One Society → Different Worlds
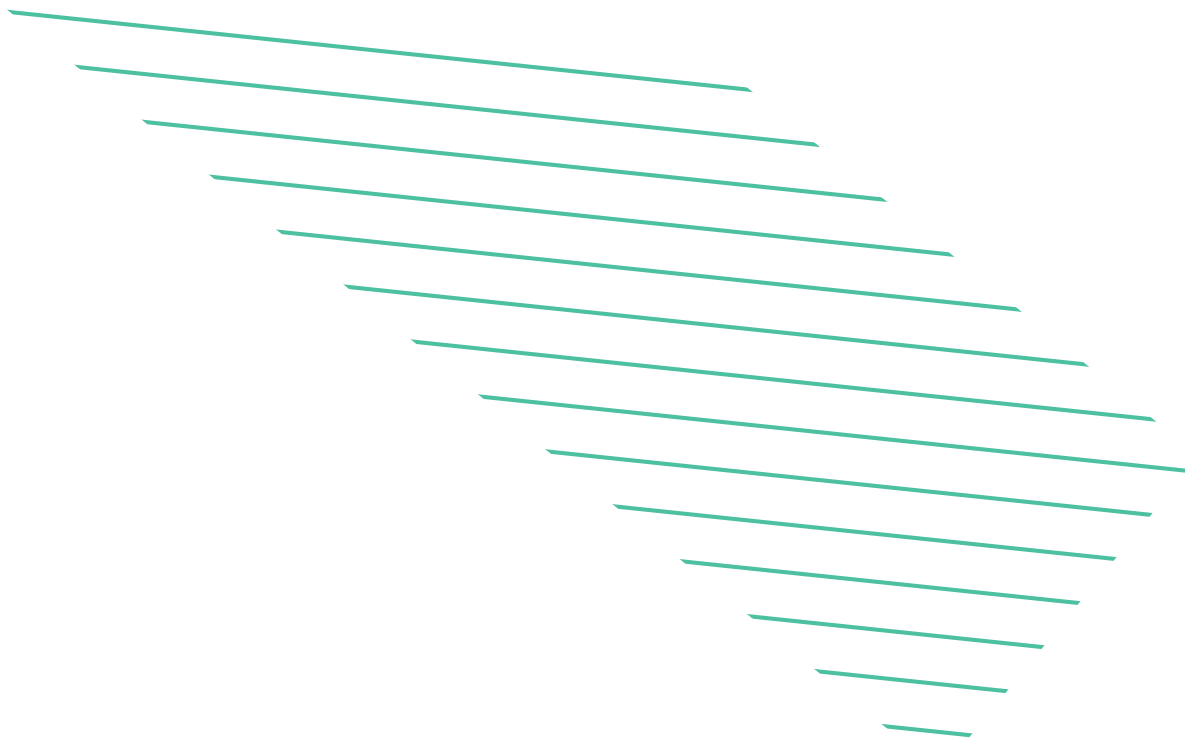
The study *One Society – Different Worlds*, exploring lines of conflict in Czech society, came out in Czech in June 2021. It was produced by the Masaryk Democratic Academy and the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation's Prague office, together with the market research agency STEM.

Whereas previous research had identified conflict lines as such, the aim this time was to explore these lines more closely using a qualitative approach. The study also aimed, through managed direct confrontation of participants from the various attitude groups, to test the possibilities of mutual understanding and dialogue.

In terms of the most general approach to the state of Czech society, the study distinguished three main groups. The first was the *positive* group, which despite partial reservations concerning the state of political culture, assesses the current direction of the Czech Republic as in principle good, above all in contrast with the period before 1989. It appreciates personal private, civic, consumer and business freedoms, which it identifies with democracy. Current social problems do not, given its overall optimistic assessment, play much of a role in its eyes.

