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Participatory Journalism: The Case of the Czech Republic

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1. Introduction: The Czech national public sphere and political communication

Freedom of speech and the press in the Czech Republic are guaranteed under the Constitution and there currently exists a strong independent media. At the end of this decennium the influence of political parties on the media has further decreased. However, given the polarization of party competition, left-right division among the media can be observed. The ownership structure of the private media (i.e. print, radio and television) does not seem to affect news coverage, and investigative journalists continue to uncover and report important links between politicians and bureaucrats, private interests, and in some cases those involved in criminal activities. Despite numerous signs of disapproval and critiques originating from within the government and among leading political actors, there has never been an attempt to limit the independence of the media. The crucial regression in this respect, which severely undermined the constitutional right to inform and be informed, is the so-called *Muzzle Law*, which has introduced strict restrictions.²

Within the Czech print media, German companies own many of the national dailies. In contrast, ownership of the regional press is more balanced even though there is a tendency towards centralization. Public and private radio and television ownership exhibits considerable pluralism. With regard to foreign ownership of Czech media organisation the general impression is that this feature has not had undue influence on the ideological tone of media output. Of greater importance are the economic pressures on journalists, many of whom work in a competitive employment market that may undermine the scope of their independent action.

For many years, there was an important debate on digitalization of television broadcasting in the Czech Republic. One of the assumed effects was a greater liberalization of the domestic media market. The largest commercial channel, TV Nova, has been most vocal in its

¹ The chapter is work in progress, based on analysis done in Oslo in September 2009 by Jessie Hronesova and her study: Briefing paper on Euroscepticism: the Czech Republic, Prague 2009.

² The so-called *Muzzle Law*, an amendment to Act No. 141/1961 Coll., introduced a ban on publishing any account from police wiretapping in newspapers, the internet, TV, or radio. Pursuant to the law, it was forbidden in a specific controversial case to make public that the police had wiretapped an important politician, who had lobbied for a businessman under suspicious circumstances. The amendment was adopted by clear majority in the Chamber of Deputies without much discussion. This law sets severe punishments such as fines or imprisonment for journalists who are tried and convicted. The threat of the punishment looms even if the journalist brings the information in public interest; even those journalists who would publish a police wiretapped discussion of a politician lobbying in the interest of a private company have to be taken to court.

opposition to the introduction of digital television fearing loss of market share with a more plural system. TV Nova was successful in prolonging the negotiations on the process over much of the past decade. In October 2005, official digital broadcasting started and in 2008 modernization and construction of the infrastructures for further improvement of the digital network was started. Digitalization has led to a growing pluralism among television broadcasters and increased competition is re-shaping the media landscape of the Czech Republic. As of April 2010, there are 6 private television broadcasting providers with broadcasting licenses for the whole national territory; and there are approximately 50 private regional broadcasting companies. Another important issue in this respect is the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting. This is an administrative authority which oversees state administration in the area of radio and television broadcasting and re-transmission. The council also supervises, maintains and further develops the range of programme on offer to the public. Various members of the Council, nominated by parliamentary political parties, are regularly scrutinized in the media for attempting to exercise political pressure on Czech TV media.

In the 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections, the voices of Eurosceptics seemed to become louder than ever before. Among the European Union Member States, the Czech Republic, a member since 2004 and a comparatively small EU-state, is often considered an *enfant terrible* due to the strong Eurosceptic views of President Václav Klaus and some other prominent political figures. Although the Czech Republic presided the Council of the European Union at the time of the EP elections, the election campaigns of major political parties were largely ignoring European topics and focused primarily on domestic issues. In fact, even controversies over the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, the only European theme that came forward in the elections, were interpreted as part of the domestic political clashes. It corresponds with the Eurobarometer Survey results. In the Czech republic, 36% of respondents mentioned as important the position of candidates on national issue compared with 27% of respondents, who mentioned European issues [Eurobarometer 2009].

Euroscepticism as a political discourse that rejects the competencies and constitutional framework of the European Union [Mair 2007] is by no means a novelty in the Czech political discourse.³ It has been brought to the notice of the public mainly by the incumbent President of the Republic, Václav Klaus, and the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), of which he was the founder. Although Václav Klaus officially submitted the application for entry to the EU in 1996, he has in time become one of the most ardent opponents of any further enlargement of the EU in terms of power scope, and a major dissenter of the European Constitution and the Lisbon Treaty.

The campaign of Czech political parties to the European Parliament was marked by the March fall of Topolánek's government and the prospect of upcoming elections in October 2009. The European elections thus suffered from the domestic partisan conflict between the two main parties - ODS and ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party) - and were used as a preview for the upcoming national parliamentary elections planned for the fall of 2009, which were at the end postponed to be held in the regular term in May 2010.

As a result of the inter-party struggle, European topics, with the exception of the Lisbon Treaty, were missing on the agenda of the main political parties. Their campaigns were primarily based on a negative depiction of their rivals, which shaped the course of the pre-election party public happenings. ODS blamed the Social democrats for causing the fall of the

³ Kopecký (2004) provides an analysis of the Czech Euroscepticism prior to the EU accession.

government in the midst of the EU Presidency without any back-up plan, and criticized their programme on social policies. ČSSD, on the other hand, accused the ODS of precipitating the financial crisis and later on of organizing the so-called “egg” attacks. There, Social democrats and especially their leader, Jiří Paroubek, had to face attacks of mostly young people who were dissatisfied by the party and started throwing eggs at party representatives during their rallies.⁴

In fact, the egg attacks marked the entire course of the election campaign. It not only brought the public attention to the domestic party conflicts but also provoked widespread discussions about the state of democracy in the Czech Republic. It was often questioned whether the acts of young people should be regarded as freedom of speech, or rather as direct personal assaults that should be punishable under the criminal code. Although political experts differed in their interpretation of the egg attacks and their impact on the election results, it was generally agreed that the fall of Topolánek’s government and the ensuing public comportment of Jiří Paroubek discredited the Social democrats who came second in the EP elections.⁵

