



Risk of Radicalisation in the Time of Russo-Ukrainian War: Exploiting the Weaknesses of Czech Society as a Threat to National Security

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Summary

Recent violent incidents between members of the Romani and Ukrainian communities may carry the risk of radicalisation and outbreaks of violence on a societal scale. However, the causes of these clashes and the mobilisation of different groups against Ukrainian refugees have deeper roots in the long-standing ineffectively addressed structural problems faced to varying degrees by all disadvantaged communities in our country. The accelerator, not the cause, of radicalisation may be the distorted information disseminated in the online environment, including the malign influence of foreign actors. The most vulnerable to these influences are individuals who suffer from heightened feelings of insecurity, tend to see the world in black and white terms, experience grievances and face social exclusion and isolation. Exposing these vulnerabilities in our society should be seen as an opportunity to strengthen cohesion and minimise the potential for conflict, which in times of crisis is an immediate threat to national security. Respectful strategic communication, strengthening local communities and security, but in the long term, especially increasing the resilience of social capital, should serve as tools for solutions.

Recommendations

Government:

- The significant impact of socio-economic problems, stigmatization and marginalization on the security and internal stability of the state must be realistically acknowledged. Focus on specific policies in these areas as key to maintaining security and stability, in addition to implementing quick and coercive solutions that only address symptoms such as misinformation or disinformation.
- Take on the task of starting to integrate resilience building across the board into the education system, despite the fact that benefits of social cohesion to national security will manifest beyond the horizon of the electoral term.

Broader political representation:

- In this volatile security situation, avoid negative communication and blanket condemnations that increase radicalisation and reinforce polarisation. It is preferable to refrain from communicating rather than contributing to further stereotyping of already stigmatised groups and thus to the risk of violence breaking out.

Local municipalities:

- Actively engage in reducing tensions in local communities with the involvement of all affected parties. NGOs (including religious organisations) should be invited to provide psychosocial support or material assistance.

Czech police:

- Continue to professionally assess immediate security risks and transparently report on the situation and potential incidents at local and national level. Engage on the ground with local actors of the parties to the conflict and local authorities.

The context of the current crisis: digital social networks as a tool for defence and mobilisation of the Romani community

During June and July 2023, violent incidents involving some Romani and Ukrainians occurred in several areas in the Czech Republic. A series of escalated interactions, including violent behaviour, was triggered by the death of a Romani youth who was killed by a man of Ukrainian nationality in Brno.

Romani participation in protest rallies with an occasional violent element has been mobilised mainly through the posting of 'live streamers' on the social networking site Facebook, where Romani have been mobilising in moments when they feel threatened over the past few years. An identical situation occurred in June 2021, when Stanislav Tomáš died after an unfortunate police intervention in Teplice. At that time, the same actors (some of them from the Romani diaspora abroad) joined the mobilisation on social media, and now they have been temporarily joined by actors from other areas where the clashes took place.

The recent events may be reminiscent of the beginnings of the most intense moment of political violence in modern Czech history, when right-wing extremists, supported by some local residents, attacked Romani communities in many parts of the country during the anti-Romani protests of 2008-2014. Although some Roma actively participated in protests against extremist marches at that time, the escalation of violence and retaliation from the Roma side did not take place for the following reasons: the desire not to endanger family members by escalating violence, the deeply rooted ideology of non-violence, which was reinforced by the support of non-governmental actors, especially religious organisations (e.g. the Salesians of Don Bosco), which served as a tool to cope with the traumatic consequences of violence against the community. These organisations also appealed to the pro-social values of the Romani. Pacification efforts by respected figures in the community also played a role, pointing out the ineffectiveness of violence that would ultimately endanger the Romani and worsen their situation.

While it may seem that the same mechanisms that make Roma resilient against political violence have worked in the present, the risk of a resurgence of particularly ethnically motivated violence exists especially in the new context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Indeed, the ongoing transformation of a global environment defined by strategic competition and a series of crises has had a long-term material and psychological impact on structurally disadvantaged social groups. These citizens, whether they are members of the Romani community or the

majority, suffer from an acute sense of loss of their own significance, of being mattered to by the state¹. In times of war in our geopolitical space, which has a direct impact on a number of social processes in the Czech Republic, these weaknesses are further amplified by the information tools of the digital age, which increase polarisation and can help radicalise at-risk individuals and groups. The desire to be seen and heard is even more evident in the Czech Romani community, where systematic structural disadvantage is compounded by a lack of respect for their ethnic identity. It can be assumed that this is why many Romani people like to publicly share their own experiences, opinions, and attitudes on social networks.

