

Climate Obstruction in the Czech Republic

Winning by Default

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INTRODUCTION: CLIMATE OBSTRUCTIONS IN CZECHIA

Despite the recent development of renewable energy sources, Czechia, like Poland, remains one of Europe's most coal-dependent economies, with coal accounting for approximately 50% of the national energy mix.¹ In terms of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, coal-fired power plants produce nearly 90% of emissions in the country's energy sector; coal- and gas-fired power plants together accounted for 96% of the sector's emissions in 2018. In the wider economy, also in 2018, the energy sector produced 40% of all emissions. Transportation was second, with 16%, and industrial production third, with 13%.²

From the beginning of the modern era, the Czech lands (territory that, until 1918, was part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy) have been characterized by their concentration of energy-intensive industrial production. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Czech lands accounted for more than 2% of all global CO₂ emissions (they emit less than 0.25% today). Per capita CO₂ emissions peaked in 1978 at 18.39 tonnes, and, in the twenty-first century, have oscillated between 12.5 and 8.72 tonnes.³

The country's total 1990 emissions were 198 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents (MMT CO₂e). By the early 2000s, they had dropped to 150 MMTCO₂e due to the shuttering of many energy-intensive industrial facilities after the fall of communism. This post-transformation shock resulted in a sharp drop in emissions in the last decade of the twentieth century, which continued even during the first decade of the new millennium, though it was not as steep. As a result, the country reported 118 MMT CO₂e in 2021, 60% of its CO₂ production in 1990 (Figure 10.1).⁴

As in Poland (Chapter 8), these transformation-related changes made it possible for Czechia to meet the reduction targets set by the Kyoto Protocol without any explicit policy measures aimed at protecting the climate. The country's projected future emissions (based on nationally determined contributions [NDCs]) are to be reduced by at least 55% compared with 1990 by 2030. As part of the European Union's 'Fit for 55' climate package, Czechia's commitment to reduce its GHG emissions increased from 14% to 26% by 2030 compared with 2005.⁵

This track record sets the stage for reconstructing the country's climate story. Here we aim to provide a better understanding of climate obstruction in Czechia, particularly the high direct involvement of actors from the sphere of politics rather than from business; the significant role of fossil fuel companies, which is often hidden; and the low level of public interest in discussing climate mitigation and policies. We follow Kristoffer Ekberg and colleagues' definition of climate obstruction (Chapter 5), which describes the concept as an umbrella term covering 'complex ways in which the status quo is reproduced, be it in the dimension of science, politics, culture or the economy'.

We begin by introducing our argument and follow with a brief contextualization of the development of climate obstruction in Czechia. Then we focus on describing the most important actors and the strategies and tactics they deploy. Here we differentiate between 'hard' strategies and tactics and 'soft' (discursive) ones, showing how these actors put their words into practice. Last, we analyse the specific meanings the actors construct within different obstruction discourses.

The Czech climate story

The Czech climate story begins in the early 1990s, when Czechoslovakia was undergoing its transition to democracy, which in turn brought a significant improvement in emissions levels (see above), making the issues of environmental protection and climate change seem less important to