Only new or small political parties (none of which passed the 5% threshold) focused on European agenda in their programmes. Apart from the Green Party that focused nearly exclusively on European environmental issues, other parties focusing on the EU topics were either strongly Eurosceptic (Libertas.cz, Suverenita and the Party of Free Citizens) or manifestly pro-European (European Democratic Party and the Association of Independent Candidates – European Democrats). The former argued in their programmes that the Czech Republic as a small and weak member of the European Union would have even less of say on EU policies were the Lisbon Treaty ratified.⁶ Although the loss of sovereignty has repetitiously been a strong Eurosceptic argument against all projects of deepening the EU integration, concrete examples or excerpts e.g. from the Lisbon Treaty or elsewhere that would support this claim were presented only rarely. In fact, populist Eurosceptic parties – Libertas.cz and Suverenita – mostly “recycled” their previous opposing arguments to the European Constitution and argued that the European Union would be turned into a superstate with a state-like president and government. The Party of Free Citizens initiated the so-called *European Contract* that called for dissolution of the EU in its current form and replacing it by a loose economic association of European countries.⁷ On the other hand, the pro-European parties argued not only in favour of the Lisbon Treaty but also in favour of further economic and political both on the European and also on the transatlantic level.⁸

Participatory journalism provides a unique chance to compare the ideas and views of professionals with the public. By the use of discussion fora, discussion groups, commenting functions or even blogs written by the members of general public, policy makers and journalists it is possible to get a sense of the public-wide debates across the country.

The condition for participatory journalism can be characterized in general as the access to the internet and the proportion of internet users in the Czech population. According to the current study, in May 2010 62% of citizens were internet users (54% has internet at home and

⁴ The first egg was thrown a student in Kolin, who later created a Facebook group *Eggs on Paroubek*.

⁵ This was also thematized in one of the coded articles (Machay 2009).

⁶ One of the blog entries analyzed in this study compared the political programmes of Czech Eurosceptic parties (Bricháček, Tomáš, 2 June, 2009). An overview of all party programmes in Czech can be accessed at the Euroskop website.

⁷ More details in Czech at the party’s webpage (Svobodní 2009).

⁸ A very useful overview of the 2009 EP elections party programmes can be found at Stavba CMKOS 2009 webpage.

additional 8% has access to internet somewhere else).⁹ There is also a rapid growth of users of social networks – while in October 2009 Facebook.com had around 100,000 users, in February 2010 it was around 230,000.

2. Research questions and subsequent hypotheses

Central topic of this chapter is the impact of the online public sphere in amplifying EU political debates. In order to answer the question of what is the character of online media in the Czech Republic, research questions formulated by Michailidou and Trenz were used.¹⁰

Research Question 1. What is the impact of the internet on the publicity of EU political communication and news-making on EU political affairs in general?

Research Question 2. What is the impact of the internet on the participation dynamics in EU political debates?

Research Question 3. What is the impact of the internet on the formation of public opinion and the evaluation of the legitimacy of the EU?

The data used for analysis focused on newspapers' websites and political blogs. The websites and blogs included in the sampling process had to fulfil simultaneously three main criteria: (1) being the most or among the most visited sites in their field, (2) allowing for some form of participation from the part of the audience, and (3) having RSS feeds available. The sites' popularity was measured according to the rankings made by www.alexa.com. Although there is a tool that generates the most-visited Czech websites (<http://www.siteinfo.cz/top-weby>), which was also consulted, the Alexa rating was given preference to choose the appropriate newspaper sites for this analysis. Here we were forced to make some selection.

In the Alexa rating (see table 1), there are only nine websites on news and politics, excluding websites of TV stations (TV Nova, CT24 and CT). The three selected news reporting websites - *Novinky*, *Aktuálně*, *Lidové noviny* - represent the only sites that fulfilled the given criteria. For instance, although *Deník.cz* has a higher Alexa rating (than e.g. *Lidové noviny*), it operates at a regional level and thus has detailed regional and nationwide section compared to the limited amount of articles published on world news. *Volny.cz* and *Tiscali* are also among the first 100, but they do not offer RSS function and their news reporting is very limited and informative only. In general, the selected webpages also represent the Czech political spectrum: *iHned*, *Aktuálně* and *iDnes* standing on the centre right, *Lidové noviny* in the centre (although leaning towards right) and *Novinky* on the centre left of the spectrum. In the Czech Republic, all traditional newspapers have their online versions such as *Lidové noviny* (*lidovky.cz*), *Mladá Fronta Dnes* (*iDnes.cz*), *Hospodářské noviny* (*iHned.cz*) and *Právo* (*Novinky.cz*). Likewise, most political blog sites are associated with major newspapers. For that reason, *blogy.idnes.cz* and *blog.ihned.cz* were selected as the main sites *iDnes.cz* and *iHned.cz* rank high in the Alexa rating. The bloggers of *iHned.cz* and *iDnes.cz* are often cited in media and belong to the best-known in the CR.

⁹ Study Factum Invenio, Dnes 17.5.2010, p. A4.

¹⁰ Asimina Michailidou and Hans-Jörg Trenz: Mediating European Integration: Online political communication in European Parliamentary election campaign. Ms., Oslo 2010.