‘Us’ versus ‘Them’: From structural frustration to radicalisation

According to the latest Eurostat report, the Czech Republic is the country with the highest number of Ukrainian refugees (32.2) per 1,000 inhabitants². The Russian aggression and the related arrival of Ukrainian refugees unfortunately carries a greater risk for national security than, for example, the previous crisis in the form of the COVID pandemic. This is mainly due to the presence of a very vulnerable community of war refugees, the majority of whom (74%) are women and children³. The problem for security stability is not the war refugees per se, but the fact that there are other disadvantaged and crisis-exhausted social groups in our country who compare their situation with that of Ukrainian refugees. Meanwhile, there was no comparable reference group to which both Romani and anti-systemic movements could relate, either during the COVID, migration or global financial crisis.

In this context, the latest scholarship in the study of radicalisation points to the role of relative deprivation as one of the primary factors that leads to radicalisation with violent elements against the political system⁴. In the Czech context, relative deprivation leads not only the Romani, but also other long-marginalised groups in our society to feel even more marginalised and unheard by the state as a result of comparing their own situation with that of refugees from Ukraine. What is important here is not the objective socio-economic status of the groups in question, but the subjective perception that ‘their’ state does not accommodate them but gives priority (albeit seemingly) to the needs of ‘foreign’ refugees. Such a feeling deepens already existing frustrations and, in the longer term, causes anger to build up, which can lead to aggression.

The long-term relative deprivation of the most disadvantaged groups also creates conditions for possible violent radicalisation. In general, most people never resort to violent radicalisation, but rather individuals whose socio-political deprivation is combined with personality predispositions to violence⁵. Examples of such a combination of these factors are Tomáš Čermák and Patrik Tušl, who have already been convicted in several cases for acts that resulted from their radicalisation, including inciting hatred against refugees from Ukraine⁶. For example, it may be a reaction to acts committed by individuals from different communities, whether Ukrainians, Romani, or

¹ Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Bélanger, J. J., Sheveland, A., Hetiarachchi, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2014). The psychology of radicalization and deradicalization: How significance quest impacts violent extremism. *Political Psychology*, 35, 69-93.
Kruglanski, A. W., Molinaro, E., Jasko, K., Webber, D., Leander, N. P., & Pierro, A. (2022). Significance-quest theory. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 17(4), 1050-1071.

² Eurostat. (2023). 30 June 2023: 4.07 million with temporary protection. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230809-1>

³ UNHCR. (2023). *Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine Situation – Inter-Agency Operational Update Q2 2023: Czech Republic*. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/102628>

⁴ Obaidi, M., Bergh, R., Akrami, N., & Anjum, G. (2019). Group-based relative deprivation explains endorsement of extremism among Western-born Muslims. *Psychological Science*, 30(4), 596-605.

Kunst, J. R., & Obaidi, M. (2020). Understanding violent extremism in the 21st century: the (re) emerging role of relative deprivation. *Current opinion in psychology*, 35, 55-59.

Power, S. A., Madsen, T., & Morton, T. A. (2020). Relative deprivation and revolt: current and future directions. *Current opinion in psychology*, 35, 119-124.

⁵ Pavlović, T., & Franc, R. (2023). Antiheroes fueled by injustice: Dark personality traits and perceived group relative deprivation in the prediction of violent extremism. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 15(3), 277-302.

Talks with Milan Obaidi from the University of Copenhagen and Sophia Moskalenko from Georgia State University.

⁶ https://www.irozhlaz.cz/zpravy-domov/cermak-tusl-nenavistne-vyroky-ukrajinci_2212211338_pj

members of the majority society. In an age of hoaxes and distortion of information in the online world, it is difficult to predict the dynamics and consequences that past and future incidents may have. However, while unpredictable, the risk of an outbreak of political violence is now more real.

Although not causes in themselves, two important factors - the dynamics of the digital world and information influence operations in times of war - increase the risk of anti-systemic and ethnic violence in society. Although experts do not yet agree on the exact role of the online environment in the radicalisation process⁷, it is undeniable that disinformation or hoaxes disseminated online can reinforce polarisation, accelerate the radicalisation process and, above all, facilitate mobilisation to use violence. Disinformation can then be most conducive to radicalisation for individuals who are insecure, inflexible, suffering from feelings of grievances or social exclusion⁸.