Czech Republic Greenhouse Gas Emissions

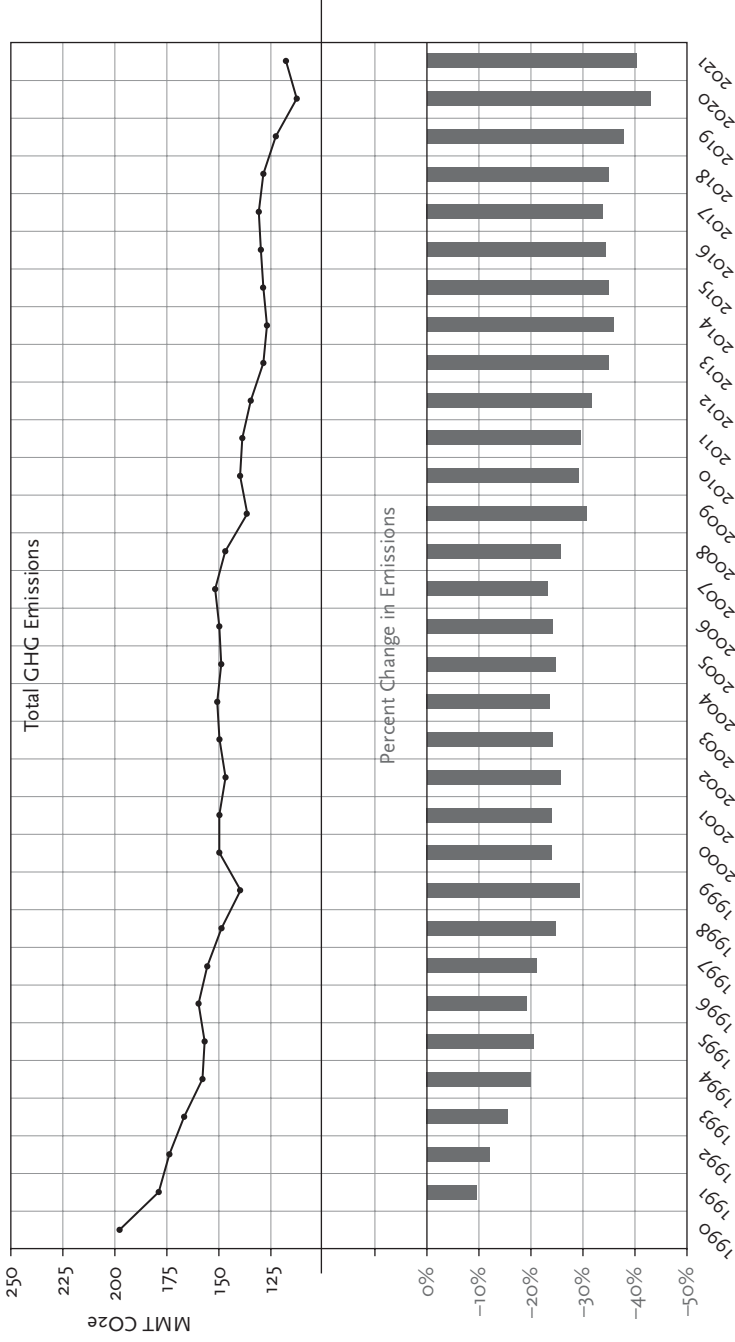


Figure 10.1 Total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (in MMT CO₂e) and percentage change in emissions in Czechia between 1990 and 2021, inclusive.

Source: Total GHG emissions based on data provided by Gütschow and Pflüger (2023) for Kyoto Six Greenhouse Gas Totals.

mainstream society than others. The nation's main political goal was to catch up economically with Western Europe, while the only way to effectively do so, according to the liberal-conservative government led by the then-Prime Minister Václav Klaus, was via a free market economy.⁶ Klaus has been an active critic of environmentalism since 1990, and, at the same time, is the figurehead of the liberal-conservative political discourse that has underpinned the country's post-communist transformation strategy.

Klaus has been a vocal and internationally recognized climate sceptic who introduced the issue of climate change into the national discourse, spotlighting it prominently during his two presidential terms (2003–2013) by directly linking adaptation and mitigation measures to the economy by stressing their supposed threat to the virtues of the free market. Important components of this obstructionist discourse have remained since Klaus left office. Accordingly, even very recently Czechia has been a dissenting voice in European environmental policy debate circles, de-emphasizing the importance of action on climate change.

In addition to politicians and their parties, this contrarian discourse was further spread by Czech think tanks, especially liberal-conservative ones. The work of these think tanks has reinforced the already dominant discourse on climate change, offering it to the wider public. At the same time, these organizations have also functioned as an educational platform for successive generations of political elites. These efforts have instilled a relatively rigid and enduring set of interpretations of climate change and related policies and practices in elite policy circles.

Moving to the public sphere, evidence shows that the salience of climate change is generally lower in Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland and Czechia, than in the rest of the European Union. At the level of the citizenry, Eurobarometer 2021 reports that fewer Czechs (12%) consider climate change the most serious problem facing the world today than the EU average (18%). In Czechia, climate change ranks third, behind the spread of infectious diseases (15%, compared with 17% in the European Union) and the deterioration of nature (14%, compared with 7% in the European Union). Fewer than two-thirds of respondents said they consider climate change to be a very serious problem (64%, compared with the EU average of 78%).⁷

To explain public opinion on climate in Czechia, we look to the role of the mainstream media, which have had a specific role in the climate obstruction story: maintaining the status quo. Czech media have served as an open, uncritical platform for politicians and other vocal climate obstructionists to communicate their views and ideas on climate change, failing even to encourage an exchange of various viewpoints on the nature

of climate change or debate on climate-related policies. As wealthy coal and energy production company owners have also owned media companies, their role in this story perfectly fits their needs.

Surprisingly, coal and energy producers have not played a visible role in the climate obstruction story. Rather, they have remained in the background because most of their job has been accomplished for them by politicians and related think tanks. Important politicians not only push the agenda of climate obstruction, but also seem to accept the demands of the coal and energy producers (as much as they can given the demands of the international environmental arena, which limits room for more radical political moves).

For all of these reasons, we interpret the Czech story of climate obstruction as ‘winning by default’: climate denial and scepticism along with opposition to, delay of, and dismissal of effective climate policies is the established mind-set of the Czech political mainstream. As such, obstructionists need not do much additional lobbying to make an impact. To put it metaphorically: much effort is needed to make a fire, but once the fire ignites, one need only throw a small log on it from time to time to keep it burning.

A HISTORICAL DESCRIPTION OF CLIMATE OBSTRUCTION

As noted, Czechia has a well-documented history of broad climate scepticism,⁸ which is also reflected in quantitative indicators such as the Climate Change Performance Index.⁹ Czechia is home to one of the most famous climate deniers—its former president, Václav Klaus—and is regarded by researchers as ‘one of the most sceptical countries in Europe’.¹⁰ This designation is due not only to the general differences between Eastern and Western Europe, but also to the fact that the sceptical position was articulated in the country relatively early on and, more importantly, came from the top.

Already prime minister (1992–1998), Klaus contributed significantly to the closed political climate surrounding environmental issues in Czechia because he bundled environmentalism together with feminism and Europeanism, labelling them collectively as a new form of communism in disguise that threatened human freedom.¹¹ Miloš Zeman, who served as prime minister after Klaus (1998–2002), was similarly militant against all types of environmental activists and their political messages. In 2003, Klaus was elected Czech president, ascending to the most influential position in terms of symbolic importance. Research indicates that it was in this role that he made significant progress in spreading climate scepticism in the country, legitimizing it in the eyes of important political agencies and even among parts of the population.¹²

At the same time, our recent research on Czech media has demonstrated that open climate denialism and scepticism are now playing a relatively minor role in the Czech media; climate obstruction rather exists on a spectrum. The voices of climate deniers, even though relatively strong in the past and representing the political elite, in more recent years are becoming marginal and slowly fading away.