Table 1. The top 10 most popular websites for political news in the Czech Republic based on the Alexa Rating as of 24 August 2009¹¹

Rank	Name	Webpage	Alexa Rating
1.	Seznam ¹²	http://www.seznam.cz/	1
2.	Novinky	http://www.novinky.cz/	6
3.	Centrum (Aktuálně)	http://aktualne.centrum.cz/	7
4.	iDnes	http://www.idnes.cz/	9
5.	Volný	http://web.volny.cz/	53
6.	Deník	http://www.denik.cz/	57
7.	Česká televize	http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/	64
8.	iHned	http://ihned.cz/	86
9.	Tiscali	http://www.tiscali.cz/	87
10.	Lidové noviny	http://www.lidovky.cz/	92

3. Investigating the 2009 European election campaign on the web

3.1. Political e-sphere in the Czech Republic

The selected electronic media used for the purpose of this study are nearly exclusively (with the exception of *Aktuálně*) linked to a printed daily newspaper. *Novinky* is closely connected with the left-wing *Právo* (The Right), *Lidovky* with one of the oldest Czech newspapers *Lidové noviny* (People's News), *Blogy.idnes* with *Mladá Fronta Dnes* (Young Front Today) and *Blog.ihned* with *Hospodářské noviny* (the Economic Newspaper). As the largest publishing group on the Czech market is Mafra Ltd. run by Michal Hanák and owned by the German publishing company Rheinisch-Bergische Druckerei und Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, two of the selected e-media sources pertain under this company: *Lidovky* and *iDnes*. In spite of the fact that most of the e-media analyzed is linked with a paper version, the overlap in information was limited. In this case we may conclude that the on-line media are different from the existing offline public sphere.

Firstly, blogs are in general practically exclusively an Internet-based platform (although occasionally some blog articles are converted into columns in the printed newspaper, e.g. the case of Jan Macháček's entries) and are thus able to swiftly and broadly capture the current mood in society. Secondly, the options given to a news reader on the Internet are much broader than in the case of printed media, as similar and often older articles are being lumped under one topic, discussions below the articles are enabled and background information is in some cases (such as *Aktualne.cz*) provided by links to other articles or even encyclopaedic sources. Again, any reaction to current events is severalfold swifter than with the printed news.

In the Czech Republic, the number of readership of electronic media has been constantly growing as elsewhere in Europe in the past few years. The e-media offers not only a cheaper option but also updates the reader by minutes, not by a day as in the case of printed media.

¹¹ More detailed description of these websides including rating see in Appendix No. 1.

¹² *Seznam.cz* and *Novinky.cz* are owned by the same owner. The news editorial is thus the same and so are the news – readers are automatically redirected from *seznam.cz* to *novinky.cz*.

We can say that it is thus obvious that the e-media have played an important role in the EP election campaign. The impact was twofold and in two basic types of Internet sources: first was described above, i.e. the e-news reporting that brought constantly updated information and invited active participation of the readers in the debates. The speed with which the information was being brought to the reader could be at the expense of reliability – it was often the case that information was being denied and modified within only minutes or hours. In the Czech case, the egg-affair was monitored in such a way that numerous unconfirmed information related to the motivation of the attacks and the organizers were made public and later denied. This lower reliability and complexity is reflected in the trust in online media. Online media are not perceived in the same way as offline media as for truthfulness and complexity of information. The results of research survey¹³ conducted in the Czech Republic in March 2009, shortly before the period analyzed in this study, show that internet news servers¹⁴ are less known among the general public, people created their opinion on them to a lesser extent and held the news as less complex.

The second Internet-based source that played a major role in the EP elections campaigns in the Czech Republic was Facebook. Facebook was being used as a media to gather people of the same views and encourage them for communal actions: the egg attacks spread all over the country after a Facebook group was created that provoked Czech citizens to use eggs as means of disapproval with Jiří Paroubek (the chairman of Czech Social Democratic Party) and his party. Moreover, Facebook functioned as a public poll: just before the elections young people voted online and thus showed what their political preferences were.

Lastly, some political analysts reckoned that because ODS used Facebook for its campaign (ODS representatives had their Facebook profiles and groups) a long time prior to the elections, the party was able to get more support of young people than ČSSD that took up with a delay.

3.2. Analyzed e-media

As for the selected e-media used for this study, the quality of reporting differed although the topics and readers commentaries were very alike. The main news articles were published by *Lidovky*, *Aktualne* and *Novinky*, more extensive and in-depth analyses were generally offered by *Aktualne*. *Aktualne* also provided historical or political background for readers unfamiliar with the discussed topic. However, the readers of this server used many xenophobic or nationalist comments, calling the EU a *Euro Reich* and Eastern Europe a colony of Western Europe. Also, ODS was in many instances renamed into ODSS. The number of comments was usually very high – often reaching 800 or more – but not giving much space for well-founded evaluations of the European integration. In the case of *Aktualne*, quantity of comments exceeded the quality of them: the number of comments, for instance, to an article about a famous Czech singer was even three times as high.

Lidovky provided shorter articles with basic information, rarely offered any evaluations, referred to domestic topics and was usually flooded with – in most cases – unsubstantiated commentaries and entries without any sense or reference to the discussed topic – therefore,

¹³ “How the Czech public perceives truth and complexity of the news in Czech media?” Public Opinion Research Centre, Institute of Sociology AS CR, Press Release, Prague 5.5.2009, http://www.cvvm.cas.cz/upl/zpravy/100902s_om90505.pdf, accessed 18.05.2010.

¹⁴ Surveyed servers: idnes.cz; Novinky.cz; Aktualně.cz; Super.cz; Ihned.cz; Lidovky.cz.

these were not coded as they had no relevance to the EU whatsoever. It seems that only domestic topics were of any interest to the readers as the article on Declan Ganley prompted only 15 discussion entries. Also, there were quite a few Eurosceptics among the commentators, mostly opposing the Lisbon Treaty.

Novinky, the third chosen e-news server provided very low quality reporting that was mostly taken over by the Czech Press Office (ČTK) and thus merely stated the facts without giving any background, opinions or further reference. As in the other cases, *Novinky* primarily focused on domestic issues such as the racist and xenophobic pre-election campaign TV clip of the Workers' Party and the Roma issue in the CR (final solution of the Roma question, Roma parasites or black racism are discussed in the clip). As the server removes discussions after two months, debates were in most cases unavailable, although there were blog entries below the articles that were used and coded in this study.