At the other end of the spectrum is the *critical* group, which takes a negative view of the state of society after 1989, above all because of a perceived loss of control over its own existence and a loss of security, whether in the form of precarious work and unaffordable housing, or various negative demonstrations of economic and political globalisation. The issue of security and autonomy in the geopolitical sense of the word also resonates strongly here. For the people in this group, the period before 1989 is one of greater certainty, but also one of greater interpersonal trust and community, and of clearer and better-enforced rules.

The third group consists of those with *opinions in the center*, whose members show, in a less crystallised form, sympathy for both of the two extreme positions.

Talking past each other

Two key findings of the study can already be well demonstrated at this point. First, that there is a societal split between those who view development after 1989 as a period of freedom with positive connotations, and those to whom the implementation of the same principle appears to represent an undesirable loss of control and security, whether in the socioeconomic sense or in the sense of the disappearance of a clear cultural and identity framework.

The group whose attitudes can be described as *critical* may put a certain amount of emphasis on the need for a strong figure to head the state (although this, in various forms, can be found in all the attitude groups) but it does not explicitly dispute democracy as such. A positive assessment of

the period before 1989 and a skeptical view of the ensuing period are not for this group contingent on a desire for political authoritarianism; rather, they ensue above all from differing preferences with regard to social stability and the certainty of the previous regime on one hand and a specific concept of the freedom of the post-1989 order on the other hand, a concept in which this certainty and stability are viewed as an outdated, even undesirable element.

The call of the *critical* group for strong figures, as well as for "ordinary people to be listened to" or for elements of direct democracy are aimed above all at regaining this lost control.

The second, and connected, finding of the study is that of the title: the *different worlds* that form part of a single society. This state of affairs in itself might in a plural society still be described as natural: society is varied, and people's experiences, interests, values and the attitudes ensuing from them thus naturally differ. The problem is that in the Czech case there is a lack of mutual reflection on these very different life experiences, and so the *positive* and *critical* groups tend to talk past each other when discussing many subjects.

While the first, for example, see the West as a symbol of the free order after 1989, the second connect it with the unfair way in which Western companies treat Czech employees. Nevertheless, the *positive* tend to say the fissure in society is caused above all by a lack of information, or education and critical thought, and it is implicitly clear that they do not mean themselves but those with opposing attitudes to them. They do not reflect upon what the second opinion pole considers a problem. The *positive* thus to a certain extent divide society into those who understand the world and evaluate it using the "right" criteria — in other words, themselves — and the rest, who need to be properly educated. As soon as "the others" are educated, they claim, the gulf will disappear.

The *positive* thus apparently fail to understand that attitudes towards social questions may spring from differing life experiences and social status, or from a differing interpretation or evaluation of the same information.

In comparison, the *critical* group does not consider the problem to lie in a lack of information (ascribed to them by the other side) but rather in the insufficient attention that is paid to their problems, their specific life experiences and view of the world.

If we recapitulate the attitudes of the *critical* group, as presented previously, it is clear that they present perspectives that are indeed not paid

much attention in the dominant narrative of the present. This is partly because the attitudes of the *positive* correlate with education, and therefore also with social influence and share in the creation of the societal discourse.

This leads the *critical* to depart more and more frequently from the mainstream and to tend towards alternative sources of information and discussion platforms, where they feel they are more noticed, but where their frequently legitimate concerns are perverted into unacceptable, socially-damaging forms.

The *critical* group (and to a limited extent also those with opinions in the center) thus point, using specific vocabulary, to a number of existing social problems in Czech society: precarious work and low wages, unaffordable housing, the impermeability of the education system and low social mobility, income and property inequalities and the negative impacts of economic globalisation.

Their criticism of the part played by politics in the present state of the country, in contrast with the other side's moral criticism of "rudeness" and "angriness", heads in this direction — from their point of view politics is failing when it comes to "dealing with the problems of ordinary people".

