufficiently speaks to the chosen theoretical concepts. While the case study on Ostrava street names is novel and insightful, the case study on the passing of the law on ÚSTR could have used a more explicit conclusion in section 6.1.2.3 that would have summarized the findings and related them more explicitly to the previously outlined memory studies concepts.

In comparison to the previous version of the thesis, I appreciate that Lydie has added more political context in which the dominant discourse on communism developed and also that she attempted to address the political and ideological underpinnings of Czech media, both on the level of discourse and individual media outlets. Nevertheless, it is this part of the thesis that exposes a remaining research gap: the history of Czech post-1989 media remains only cursorily mapped. Although I appreciate that the thesis quotes my own work on Czech postsocialist media, I was somewhat uneasy the thesis now relies heavily on one of my texts from a non-scientific publication for the general public (Pehe 2023). While I stand by the conclusions of that text, it is an essay rather than scholarly study, and not based on empirical research. I make this to highlight that Lydie has chosen to tackle a subject that partially lacks well-founded research and as such, addressing this topic runs the risk of making impressionistic statements. If the thesis were to be turned into a book or series of articles (and I highly recommend the work to be published in some form), I would suggest engaging with David Klimeš's recent book *Od Listopadu po Novu*, which was apparently published only as this thesis was submitted, but would have otherwise given further backing to some of the claims about the Czech mediascape.

Coming from a different discipline, I would like to commend Lydie for engaging with the relevant historiography effectively and persuasively. Even if I could quibble with several remaining factual inaccuracies, from my point of view, they do not detract from the value of the argument. At other times I did, however, feel that some unsubstantiated generalizations are made, such as the *Memory of the Nation* project coming to "embody the memory of the socialist past" (for and by who, who are the recipients?).

Despite these drawbacks, I consider this thesis accomplished and of high quality. From a formal point of view, the study fulfils all the requirements of a PhD dissertation. The thesis tackles the tricky problem of performing discourse analysis in translation. Although at times rather mechanical translations and calques from the Czech obscure some of the more subtle meanings of the analysed corpus, the overall argument remains clear and comprehensible. I was also happy to see the present version of the thesis also makes more of an effort to avoid an excessive use of passive voice.

What could have perhaps further enriched the thesis would be a consideration – given that the study frequently evokes similar institutions to ÚSTR in Slovakia, Poland and elsewhere – of whether the discourse on the communist past in these neighbouring countries engages in similar ideological operations as the case analysed here. For

example, chapter 3.2 adds some comparative context and notes that memory legislation started to be used as “instruments of illiberal transition” in Hungary and Poland. Here, a short reflection could have added on why a similar development did not occur in the Czech Republic. Thus, in terms of questions for discussion during the defence, I would like to invite Lydie to reflect more on the international dimensions of the studied topic. Although the thesis reflects on a “regional grammar”, I would like to ask: how specific is the Czech case? Do the conclusions reached pertain only to Czech discourse on the past or do they hold wider relevance?

Recommendation

The thesis meets all the necessary requirements and I recommend it to be accepted by the committee.

Prague, 29.10.2024