AN ANALYSIS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE MAJOR ACTORS AND TYPES OF INSTITUTIONS INVOLVED

The role of former President Klaus cannot be understated in the mainstreaming of climate scepticism in Czechia, but it was not only he who helped to legitimize this type of discourse. Most important were political parties whose representatives actively denied the human origin of climate change and challenged coordinated action to protect the climate. The most important of these was the Civic Democratic Party (ODS; *Občanská demokratická strana*), established by Klaus in 1991. Next has been an active and visible network of obstructionist think tanks that produced various cultural products such as publications, commentaries, and media appearances. Some of them, such as the Centre for Economics and Politics and the Civic Institute, received direct support from their US-based partners and are personally linked to Klaus and/or a political party, most often ODS. Finally, there are businesses and media, owned or potentially owned by oligarchs and/or important investors in the fossil fuel industry, that offer a platform for types of climate obstruction. At present, two important media corporations are owned by Andrej Babiš (until 2023), a Czech oligarch and former prime minister, and Daniel Křetínský, an internationally significant investor in the energy sector.

In the following section, we examine these types of actors, presented in order of their importance based on their explicit and nationally visible involvement in climate obstruction. (It is impossible to base the criteria on their actual influence, which we are unable to measure at present.)

Political parties

The Civic Democratic Party

The ODS was established as a liberal-conservative political party modelled on British conservatism in the Thatcherite tradition, which formed the core of the political programme advocated by Klaus, the party's lead

figure for the first decade of its existence. Regarding the climate and environmental protection, the party mirrored the position of its founder, traditionally downplaying their importance. For Klaus, environmentalism since the 1990s is a dangerous ideology, a belief he would consistently tie to his explicit denial of the human origin of climate change later on. Through its overlapping membership and cooperation, the party (including Klaus and other important members) has been closely linked with other organizations, mostly libertarian think tanks (discussed later).¹³

ODS has historically formed an important part of the anti-climate network of political organizations (Figure 10.2). As one of the most important political forces in the country until 2013, when the political spectrum began to shift—the hegemon of the centre-right and a senior member of several coalitional cabinets—it was undoubtedly influential in shaping public opinion on climate change. Currently, although there are some active deniers among the more visible ODS politicians, including MPs, the party itself now pragmatically accepts the reality of climate change and the need to decarbonize the European economy.

ANO 2011 (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011)

Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011 (ANO 2011) is the most significant new populist party, usually classified as managerial or anti-elitist.¹⁴ It was part of governing coalitions during two terms between 2013 and 2021. Its leader, Babiš, served as prime minister between 2017 and 2021, when ANO was the senior member of the governing coalition. The party was founded in 2011, by Babiš, the second-richest Czech entrepreneur and owner of the country's largest agricultural and food processing holding, Agrofert (which is also active in multiple business sectors, including the news media). ANO and its founder have regularly declared their intention directly to help 'the people' and have attacked elite professional politicians. Although the party has at times characterized policy measures for climate protection as politically dangerous, it has also pragmatically accepted the international mainstream consensus, seeing climate change as a business opportunity, and it supports Czechia's conformity with international climate agreements.

The Far Right

Currently, only far-right parties directly attack measures to protect the climate and/or deny the human origin of climate change. Except for the

Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD, represented in the parliament), these groups (such as Trikolóra and Svobodní) are marginal, although the latter is linked to think tanks involving the Klaus family, as discussed later). SPD wants to radically transform Czechia's political system by introducing mechanisms of direct democracy, such as general referenda on fundamental political issues and political mandates that can be directly revoked by the public. The SPD's first priority is to call a referendum on leaving the European Union. Accordingly, it is against international cooperation on climate protection and Czechia's participation in the process.¹⁵

Think tanks

Drawing partly on our past research on Czech think tanks,¹⁶ we have identified those that are actively involved in the issue of climate change.

The Klaus family think tanks: Centre for Economics and Politics (CEP) and the Václav Klaus Institute (IVK)

An advocacy think tank, the Centre for Economics and Politics (CEP, or *Centrum pro ekonomiku a politiku*) was founded as a nonpartisan association in 1998. It has been seen as an institutional umbrella for associates and followers of Klaus. The CEP's main goal was to promote the principles of a free market economy, limited government, and individual freedom and to formulate and further public policies based on these principles. A climate agenda has been part of this ideologically libertarian organization. The CEP is considered the most important and also most resourceful think tank among climate sceptical organizations in the country, at least historically.¹⁷

The CEP has closely cooperated with the Václav Klaus Institute (*Institut Václava Klause*, or IVK) which has declared the same goals, even using the same words. Many of the CEP's activities were performed jointly with the IVK and generously supported by the PPF company, established and controlled until his death by the wealthiest Czech businessman, Petr Kellner, whose activities traditionally relied on political backing.¹⁸ Based on the volume of their current public output, the IVK has coordinated the groups' main activities since 2013. That year, Klaus retired from office, and his public activities (as well as those of the network of his associates) found their institutional home in the IVK. IVK is very active in publishing and otherwise informing the public on many aspects of political and social life including climate change.