In the *positive* group, on the other hand, socioeconomic problems and injustices are mentioned only rarely, and in general terms. It is clear that direct experience of them is either lacking or is not reflected upon — or, in the spirit of the professed values of freedom and responsibility, these things are interpreted as personal failures on the part of individuals, the natural result of insufficient hard work, talent or luck, and there is thus no need to worry about them too much or deal with them systematically.

In the case of the *critical* group it is worth remarking on the urgency, anxiety and emotion with which they state their attitudes, and also on the firm and briskly presented explanatory formulae they use. This is definitely connected with the fact that they have a generally negative view of the state of society and the direction in which it is heading, which forces them to formulate in some way what they consider problematic. At the same time, they perceive the division in society more acutely, including the feeling that there is essentially no agreement on anything. Their statements show a desire for a certain type of solidarity — including in relation to the pre-1989 era, which they perceive as a time of greater trust and closer personal relationships.

By contrast, the *positive* group defends on an abstract level the right to various opinions and sees the polarization as natural to a large extent. At the

same time, however, it is paradoxically bothered by the existence of social strata with a different, "wrong" view of the world (for example Communist Party voters).

Rejection of politics

The study *One Society – Different Worlds* identified two themes in particular that make waves in Czech society: Roma issues and the question of migration. Both Roma and migrants are perceived negatively across opinion groups, but the way in which they are viewed varies in intensity and in the uncompromising nature of the criticism.

In relation to the Roma, in particular, the idea of merit appears to be a very important argument; this fact points towards the socioeconomic background of the critical attitudes. Often these hide an internalisation of the neoliberal logic of competition and the idea that welfare payments should be conditional, or a call for unconditional engagement in the labour market. For the *positive* group it is more of an ideological issue, for the *critical* more a question of their own experience. This is because the same demands are made of them in a similarly merciless way, and despite their hard work they do not receive adequate reward, respect or more generous aid in difficult situations. They themselves thus feel the need to apply these demands to the Roma minority. The result is that exceptionally harsh and ruthless attitudes can be found in both groups.

With regard to migration, the key question is whether we are talking about labour migration mostly from Eastern Europe, or predominantly Muslim war refugees. While in the first case a key role is played across the groups by the question of merit and competition on the labour market and in social systems. The question of refugees is largely permeated by fear of cultural difference and safety concerns.

However difficult it undoubtedly is to find the precise boundary between understanding the motivations of respondents and approving the attitudes, often highly problematic, that flow from them such attitudes cannot be waved away as entirely unjustified or straightforwardly xenophobic. These attitudes have to be seen in context: as part of a feeling of the loss of clear rules that are adhered to, and loss of control, security and the certainties, including personal economic certainty, that are especially defining for the *critical* group which takes a more clear-cut stance on the issue of migration.

All attitude groups express a major rejection of politics. Politics in their view does not enable citizens to be represented and conflicts in society to

be dealt with in a non-violent way, but is seen as an actor that artificially creates or escalates conflicts and yet does not have the interests of citizens at heart.

The reservations expressed by the *positive* group focus mainly on a lack of political culture and on the failures of certain political elites. In their view these have their roots in the period before 1989, above all because the pre-1989 elites still continue their careers today. Sometimes the continued existence of the Communist Party (KSČM), its electorate or "communist ideology" is expressed as a problem.

The arguments here mostly involve abstract values and morality; if a more "political" attitude is expressed, it either tends to be right-wing (such as an emphasis on one's own responsibility and making use of opportunities) or it has at least an anticommunist undertone, for example when the reason given for why some contemporary public figures are problematic is their activities before 1989.

By contrast, the criticism voiced by the opposite attitude group — the *critical* — goes in a more practical direction: politics in their eyes fails to deal with the social problems that exist.

A fragmentarised society

The questioning of the various attitude groups on various important and controversial social themes during the research does not, however, confirm overall the oft-cited thesis regarding the *polarisation of society* in the sense that there exists two compact groups which always hold opposite positions on all questions. Outside the framework of the above-mentioned principal division into *positive* and *critical groups*, the individual lines of conflict on concrete questions often run through attitude groups, and on some questions, there is even agreement, however problematic.