In this context, potential foreign malign influence operations, which must be taken into account to a greater extent in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War, also have a more serious impact on the radicalisation of alienated social groups. Although they are not the cause of the radicalisation of society, they can skilfully exploit existing weaknesses. Vulnerable and alienated groups in our country can then be used as a weapon when they direct their anger against, for example, war refugees. The effect of such action is to destabilise the law and order, and further undermine social cohesion that is always an essential component of security. A typical example of such influence of state and non-state actors in a different context is the jihadist radicalisation of marginalised communities in the Western Balkans and in many EU countries.

No time to wait: Modern policies of preventing radicalisation

There are two basic approaches to dealing with violent and non-violent radicalisation. The first is short-term and determined by the priority of de-escalating violence or tensions, but it does not aim to tackle the causes. The priority of the second, and ideally complementary, approach is to address the causes of radicalisation. However, it requires much longer time, political courage, and vision beyond the horizon of a single electoral term.

The short-term intervention should address the symptoms of radicalisation, in particular behaviour on digital platforms and manifestations of radicalisation that violate Czech law. A cheap, quick, and effective tool is targeted strategic communication to stakeholders and the wider public. In the case of alienated or radicalised groups, it is effective to choose a style of communication that reduces feelings of insecurity with clear messages and makes it clear to all stakeholders that they and their concerns matter. Such an approach reinforces broken trust and helps to rebuild a sense of belonging to the political system. It is not only in tense moments that a responsible and disciplined approach by the political representation in public speeches and online interactions is in order. An example of good practice in recent months is the communication activities of the Minister of the Interior and, to some extent, the President of the Republic.

For short-term tension reduction, intervention tools are also offered at the lowest possible level of the affected communities. It is always a good idea to involve both local police forces in such activities to alleviate security concerns and NGOs with a local presence to provide psychosocial support to the affected communities. In the event of an escalation in a Romani community, respected local leaders should be included in de-escalation efforts, even though they may be involved in the protests, as they are the ones who have both respect and influence over the decision-making of at-risk groups and individuals. The risks and manifestations of violent

⁷ Whittaker, J. (2022). Rethinking online radicalization. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 16(4), 27-40.

⁸ Roberts-Ingleton, E. M., & McCann, W. S. (2023). The Link between Misinformation and Radicalisation. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 17(1), 36-49.

radicalisation that threaten public order, which are more likely to come from individuals, should then be left to the responsibility of the relevant security forces, who are able to deal professionally with such risks and threats.

Long-term solutions that address the causes of radicalisation should be approached in a similarly proactive spirit. Therefore, in addition to improving structural policies to meet the needs of disadvantaged groups more effectively in the labour market, housing and education, we also need to start building resilient social capital in real terms. It has been shown to strengthen social cohesion and minimise the potential for conflict in society. It will also make it possible to reduce the risk of vulnerable groups succumbing to misinformation by strengthening their self-confidence and adaptability.

A good concrete example of an across-the-board policy for building societal resilience is the recent inclusion of a compulsory Health Education subject in the British curriculum⁹, where all children, regardless of social background, are taught throughout their schooling how to navigate their physical health, emotions, intergroup differences and how to proactively work on their personal growth without relying on someone else to do it for them. Having a resilient personality that can regulate their emotions, does not tend to see the world in black and white, and takes a proactive and pro-social approach to life makes them much less easy to manipulate and radicalise. From the position of the state, however, it is necessary not only to systematically introduce this type of education for all, but also to build sufficient professional capacities for it, because at present there are only a limited number of teachers and experts available in the Czech Republic who are competent for such practical education. The effect of building the resilience of citizens in this way is a matter of at least one generation and thus represents a long-term instrument for strengthening national security.

The current security situation in the Czech Republic, where manifestations and tendencies towards violence in the crisis context of the Russo-Ukrainian War are surfacing due to deeper causes, should be used as an opportunity. Although the recent violence has involved two very vulnerable groups in our society – the Romani and Ukrainian war refugees – it is tangible evidence of the impact of vulnerabilities in our society on security and stability. The socio-political context and the groups involved may change in the future, but the nature of the problems, the motivations of the people and the consequences of the weaknesses in our system will remain the same.

⁹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1090195/Relationships_Education_RSE_and_Health_Education.pdf