The Liberal Institute

The Liberal Institute (LI, *Liberální institut*) is an advocacy think tank, established as an independent association in 1990. Its main goal is to spread, develop, and apply classical liberal ideas as well as to promote programmes based on the principles of classical liberalism. In terms of climate scepticism, it has not been particularly active, but it did help to publish the book *The Sceptical Environmentalist* by Bjørn Lomborg and organized his first visit to the country; both of these efforts were supported by Czech Coal, among other companies.¹⁹

The Civic Institute

The advocacy think tank Civic Institute (OI, *Občanský institut*) was founded in 1990. It is an independent association originally focused on promoting a free market economy. Since the mid-1990s, the OI has moved to a more conservative position, stressing cultural and social issues, mainly what the organization understands to be the moral, religious, and pre-political foundations of a free society: the traditional family. This orientation may explain why the organization is sympathetic to the recent success of nationalists and populists in Poland and Hungary and accepts broadly nationalist politics as the right response to all current problems, including climate change.²⁰

Businesses

As noted, the major mainstream Czech media outlets are or were owned by two oligarchs, one of whom is a major European player in the energy sector. The first is Babiš, who is generally regarded as the most important Czech populist politician and whose holding, Agrofert, owned the biggest Czech media company, MAFRA. Currently, the company has been sold to a former PPF manager and Kellner associate Karel Pražák, the owner of the investment company Kaprain Holdings. Originally, negotiations were under way with two businessmen, both very active in the fossil fuel industry and the production of obstructionist content: Pavel Tykač and Daniel Křetínský. Both Tykač and Křetínský are major investors in the energy sector and fossil industry. Tykač is the owner of the Sev.en AG group; Křetínský owns the Energetic and Industrial Holding company (EPH) and is also currently the majority owner of the Czech News Centre, one of the

biggest media companies in the country. Both also invest internationally, especially Křetínský, who is involved in the energy sector, including fossil fuel sources and the building of new power plants.

Due to the typical business strategy of secrecy and the lack of transparency in industrial lobbying in Czechia, concrete evidence of the ways big businesses obstruct climate change mitigation is unavailable. The information that is available comes from publicly accessible media content, which itself qualifies as climate obstruction, in the outlets owned by these investors. The prevailing interpretation is that both Křetínský and Tykač, both heavily invested in fossil businesses, also invest in the media to gain leverage over public opinion. Because the future of fossil business depends in part on government regulation, wealthy executives acquire media in hope of influencing policymaking through their own influence over the public.²¹ In addition, some relationships between fossil businesses and specific politicians have been documented, including former Czech President Zeman and factions of ODS. Also, energy businesses have sponsored public events for prominent guests and opinion leaders.²²

In their public statements, these business owners do not see themselves as climate change deniers, and, for example, Křetínský has explicitly stated that his EPH does a 'tough job' in keeping unpopular assets viable, which at the same time provide needed energy. According to him, for example, the German economy cannot currently do without fossil fuel sources, but he has also stressed the need for an energy transformation and a future in which fossil fuels have been replaced with renewable energy sources.²³ Needless to say, Křetínský claims non-interference in, and the editorial independence of, the media he owns and even views his acquisition of traditional media as a service to a liberal democracy currently under siege from the boom in Internet-based social media and media platforms.²⁴

Media and Internet-based platforms

Evidence from our research on the media formerly owned by Babiš (MAFRA) reveals some trends in media content related to climate obstruction in Czechia. We categorize these media as part of the mainstream and contrast them with alternative media, represented by smaller, web-based leftist media. A significant difference between different newspapers is evident in their framing of climate change. Whereas the mainstream media focus on adaptation measures or understand the climate crisis as an opportunity for business, the alternative media stress the importance of

mitigation. The discourse of adaptation is also represented in the media owned (until 2023) by former Czech Prime Minister Babiš.

Media owned by Křetínský were not covered by our research, and other systematic research on the topic is sparse. However, critical journalists have repeatedly identified open attacks against demands for climate protection and their advocates, including activists and international organizations. As the critical web-based papers Referendum.cz, Alarm.cz, and other critical sources have pointed out, reporters from papers and journals owned by Křetínský often frame climate activists and the European Union alike as the ‘green Taliban’ or eco-terrorists.²⁵ At the same time, these critical sources stress the urgent need for further research to track the influence of the fossil fuel industry on the content of the Czech media. For example, in the case of Tykač, investigative journalists were able to uncover a direct connection between his company and Facebook trolls ridiculing and attacking climate activists.²⁶

Apart from the traditional media, we can also identify some Internet-based sceptical platforms spreading obstructionist content, such as reformy.cz and D-Fens, which are rather limited in their scope and resonance.²⁷ At the same time, their content creators are embedded in the aforementioned organizations, mostly far-right parties, and some of them identify themselves as part of the Czech climate science community.

CLIMATE OBSTRUCTION STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Politicians, think tanks, media, and other actors are involved in many activities to promote their own perceptions of climate change and related policies. Although their strategies and tactics differ, a closer look reveals these efforts to be interconnected and complementary.

Political strategies and tactics

In her research on think tanks, Diane Stone defines the core of what they can achieve in policy transfer: ‘Their prime importance is in the construction of legitimacy for certain policies and in agenda-setting. They transfer the ideas and ideologies, the rationalisations, and legitimations for adopting a particular course of action. . . . However, to see policy transfer occur, these organizations are dependent on formal political actors’.²⁸ Formal political actors not only push their agenda to get voter support, but also tend to prioritize policies that are salient to their voters.²⁹ Applying Stone’s definition

to the practice of climate obstruction in Czechia can help in understanding the logic of the specific strategies and tactics the major actors have applied to achieving their climate obstruction (and other) goals. The logic of each sector, and how it has interacted with the other actors, is as follows.