Czech society can be much better described as *fragmentarised* — falling with regard to various themes into various camps that may often hold opposite positions, but the theme in question often has an entirely different significance for them, and so they lack a starting point for a constructive encounter.

The existence of various attitude groups based on legitimately divergent interests and values, and the fact that these groups will sometimes clash with each other, is something that is natural and desirable in a pluralistic society. However, the fragmentarisation that is described in the study is

something that threatens to end in disintegration, as it proves impossible to reach mutual agreement on the basic direction of society or constructive compromises.

The solution is not only to engage in further research, media and political work on the kind of "worlds" we have in Czech society, what distinguishes them and to what attitudes their members are led by their own experiences, as well as work on the actual removal of the reasons for the existence of worlds so separate from each other. This is the case whether the issue is educational segregation or deepening regional inequalities.

Of course we have to also work politically with the fact that these are not equal, but *unequal* worlds. Above all this means getting to grips in an adequate political way with the legitimate social analysis and criticism that is heard from the *critical* spectrum. Unless we identify the real reasons for social problems and find more constructive and appropriate solutions to them, we will find that conservative, nationalist, xenophobic, anti-European and anti-Western solutions score more and more often.

Politics needs to undergo an urgent renewal so that it deals with the problems articulated above all by the *critical* part of the spectrum and so that it is seen as an arena in which real conflicts are dealt with, not just one where conflicts are artificially produced.

This also calls for the creation of a new post-communist narrative that is held in common and takes into account all the ways of looking at the recent past and the present. It further requires the weakening of the principle of merit, which in its contemporary form effectively prevents the building of a cohesive society.

The most controversial themes, such as migration, the relationship to the period before 1989 and assessment of subsequent development, loom out of our research with such urgency that they cannot simply continue to be suppressed or to be debated in such a narrow way, without a broader social context, as they have been to date.

A comparison with a model German study (published in Czech as *In Search of Lost Dialogue*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2020) is noteworthy, showing that the *positive* group in the Czech Republic differs considerably in its attitudes from the corresponding group of those *open to the world* in Germany.

The dominant liberalism of this attitude group consists in the Czech Republic mostly of an appreciation of the advantages of the liberal legal state and freedoms acquired. Practically, however, it is not defined by

the values, themes and goals that correspond to the German division, in other words liberalism as openness to the world, emancipation, equal rights for minorities and the disadvantaged and making provision for various identities, which in Germany tends to be connected with being left wing on socioeconomic issues.

In the Czech Republic, people who are similarly culturally liberal, whether left or right wing on the socioeconomic axis, form such a marginal group that they do not even enter the basic division into the three attitude groups.

This all calls for closer inquiry, but even now we can find an answer to the question of why Czech-German, or indeed European debates on social issues — such as accepting refugees, equality between men and women and the future of Europe — are received and held differently and with differing results.

By contrast, the attitudes of the *critical* in both countries (with the exception of specifics such as the relationship to the period before 1989) overlap markedly, both in their negativity and in the urgency with which they are put forward.

It seems that part of both societies forcefully perceives a lack of control, threat and uncertainty, independently of whether there is a specifically post-communist context. The way in which these things are experienced thus does not come only from a comparison with state socialism, as the Czech results might suggest, but is more generally valid. After all, Western society used to be more culturally and socially stable also.

*The study was published in Czech as Jedna společnost — různé světy. Poznatky kvalitativní studie o fragmentarizaci české společnosti, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung & Masarykova demokratická akademie, 2021; and can be **downloaded here**.*

*Its German translation Eine Gesellschaft — unterschiedliche Lebenswelten. Erkenntnisse einer qualitativen Studie über die Fragmentarisierung der tschechischen Gesellschaft, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung & Masarykova demokratická akademie, 2021 can be **downloaded here**.*