As far as the blogs are concerned, bloggers of *iHned* without any doubt offered the best entries that adhered not only to the etiquette of style and length but also sufficiently explained their opinions and views. However, such articles inspired the lowest number of comments (the number never exceeded 18 with the exception of Jan Macháček – a well-known journalist and blogger). On the other hand, the commentators reflected the quality of the bloggers and also substantiated their arguments and thus offered their views with sufficient explanation. They also seemed to have some pre-knowledge of the discussed topic and only a few people in the discussion groups flamed. As all of the articles in the chosen period were coded (10 out of 10), the case of *iHned* is very useful for the aims of this analysis in terms of discussed topics. In fact, bloggers of *iHned* covered nearly the full range of EU-related topics: political programmes of the candidate parties, ODS and ČSSD campaigns, the use of Facebook and the results in other countries and the new conservative faction in the EP.

Blogy.idnes differed from *iHned* in one major aspect: *iDnes* offers its blogging platform to anyone and thus in the selected period there were 235 articles found. This is also reflected on the quality of the blogs: they are in many cases very blustering and even insulting. Coded topics were for example violence during the EP campaigns (egg attacks), the Roma problem, racism in the Czech Republic, Czech MEPs and one blog entry offered a guidance on how to choose a party. Another blog focused on the meaning of the EP elections and came to the conclusion that the Czech Republic is a small country with only 22 MEPs that could not have any major impact on anything in the EP. There were high number of comments to the articles but only a few pertained to the discussed topic - provided evaluations and were thus coded.

4. Findings

4.1. The profile of the selected websites

a) *Novinky* (*Seznam*)

Type of content: Categories listed are home and world news (divided into geographical subsections), a section called *Just happened*, culture, economy, sports, blogs, education, career, interviews, travelling, TV programme and more. Emphasis is put on a visual catchiness of the articles at the expense of their content. Weekly news evaluation is also designed in the form of pictures. Information provided on the homepage comprises currency exchange rates, opinion polls and political jokes. Some articles also include videos as part of a new project called *Stream*. *Novinky* is based on a very simple platform but offers its readers

links to related articles or articles that might be of some interest to that particular reader. As there are no blogs or political analyses, personal opinions can be expressed only by the means of commenting on articles. (The comments are sometimes very emotional and rarely to the point.) Users can comment on every article and the RSS feeds, mobile phone and email news are also available.

Style of writing: *Novinky* is trying to cover high quantities of issues and thus the articles are usually short and offer only limited analysis, prioritizing quantity and speed. On the other hand, headlines are quite long or even in the form of full sentences. The news source of the entries is in the majority of cases the Czech News Agency, ČTK, only.

Political affiliation/ editorial stance: *Novinky* is the news section of the most popular Czech web portal *Seznam.cz* (ranked even higher than Google) and supplied by *Právo* newspaper. *Právo* (originally called *Rudé Právo*, i.e. The Red Right) is one of the oldest Czech (Czechoslovak) newspapers, founded in 1920, that had been closely associated with the Communist Party until 1990s. After 1989, the name of the paper changed to *Právo* and although it does not officially support the Communist party it still adheres to the political Left, or Centre Left, and takes advantage of the former reader base.

Ownership information: *Novinky* is a joint project of the private company *Seznam* and *Novinky* that are owned by Borgis, a.s. (the publisher of *Právo* newspaper). Borgis was established by the editorial team of *Rudé právo* in 1990.

b) *Aktualne.centrum.cz*

Type of content: *Aktualne* offers a very broad variety of topics such as news (home, world, politics), economy, analyses, science, finances, lifestyle, travelling, culture, online interviews, videos, blogs (of well-known politicians, writers, or economists). A special section is dedicated to up-to-date stories (elections, film festivals etc). There is even a news section in English. Compared to other websites, *Aktualne* allows more space for “green” topics (environmental protection and ecology) and human rights issues. It also abundantly quotes foreign media. Users can comment on every article and the RSS feeds and email news are also available.

Style of writing: Although the language of the entries is very simple and informative and the articles use narrative style, the spectrum of articles is broad and their analytical background is very high as well as the standard of professionalism. It also brings a number of investigative articles. The platform is very interactive: entries are accompanied by historic timelines or further explanation that in an unusual way give more background information to the covered stories (even quizzes are used). In 2005, the website came into existence and succeeded in attracting several famous reporters away from renowned media (such as *Hospodářské noviny* - Economic newspaper). The website is extraordinarily successful, is often quoted in print media and has up to 130,000 visitors every day.

Political affiliation: Centre right.

Ownership information: *Aktualne* is a journalistic project of its parent company - *Centrum.cz* (belongs to NetCentrum whereby the Warburg Pincus has the majority share).

c) *Lidovky.cz*

Type of content: The online version of one of the oldest Czech newspaper *Lidové noviny* (People's News, founded in 1893) brings news on culture, economy and politics. There are also categories such as business, internet, media, sport, online English lessons, people, TV

programme, auction, lifestyle, videos etc. Well-known and often cited on the radio and television is a section on opinions, commentaries and blogs. *Lidovky* also offers a section called “presentations” (study materials) and cooperates with a purely internet-based news provider *Neviditelný pes*. Users can comment on every article and the RSS feeds, mobile phone and email news are also available.

Style of writing: *Lidové noviny* are one of the most respected Czech media with a long tradition that provide quality news articles that adhere to standards of professional journalism. The language used is much more complex (often even literary) than in *Aktualne* or *Novinky*. In any case, the quality is prioritized over quantity and speed. The motto of the paper is: “It is more important to get quality information than quick information” (Černý, 2008). *Lidovky* put emphasis on society and lifestyle articles compared to other internet-based news providers. Also, it focuses on cultural topics and provides a cultural programme.