The topic of climate change was first raised in the 1990s by political parties and politicians with a liberal conservative-leaning ideology. They collaborated with allied think tanks to spread the information they wished to emphasize to establish a specific hegemonic discourse in Czech society, or particular system of practices and interpretations,³⁰ around climate change. The discourse advances the claim that climate change is an ideology hostile to freedom rather than a phenomenon proven by (proper) science. Mainstream media helped to spread this discourse by reporting on these politicians and think tanks without directly promoting the agenda of climate obstruction themselves. Rather, these outlets provided a platform for climate obstruction actors and did not challenge their claims, nor did they provide any forum to discuss the topic of climate change more broadly. As noted, the Czech public has historically not considered climate change to be a very important public policy issue. This media passivity and citizen indifference have been useful to the coal and energy magnates who own some of the biggest media houses in Czechia because their agenda of climate obstruction had already been successfully advanced by politicians and related think tanks. In other words, the coal and energy industries have had to do little if anything on this front because the politicians have always done it first.

Taking a closer look at the think tanks involved in climate obstruction, it is important to note that they are not oriented solely around the topic of climate change. This is evident from their focus on and activities promoting liberal-conservative values. Thus, while they might sponsor activities dedicated to climate change, such as a ‘Global Warming – Facts and Myths’ scientific community meeting (organized by CEP in 2007), they might also concurrently organize a seminar on the performance of the Czech economy, such as the one CEP organized around Klaus’s book on the topic in which climate policies were criticized as a form of regulatory overreach that harms free market economies.

To show how such logic works in practice, we have used Stone’s list of think tank policy diffusion tactics³¹ and applied it to climate obstruction in Czechia. Table 10.1 provides an overview of the type of information the major Czech think tanks collect and produce, the topics within which climate change is discussed, the target groups to whom the information is directed, and the various ways the information or discourse is disseminated.

The table shows that there is much in common among the think tanks analysed here. First, all of them conduct their own research (mostly on

Table 10.1 CZECH THINK TANKS' 'HARD' STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

| | Type of information collected/ produced | Topic (within which climate change is discussed) | Target groups | Methods of information/discourse dissemination |
|-----|--|---|---|--|
| CEP | Research Publications Good practice (e.g. discussions/ debates with the policy makers on various policies applied in different countries) | Free market Democracy European Union | Policy makers (politicians and policy experts) Academia Media editors | Education (summer schools, lectures, conferences) Meeting with policy makers (roundtables) Publishing books and translations Public discussions |
| IVK | Research Publications | Free market Democracy European Union | Policymakers (politicians and policy experts) Academia Media editors Public | Education (summer schools, lectures, conferences) Library service Publishing books and translations Public discussions |
| LI | Research Publications | Economic policies Macroeconomic transition | Policymakers (politicians) Academia (students) Public | Education (summer schools, lectures, conferences) Meeting with policy makers (roundtables) Publishing books and translations Public discussions |
| OI | Research Publications | Cultural issues Social issues Free market Christian values | Policymakers (politicians and policy experts) Media editors Diplomats Academia (students) | Education (summer schools, lectures, seminars, conferences) Meeting with policy makers (roundtables) Library services Publishing books and translations |

'Hard strategies' refer to any activity that is not a discursive framing (e.g. organizing seminars is a hard strategy, while the way climate change is discussed at a seminar is a discursive framing). Source: Based on Cisar, O., Hrubec, M. 'Think Tanks and Policy Discourses in the Czech Republic' in Vesely, A., Nekola M, and Hejzlarova E. M. (eds.) *Policy Analysis in the Czech Republic*. Bristol: The Policy Press, 2016 and data collected from think tank web pages and annual reports.

economics) and collect other information via various publications (desk research), focusing mostly on economics and liberal-conservative values. For example, LI concentrates on translating classical texts by liberal philosophers. These think tanks do not embrace pluralism but advance a one-sided, ideological perspective intended to shape their audiences' understanding of climate change and related topics. Climate change itself has been a focus of these think tanks, especially during the period of Klaus's presidency. It has also been discussed within the context of economics, especially in relation to free markets. CEP and later IVK (its successor) have discussed their opposition to various proposed measures to address climate change in the context of politics, describing it until very recently as a threat to democracy and democratic development in Czechia.

In terms of their targeted groups, think tanks focus on influencing the triad of policy makers (politicians and policy experts), media employees (mainly editors), and academics (scholars and students). To do so, these think tanks organize educational programmes and meetings with policymakers, publishing bulletins, newsletters, original research/policy papers, and books as well as translations of books and other texts on climate denialism. CEP, IVK, and OI have released the largest number of obstructionist texts, books, and book translations, with OI publishing since the early 1990s and CEP's (now IVK)'s publishing programme active since 2005.³² Beyond publishing, think tanks have built their influence through networking. The boundaries between the think tanks and the triad of groups they target are porous: for example, we see individuals who are simultaneously affiliated with a think tank and also active in academia. This is the case for controversial economist Miroslav Ševčík, who was one of the cofounders of LI and is also a professor at Prague University of Economics and Business.³³ As such, he serves as a 'bridge' between these two networks, enabling information and discourses to move from one to the other.