Political affiliation: Centre (right)

Ownership information: *Lidové noviny*, a.s. and Mafra, a.s. (Mafra a.s. is owned by the German publishing company Rheinisch-Bergische Druckerei und Verlagsgesellschaft mbH).

d) *Blogy.idnes.cz*

Type of content: *Blogy.idnes* is a platform for well-known Czech political and cultural figures to express their views on contemporary issues as well as for anyone from the general public. Therefore, the range of the covered themes is very broad. There is even a tool how to write a “common blog novel” and useful information about blogging. Blogs are divided into sections: politics, economy, society, sport, media, travel, science, poetry and photoblogging. IDnes.cz used to be the most popular news webpage (2008) and its blogging site still counts among the most visited ones. The commenting option is included.

Style of writing: Although anyone can create a blog on *blogy.iDnes.cz*, there is a very strict policy on choosing bloggers whose entries are included on the homepage. There is an editorial board that closely studies the blogs and excludes those with grammatical mistakes or vulgar language [Černý, 2008].¹⁵ Only exceptional and original quality blog entries can provide their authors a place among “VIP bloggers”. Lukáš Macek (leader of SNK ED party) or Jana Bobošíková (leader of the political party Suverenita) are two of the most famous bloggers of *iDnes*.

Political affiliation: Centre right predominates

Ownership information: Michal Hanák, Mafra, a.s. (Mafra a.s. is owned by the German publishing company Rheinisch-Bergische Druckerei und Verlagsgesellschaft mbH).

e) *blog.ihned.cz*

Type of content: The content of the blogs is just like the content of the news articles very austere and to the point. Economic and political topics predominate; entries on culture or lifestyle appear only rarely. Blogs are divided into economic blogs, students’ blogs, Hyde Park (a mixture of various blog articles) and other blogs. Top bloggers are also included on the homepage as well as the topic of the date.

¹⁵ The editorial policy was copied from colleagues of the Slovakian server SME.sk.

Style of writing: *Hospodářské noviny* (Economic newspaper) is probably the most serious newspaper in the Czech Republic (*The Czech media landscape*) that specialises in political and economic topics and addresses an educated readership. The offered blogs are basically commentaries of leading economic and political experts on the one hand, and students or journalists on the other. Jan Macháček (journalist for the *Respekt* magazine), Ondřej Schneider (economist), Iva Brožová (Head of the Czech Supreme Court), Martin Pecina (Head of the Czech Anti-Trust Office) and Michal Horáček (writer and musician) are probably the most prominent bloggers using the site. Although there is no editorial board as in the case of *iDnes*, a so-called “Bloggers’ code” is provided on the homepage that gives guidelines to the bloggers and the content of their writing and also sets rules regarding the language and information.

Political affiliation: Business and economic blogs or Centre right

Ownership information: The Economia publishing group, owned by the group of businessman Zdeněk Bakala. It publishes the daily *Hospodářské noviny* (Economic paper), the weekly *Ekonom* (Economist) and several special-interest titles. Zdeněk Bakala bought Economia from the German Handelsblatt group in the summer 2008, making Economia the only major publishing company that is not in foreign ownership.

4.2. Interactive opportunities on e-media

In the Czech Republic, there are no restrictions on the use of means of interaction on e-media: all that is needed is an email address and username that will appear above the comment. As there has not been pursued any substantial study of the socio-demographic background of the users of these options, i.e. commentators, it is quite difficult to provide any reliable information in terms of the social background of the readership. However, based on this study, it is clear that with the exception of some instances (*iHned* and a few comments in *Lidovky*), the readers did not have sufficient knowledge about the topic or political structures in the country or the EU as such and used the e-media as a platform to express their general dissatisfaction with their economic situation or the political situation in the Czech Republic. The comments thus brought many evaluations but these pertained to the studied topic only to a limited degree. In any case, the comments brought numerically more evaluations of the EU than was included in the main text. As there were more evaluations in the comments, also the number of direct evaluations was higher. As opposed to the comments, indirect evaluations dominated the main text.

Table 2. Topics of the debate - Justification of Worth in the Main Text

Topics	Justification of Worth in the Main Text		Justification of Worth in Comments	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Democracy	15	48,4	23	48,9
Culture	1	3,2	2	4,3
Necessity	1	3,2	4	8,5
Economic prosperity	3	9,7	5	10,6
Safety	1	3,2	4	8,5
N/A	10	32,3	9	19,1
Total	31	100.0	47	100.0

Even though there were more evaluations present in the comments, the Justification of Worth did not substantially differ in the main text and the comments as democracy-related justifications prevailed in both cases – both in a positive or negative way, i.e. the EU infringing on democratic institutions or safeguarding them. As already indicated, many citizens compared the previous communist era with the current situation order and either advocated or opposed it. In this context, a common practice was to enumerate how many of today's politicians were previously members of the communist party.

The only major difference regarding the Justification of Worth variable can be found in the value Safety. Safety seemed to matter more in the comments to the main articles than in the articles as such. The reason for that mostly stems from the fact that readers were using arguments linked to the “Russian threat”, which would not be acceptable in any professional type of journalism. As for the divergences between journalists and policy makers in arguments, there were no major clashes either because some of the journalists clearly supported one party over another.

4.3. Evaluation of the discussions in the comments

Participatory journalism in the Czech Republic is certainly a *novum* which also has an impact on the quality of the entries made by the public. Most of the articles in the popular e-media coded in this study were flooded by absurd comments that often did not react to the topic of the article. Although most of such comments were not coded and thus are not reflected in the tables as only relevant and EU-related entries were used (the value for Relation is thus very high 80.9%), the coded comments were often very short and did not provide sufficient information about the argument of the reader. Therefore, the Maxim of Quantity was met only in 57.4% of the cases. On the other hand, although flaming was used in the comments, offensive language was either removed by the administrators or did not relate to the coded topic and so the Maxim of Manner reached 83%. People do tend to use more vulgar expressions due to the anonymity of the Internet platform, but there were only few cases when the informal language usage was Europe-related. For instance, one commentator called the MEPs *free-loaders* and *parasites*, which was considered as good flaming. Moreover, none of the comments coded would be considered bad flaming.

Netiquette in the main articles was basically always respected – only when other actors were quoted, cited or paraphrased, the maxims deviated somehow from the norm. The Maxim of Manner was breached only on two occasions but that was when a political actor and a citizen, who used very informal language, were quoted, i.e. when indirect actors were coded. Also, quite understandably, the Maxim of Relation was never breached in the main articles. As in the comments, the main articles often lacked enough argument to support the evaluation – this was again the case when other actors were being quoted. The Maxim of Quantity thus reached only 45.2%.

Overall, the discussions that followed the main articles were mostly irrelevant to the coded topic and thus only a limited number of them were used for the purpose of this study. European-related topics slightly dominated immediately after the EP elections results were made public but the domestic political squabbling soon took over again. The large majority of what would be considered bad flaming was thus targeted at Czech politicians and concrete party actors, not the EU or its principles and ideas.

The plans for future integration could be described as rather sceptical. Results for the variable Project are also along the disapproval line. In the Level dimension, some politicians and

policy makers included in the analysis through a blog article (Petr Mach, leader of the Free Citizens) or were cited in the coded articles (Václav Klaus) opined that the EU integration could not be further deepened as it had already gone too far. The argument of a “superstate” was used in this context again. The reverse position was taken by one commentator who was of the view that the more powers the EU had the better it could protect the state from its own politicians. As for the inclusiveness, there were comments calling for leaving the EU in order to preserve the Czech national and state traditions. One commentator expressed a view that the EU was already too “large” and thus could not widen any further. He argued that the European integration functioned the best at times when there were only 15 members. Under the Scope variable, entries asking for instance about the European Parliament’s inclusion of the refugee and minority issues into its agenda were coded.

In general, there were only few extensive discussions regarding the concept, institutions (with the exception of the European Parliament) or design of the EU. Therefore, only in a minimum of cases could be coded as “comprehensive” messages, i.e. messages that would provide a substantiated opinion about the principle of integration (categories Principle, Polity and Project) at the same time. In fact, only one commentator opined that the EU was a “great idea” that has had many positive effects on the Czech Republic. Otherwise, only few messages were advocating the idea of the European integration. Even in those rare cases, the EU was regarded positively mainly as a safeguard against the fractured and inimical domestic political scene. However, there was one very critical but concrete criticism of the EU among the comments, which read that:

“The EU is over-regulated, it provides too many subventions to the agriculture, norms are badly formulated, the EU has no legal sovereignty, the EP is moving back and forth, which is expensive and the citizens have no control over the powers of the EP, the politicians sent to the EP are not charismatic...”

Also, an association made with the EU that was used in the comments was the previous communist regime when Czechoslovakia was under the sphere of Soviet influence: to some, the EU stands for a new Soviet Union, for others it shields the country from Kremlin.

Moreover, most of the evaluations in the main articles were indirect paraphrases of Czech party actors or non-party actors. Only two articles coded dealt with other EU member state – Declan Ganley in Ireland and the British National Party in the United Kingdom. The largest number of evaluations was found in the comments of citizens or in the blogs that were in the case of *iDnes.cz*, also written by citizens. Given the fact, that domestic politics and domestic political parties dominated the debates, evaluations of the EU appeared mainly in connection with the party programmes (Lisbon Treaty) or with the newly created parties (Euroseptic Libertas.cz and Party of Free Citizens).

4.4. Debate level

In the chosen media, 454 clippings were found overall, out of which 50 were chosen for coding, for structure see table 3.

Table 3. Number of clippings per website according three analysed periods

CR (Case 03)	Total number of clippings	Clippings coded		
		Period A	Period B	Period C
Website 11 (Novinky)	55	3 (11)	4 (19)	3 (25)
Website 12 (Aktualne)	83	3 (15)	4 (45)	3 (23)
Website 13 (Lidovsky)	71	3 (28)	4 (19)	3 (24)
Website 14 (Blogy.iDnes)	235	3 (51)	4 (109)	3 (75)
Website 15 (Blog.iHNed)	10	1 (1)	6 (6)	3 (3)
TOTAL	454	13 (106)	22 (192)	15 (150)

Most evaluations (75.6%) in the coded threads were supported by some kind of justification – democracy being the far most frequent (48.7%), followed by economic prosperity (10.4%).

The debate took place mainly in comments on the main text or comments on comments, see table 4 and 5 (where on the websites the articles were found).

Table 4. Location of evaluation of the EU on the Czech websites – Principle of integration

Principle of integration	Location			Total
	Main text	Comment on main text	Comment on comment	
Positive	1	1	2	4
Negative	-	2	2	4
N/A	28	17	23	68
Total	29	20	27	76

Table 5. Location of evaluation of the EU on the Czech websites – EU Polity

EU Polity	Location			Total
	Main text	Comment on main text	Comment on comment	
Level - Positive	4	1	3	8
Level - Negative	11	11	10	32
Scope - positive	1	-	1	2
Scope - negative	2	-	-	2
Inclusiveness - positive	-	1	2	3
Inclusiveness - negative	7	5	7	19
N/A	4	1	5	10
Total	29	19	28	76

Most frequent topic here was democracy, followed by economic prosperity, with the gap between democracy and economic prosperity being quite large, see table 6.