Besides making use of this system to exchange information,³⁴ climate obstruction actors use it to keep climate sceptic discourse visible at various levels of society. Politicians and policy experts have been trained to understand the data related to climate change, including how to read graphs and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) research reports. For example, such trainings occurred at a meeting of the Senate Committee on EU Affairs in September 2010³⁵ and at a conference at Czech National Bank where Lomborg gave another speech about his book.³⁶ Political leaders have also been instructed on how to interpret the EU response to climate change according to neoliberal ideology: students and scholars have listened, for example, to Kutílek's³⁷, Singer's³⁸, and Klaus's³⁹ speeches alleging 'no convincing evidence of global warning'

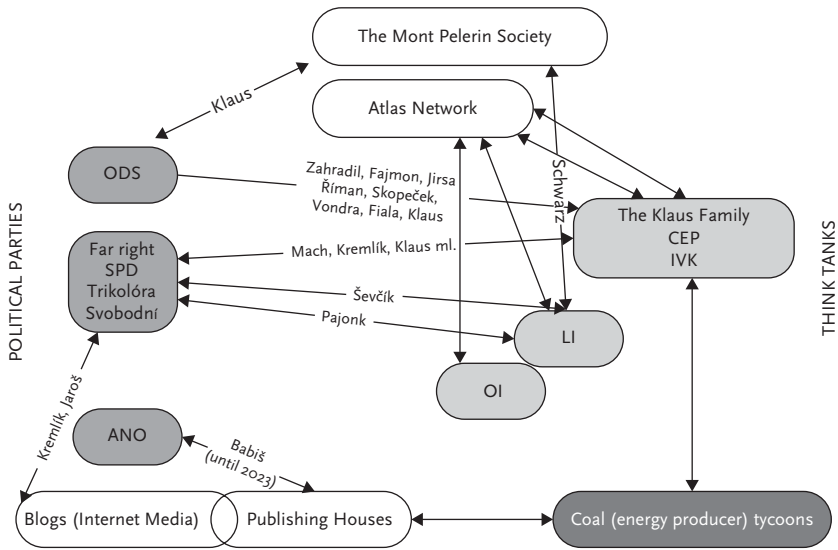


Figure 10.2 Czech climate obstruction activists’ relationships/networks.

during seminars and lectures at universities. In addition, most of these activities have been actively promoted to gain media attention. In turn, the media found such controversial conversations compelling, especially during Klaus’s presidency⁴⁰ as the debate over climate change would attract public attention.

Figure 10.2 summarizes the material just discussed. Although it is designed to capture the relationships among the actors involved in climate obstruction, it also illustrates how interrelated the field is.

Communication strategies: Types of discursive obstruction tactics and who uses them

We have identified four broad discourses related to climate change in the Czech media, three of which may be interpreted as forms of climate obstruction.⁴¹ Besides providing context for the specific frames used, the four discourses also guide obstructionists’ discursive obstruction strategies.

Open denialism

Though only marginally present, open denialism continues. Klaus, the founder of ODS and the leading figure of the climate sceptic camp,

continues to fight against ‘climatism’ and ‘alarmism’ in Czechia. For example, in 2017, he published the book *Shall We Be Destroyed by Climate or by Our Fighting the Climate?* He repeatedly argues that addressing the climate crisis contradicts human freedom while the climate itself is just fine and that ‘climatism’ should be seen as yet another ideology that will lead humanity into modern-day crypto-socialist serfdom. The far-right populist parties such as SPD, Trikolóra, and Svobodní share the same position on climate change, and it is also shared by some journalists, opinion leaders, and PR people working for companies owned by Tykač and Křetínský, who regularly attack activists and political institutions seen as pro-climate.

Adaptation

The discourse of climate change adaptation is very widespread and can also be found in the discourse of ANO and the media formerly owned by Babiš. Here, climate change-related problems, such as dealing with the consequences of droughts repeatedly affecting some parts of the country, are presented as challenges and puzzles to be solved through public investment, technology, and capable management. In this discourse, society is expected to adapt to its new reality by employing new technical solutions, with no significant attention paid to the root cause of the problem (emissions); the possibility of lifestyle or structural changes is never seriously considered. To use a simple but telling metaphor, here the engineers are expected both to achieve the desired technical solutions to climate change and continue to drive their SUVs.

Business opportunity

Here, climate change is framed as an opportunity for business. This discourse is found mostly in the media targeting entrepreneurs and investors. Economics journalists present new technologies for combating drought, such as green roofs and vertical gardens, and mitigation activities, such as producing electric cars and solar panels, not as climate solutions but as new business opportunities. Although climate change is also viewed as a problem that will bring costs due to natural disasters and changing temperatures, in this discourse it can be transformed relatively easily into a good investment—a sentiment that the current ODS and ANO

also embrace. The climate change adaptation and business opportunity discourses can be seen in the products of some of the think tanks discussed earlier. For example, the LI publishes articles on the search for solutions in technology and entrepreneurial activity, or as they themselves put it: ‘Entrepreneurs are the solution’.

Mitigation

The mitigation discourse is the only one whose theme is the root cause of the climate crisis, emissions. It is nearly absent from Czechia’s mainstream media and located mainly in critical, alternative outlets with limited reach and influence. Our research found that the debate on reducing carbon emissions is muted, with one exception: mitigation is occasionally mentioned in the corporate press when the article deals with countries other than Czechia.⁴² At home, however, the topic of mitigation is conspicuously missing, thus contributing to the generally more sceptical climate change ‘climate’ in the media. As we can see, different versions of climate obstruction form the prevailing discourse on climate change in the Czech media.