Table 6. Justification of Worth

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Democracy	38	29,7
	Culture	3	2,3
	Necessity	5	3,9
	Economic Prosperity	8	6,2
	Safety	5	3,9
	N/A	19	14,8
	Total	78	60,9
Missing	System	50	39,1
Total		128	100,0

The reason for that stems from the fact that among the Czech critics of the European Union, the EU is regarded as an undemocratic organization that uses undemocratic measures and policies (such as alleged unproportionality of votes or advantages for large countries) and thus the line of argumentation was coded under justification of democracy. On the other end of the opinion continuum, advocates of the EU argued that a democratic future of a small state such as the Czech Republic could only be secured by a trans-national organization on a European level. Another interesting finding, which certainly would not be found in the British or French case, was that very positive evaluations of the EU were frequent especially in economic terms. Evaluations that criticized the financial costs of the European Parliament were coded as necessity and positive assessments of the EU in security terms were coded as the safety variable (one comment saw the EU as a safeguard against Russia). Culture, in this analysis solely in the meaning of political culture, was the least frequent as the justification of democracy was predominant and in one way or another was part of every argument.

4.5. Evaluation of the EU legitimacy

Although paradoxically, the EU was not the main theme of the EP elections in 2009, there can be traced some predominant lines of argumentation of the evaluation of the principle, project and polity of the EU in the analyzed articles and comments. In other words, journalists, bloggers or citizens expressed their views in the analyzed articles either in favour or against the European integration, its future deepening, or any other kind of European cooperation.

The collected data suggests that the principle of European integration is contested in equal measures: the number of positive and negative evaluations is exactly the same. In one case, a defender of any sort of European cooperation argued that as a group of states, we could face the Russian threat better. In other cases, very patriotic or even nationalist readers argued that any kind of European domination over the Czech national bodies is wrongful.

Although the principle of European integration was not unequivocally rejected, the evaluations of the current institutional framework, state of integration and balance of influence of the member states in the EU were much more adverse. 42.3% of valid evaluations of the EU polity and 24.4% of valid assessments of the inclusiveness in the EU were negative. The overall picture becomes even bleaker if we add up all the negative evaluations of the EU polity, i.e. level, scope and inclusiveness: 69.3% of all coded EU assessments were in some way negative as opposed to only 17.9% positive views. The main

criticism directed at the EU level was concerning either the content of the Lisbon Treaty or the inefficiency of the European Parliament.

In this respect, it must be stressed that a general perception of the Lisbon Treaty is substantially influenced by the proclamations of Václav Klaus and only a limited amount of in-depth analysis on the content of the Treaty is offered to the public in the generic media. Likewise, the daily proceedings in the European Parliament are nearly never discussed in the Czech media. This lack of information was obvious from the comments of citizens, who were using general forms of criticism such as “the Lisbon Treaty is undemocratic” or the “European Parliament is a useless institution” (which seemed to be present even in other countries) and did not substantiate their arguments. In one extreme case, the European Union was labelled a “Euro Reich“ and another commentator argued that just as the Soviet Union, the European Union was posing threat to the liberties and freedoms of Czechs. As for the inclusiveness variable, the general argument read that the Czech Republic has no say in the EU, i.e. also in the European Parliament, and that the Czechs have to and will have to act as the large and old Member States dictate. Numerous comments to the selected articles tried to convince the Czechs that there was no need to be bothered on a weekend and go to the poll stations, as their voice would remain unheard. On the other hand, two articles tried to persuade the citizens that the European elections matter and they should use their right to vote. The analysis also showed that citizens do not feel to be sufficiently informed about the activities of the Czech MEPs as the Czech media generally focus on the domestic parliamentary issues and ignore the actions and voting on particular issues in the EP.

4.6. *Who participates (actors)*

The actors that are the most involved in the online debates are citizens, who account for 61.8% of all of the evaluations, followed by party actors with just 19.7% of the messages (see table 7). Concerning the scope of actors, majority of them were national actors (see table 8). The citizens’ predominance can however be seen as a consequence of the privileged role conferred to them by the commenting function, giving them the chance to take part directly in the discussions. Another explanation is that elites and journalist have much more opportunities to present tenor views in the official media and on the most important online forums.

Table 7. Actors involved in the online debate in the Czech Republic

Actors	No.	Percent
Journalists/Blogger	6	7,9
Citizen(s)	47	61,8
Party Actors	15	19,7
Non-Party State Actor	5	6,6
Non-State Actor	3	3,9
Total	76	100,0

Table 8. Scope of actors

Actor	Actors' Scope			
	National	Foreign	EU	Total
Journalists/Blogger	5	-	-	5
Citizen(s)	45	-	2	47
Party Actors	10	1	4	15
Non-Party State Actor	2	-	4	6
Non-State Actor	3	-	-	3
Total	65	1	10	76

5. Conclusion

The political campaign to the European elections was thus with the exception of pro-European parties nearly exclusively focused on domestic issues. Even the Eurosceptic voice of Václav Klaus was shouted down by the partisan conflict between the main parties that had started before the elections and still continues until today. In some extent we can say that here happened again the situation observed in time when the European Constitutional Treaty was discussed [Rakusanova 2008].

Online media definitely made the political debates accessible, understandable and salient. In spite of the fact that most of the e-media analyzed is linked with a paper version, the overlap in information was limited. In this case we may conclude that the on-line media are different from the existing offline public sphere, which confirms our hypothesis (1) [Michailidou, Trenz 2010] that the emerging EU-online public sphere is substantially different from the existing offline public spheres.

Evidence stemming from the analysis carried out on the e-media samples suggests that even at the time of the European elections the main topic of the journalist articles was domestic politics. This was caused by the internal political situation that was stirred up by the March fall of government and the clashes between the two main political parties – ODS and ČSSD. Throughout the entire EP campaign the domestic issues remained dominant in the discourse. Only a few blog entries thematized the importance of the EU or the European Parliament as an institution.

Also, in the instances where European topics came to the forefront, the two mostly discussed issues were the Lisbon Treaty and the effectiveness and democrateness of the European Parliament – an opinion prevailed that the number of Czech MEPs is insignificant in any case and the elections would thus not provide the Czech Republic with more influence over the EU policies. Though, only a few concrete examples were given – such as the agricultural policies or immigration problems. On occasions when the EU was criticized the argument of democracy was used as the EU was viewed by many as an institution that gives preference to large countries.

As for the journalistic quality of the coded articles, only blog entries were able to offer more evaluations of the European Union, especially on the *iHned.cz* website. Comments to the articles were in many cases in the form of short and vulgar expressions that were, however, not directed at the EU and thus were not coded. The predominance of domestic issues was also valid for the case of comments as most of these were related to the political situation or culture in the Czech Republic.

The uniqueness of online political debates analyzed in this study was not far to seek: the participation of the public offered evidence, which in an anonymous way showed the dissatisfaction of the readers with the political situation, but also proved that there is an immense lack of knowledge as far as the EU is concerned.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Profiles of the selected websites as of 24 August 2009 based on Alexa Rating– Czech Republic

	Alexa rating	Type of content	Political affiliation	Style of writing	Ownership	Comments	Reasoning for selection
Novinky (seznam)	7	Broad range of topics: home and world news (geographical subsections), section called <i>Just happend</i> , culture, economy, sports, blogs, education, career, travelling, tv programme etc.	Centre left	Often using colloquial and subjective expressions in headlines. Shorter articles offering only limited analysis, prioritizing quantity and speed.	Borgis, a.s.	Joint project of Pravo newspaper (centre left) and seznam internet server. Constantly updated – articles sorted by time.	The most popular Czech webpage is <i>seznam.cz</i> . <i>Novinky</i> is the news section of <i>seznam</i> and the most popular news webpage. Fulfilled the other criteria.
Aktualne.centrum.cz	8	Variety of topics: news (home, world, politics), economy, analysis, science, finances, lifestyle, travelling, culture, online interviews, videos, blogs (of famous people), special sections for current stories (elections, film festivals etc), news section in English		Informative, and simple language, a number of analytical articles. Often offers background to covered issues meant for the general public (timelines, explanation of terms, quizzes).	NetCentrum (Warburg Pincus has the majority share)	Compared to other webpages dedicates for time to “green” topics and human rights issues. Abundantly quotes foreign media.	Highly ranked, fulfilled the criteria.
Lidovky.cz	92	News, culture, stress extensive section on opinions and commentaries, business, media, sport, online English lessons, popular blogs, people		Prioritizing quality over quantity and speed. Offers interesting and unusual topics and uses a very complex language.	Lidové noviny, a.s. and MAFRA, a.s.	Offers radio stations and a section called “presentations” (as study materials)	Very respected newspaper with a long tradition, highly ranked and fulfilled the criteria.
Blogy.idnes.cz	9	Broad range of topics: political news, home politics, culture, life style, world views	Centre right	Very competitive selection for blogs to be accepted.	MAFRA, a.s., Michal Hanák	Top bloggers: Patrik Banga, Štěpán Binko, Jana Bobošíková, Tereza Boehmová	iDnes.cz used to be the most popular news webpage (2008), its blogging portal is counted among the most visited ones (mainly due to a very careful work of idnes editors that decide which blogs are included), it also offers commenting options
Blog.ihned.cz	87	Mostly political topics, society, special financial and economic blogs	Business and financial centre	Information-orientated blogs. Mostly presenting views on currently discussed political and economic issues. Bloggers repeat.	ECONOMIA, a.s.	Top bloggers: Ondřej Chneider, Jan Macháček, Jan Kubita, Michal Horáček	Fulfilled the criteria, financial topics mostly. Opened for all bloggers.

Appendix 2. Analyzed articles

Novinky 11

Period	No. of found articles	No. of selected articles	No. of comments	No. of selected comments
18.05. – 28.05. 2009	11	3	27/0/0	20/0/0
29.05. – 06.06. 2009	19	4	33/0/79/0	20/0/20/0
07.06. – 10.06. 2009	25	3	0/0/68	0/0/20
Overall total	56	10	207	60

Aktuálně 12

Period	No. of found articles	No. of selected articles	No. of comments	No. of selected comments
18.05. – 28.05. 2009	15	3	151/864/225	20/20/20
29.05. – 06.06. 2009	45	4	60/97/111/347	20/20/20/20
07.06. – 10.06. 2009	23	3	72/74/50	20/20/20
Overall total	83	10	2051	200

Lidovky 13

Period	No. of found articles	No. of selected articles	No. of comments	No. of selected comments
18.05. – 28.05. 2009	28	3	73/ 297/174	20/20/20
29.05. – 06.06. 2009	19	4	64/722/39/429	20/20/20/20
07.06. – 10.06. 2009	24	3	15/102/285	15/20/20
Overall total	73	10	2200	195

Blog.iDnes 14

Period	No. of found articles	No. of selected articles	No. of comments	No. of selected comments
18.05. – 28.05. 2009	51	3	6/25/23	6/20/20
29.05. – 06.06. 2009	109	4	8/9/53/15	8/9/20/15
07.06. – 10.06. 2009	75	3	112/60/21	20/20/20
Overall total	235	10	332	158

Blogy.iHNed 15

Period	No. of found articles	No. of selected articles	No. of comments	No. of selected comments
18.05. – 28.05. 2009	1	1	9	9
29.05. – 06.06. 2009	6	6	21/11/18/42/1/10	20/11/18/20/1/10
07.06. – 10.06. 2009	3	3	18/7/5	18/7/5
Overall total	10	10	142	119