With important exceptions, such as Klaus and his allies, the problem of climate change is no longer widely denied in Czechia, a situation that corresponds to the global situation generally.⁴³ Still, the issue tends to be depoliticized by the mainstream media and, in that sense, is a form of obstruction. In particular, audiences’ attention is turned to political activities only in the form of shallow adaptation measures without an explanation of the need to protect the climate for the future, which in turn would mean raising the issue of significantly reducing carbon emissions. The mainstream media do not deny climate change as such, but they do deny the public a forum to discuss mitigation measures and tend to avoid arguments criticizing state energy policy.⁴⁴ This situation has worsened since the outbreak of the Russian war against Ukraine, when the country’s continued dependence on coal began to be considered a realistic policy option. This type of (non)reporting may be one of the reasons for the scepticism regarding effective policy responses to climate change demonstrated among significant parts of the Czech population.⁴⁵

In Table 10.2, we capture the combinations of types of discursive obstruction and the actors involved. Depending on their strategies, some actors can be included in multiple categories.

Table 10.2 TYPES OF DISCURSIVE OBSTRUCTION STRATEGIES AND THE ACTORS INVOLVED

| | | Type of actors involved | | |
|---|--|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| | | Politicians/ Parties | Think tanks | Business/ Media |
| Type of discursive obstruction strategy | Open denial of the human origin of climate change and/or explicit attacks on activists, the EU, and climate scientists | Klaus, ODS (in the past) SPD Trikolóra Svobodní | Klaus family (CEP and IVK) | Czech News Center (Křetínský) Sev.en AG (Tykač) |
| | 'Soft' type of obstruction through distraction and focus on particular problems and business opportunities | ANO (Babiš), Current ODS | Liberal Institute Civic Institute | Agrofert (Babiš) Czech News Center (Křetínský) Sev.en AG (Tykač) |

DISCURSIVE FRAMINGS

In perhaps his best-known book, *Blue Planet in Green Shackles: What Is Endangered: Climate or Freedom?* Klaus states,

Global warming has recently become a symbol and, in fact, a prototype of the truth vs. propaganda problem. A single, politically correct truth has been established and it is not easy to oppose it, even though a significant number of people, including top scientists, see the problem of climate change and its causes and consequences quite differently. . . . The advocates and promoters of those hypotheses are mostly scientists who profit from their research, both financially and in the form of scientific recognition, and also politicians (and their fellow travellers in academia and in the media) who see it as a political issue attractive enough to build their careers on.⁴⁶

These lines offer a rich illustration of the framing that the dominant portion of Czech climate obstruction actors use to convey a specific and simplified meaning to a complex phenomenon (climate change).⁴⁷ These actors use this framing to attack climate activists, the European Union, and climate scientists. Although this group comprises politicians/political parties, think tanks, and media, they have all framed climate change in a

similar way using a few master frames that have been bridged, amplified, and extended.⁴⁸

At first, in the late 1990s, climate change was described as ‘global warming’, a problem addressed by Klaus and his think tank CEP. They raised uncertainty not only about the data scientists had gathered but also about the way these data were interpreted. Over this first, relatively brief period, a master frame we call Science (*proper science versus biased/ ideological science*) was constructed. The key factor here was that the science was said to be not just biased but also ideologically driven. This was an important moment in the evolution of climate obstruction as the master frame was bridged, bringing ideology into the meaning-making process related to understanding global warming/climate change. The broad meaning of the subsequent Ideology frame (*communism/totalitarianism versus classical liberalism*) opened a path for the development of many frame extensions and amplifications, which we witnessed during Klaus’s presidency. While Klaus (and CEP) framed concern about climate change as an ideology based on values in opposition to freedom (liberalism), others (politicians and some regular newspaper columnists) explicitly allied those concerned with climate change progressivists, communists, and adherents of the prior Soviet regime. Such was the case for blogger Petr Jaroš.

However, it came as if on cue to the totalitarian parasites, who had just hastily completed the cutting of the red base with the green top layer and who urgently needed a new enemy in order to reunite the scattered hordes. And no matter how hard I say it, I have to say it—they thought it up brilliantly. Or would it occur to any of you to take one chemical element and put it in the place of Trotsky, Kamenev, Tito the Bloodhound, or any other deviants from the valid party line drawn by the last Politburo meeting? From the ordinary C in the periodic table to the new class enemy Carbon—isn’t that just breath-taking?⁴⁹

Research⁵⁰ shows that the Ideology framing, which explicitly links unpopular actors or events with the previous nondemocratic Czechoslovak regime, resonated with the public, particularly when freedom was emphasized, a key factor said to help us distinguish between democracy and totalitarianism. Emphasizing freedom when discussing climate change politics—that is, constructing its meaning by comparing it to regulation—is itself a frame that supports the master frame of Ideology. In combination, Science (*proper science versus biased/ideological science*) and Ideology (*communism/totalitarianism versus classical liberalism*), with additional support from the Freedom frame, form a powerful and complementary set of

meaning-making tools. Consider the framing in the following quote from one of Klaus's texts:

In my speech here—in Erice—in 2012, I said: 'this doctrine, as a set of beliefs, is an ideology, if not a religion. It lives independently on the science of climatology. Its disputes are not about temperature, but are a part of the conflict of ideologies. . . . This doctrine is a loosely connected cascade of arguments, not a monolithic concept which—because of its structure—escapes the scrutiny of science.' I don't have any reason to change this seven years' old statement of mine.⁵¹

Although referring to (the concept of) science and ideology, the current political elite,⁵² mainly the politicians of ODS and ANO, construct their frames a bit differently. In both parties, a significant number of politicians still deny climate change or oppose climate change policymaking. Those who favour the soft form of obstruction tend to question the science and the role of society in causing climate change but in a subtler way, as can be seen in the following autumn 2021 quote from Prime Minister Petr Fiala:

As a scientist who does not do this professionally, I try to follow the various debates. I think the answer is not entirely clear. But I don't think that's the most important part of it. We have to perceive that some change is taking place and we have to be careful to some extent not to cause worse consequences.⁵³

Most important, these leaders acknowledge that the climate is changing, but usually do not discuss who is responsible for that fact. They admit that some type of action needs to be taken, just in case, to ensure that society will be able to adjust to a new situation some time in the future. This framing—'better safe than sorry'—is relatively recent, appearing in public discourse only after 2017 and anchored in the discourse of adaptation.

In the case of think tanks, this type of soft obstruction is rare. Such think tanks, particularly LI and sometimes OI, typically draw on the open denial discourse, in this case using the Ideology frame. Here, the frame is used not to shift the conception of climate change from a scientific problem to an ideological one, but to oppose the measures taken to fight it on the grounds that they are state-driven and thus contravene the logic of the free market. In practice, this framing manifests in discourse pointing to the high costs of the transition to a carbon-neutral economy. As economist Dominik Stroukal stated in his article 'As a climate leader, we will be poorer':

The rest of the world will run away from us economically and we will have to justify being relatively poorer, which will make us the climate leader of the world.

Table 10.3 TYPES OF DISCURSIVE OBSTRUCTION STRATEGIES AND THEIR FRAMES

| | | Frames used | | |
|---|--|--|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| | | Politicians/ Parties | Think tanks | Business/ Media |
| Type of discursive obstruction strategy | Open denial of the human origin of climate change and | Master frame: Science <i>(Proper science versus biased science)</i> | | |
| | explicit attacks on activists, the EU, and climate scientists | Master frame: Ideology <i>(Communism/totalitarianism versus classical liberalism)</i> | | |
| | | Frame: Freedom | | |
| | 'Soft' obstruction through the use of distraction and focusing on particular problems and business opportunities | 'Better safe than sorry' Pragmatism | 'Irrational' 'Cost versus benefit' | 'Cost versus benefit' |

Personally, I have no problem with that, I'm happy to reduce my own wealth for the sake of higher goals. The question is how the Europeans, who are deep in their pockets, will view this, and we will have a better environment at the expense of their standard of living. I'm already doing it voluntarily myself, but it will bother a lot of people, especially those for whom it's an expensive trade-off. Will it hold up politically then? A greener world is the ultimate good, but doing good is not free.⁵⁴

Table 10.3 summarizes the discursive framings Czech obstructionist actors use, placing them in the context of the obstruction strategies they employ. As the table shows, the open denial group has used identical master frames, while the soft obstruction group has used more diverse frames while still drawing on the dominant meanings already used in this discourse.

CONCLUSION

This overview of the climate obstruction landscape in Czechia raises a question: How influential have obstructionist actors been to date? It is not easy to answer because, unlike many other countries with extensive fossil fuel

production, Czechia has been limited in terms of activities both aimed directly at policy change and visible to the public, such as the publication of policy papers, the staging of debates on existing policies, the preparation of bills, or the organization of national issue campaigns. The Czech obstruction scene also has a relatively small number of actors involved. Several think tanks, tens of politicians, and a few journalists/bloggers represent the core players in climate obstruction, while wealthy coal- and energy-producing industrialists and certain publishing/media houses periodically appear in greater or lesser roles.

As we have demonstrated, there has been little need for concerted or visible lobbying campaigns against climate action by businesses or other nominally extra-political forces as mainstream Czech politicians have maintained friendly relations with fossil businesses in any case. However, more research is needed to tease out the interactions between business and politics on climate. Probably due to the indifferent stance of the political elite on climate change, only 39% of the Czech population state that they are currently interested in the problem. Furthermore, 37% of the population believe climate change's effects on Czechia will be half negative, half positive, while only 42% believe it will be all negative. These opinions exist even though most of the population—92%—believe climate change has been caused by humans at least to a certain degree, and 71% say climate change can be influenced if we change our behaviour.⁵⁵

The results presented do not reveal the reasons why Czechs are not interested in climate change and are rather restrained in their concern over its impacts. However, we may assume that the country's relatively small climate obstruction enterprise, in cooperation with mainstream politicians and via its close relationships and networks with business and media, has succeeded in promoting its own interpretation of climate change. Moreover, climate obstructionists have established certain relationship structures and discourses that have come to define what is taken for granted in Czech society; they have become part of common political logic. In other words, perhaps the biggest success of Czechia's climate obstructionists has been their mastery of discursive framing to create an environment that limits opportunities for 'opening windows to let the fresh air in'.

NOTES

1. O. Císař worked on the chapter within the framework of the research project 'Under Pressure: Crisis, Emotions, and Political Transformations around Climate Change' (Czech Science Foundation, GA22-00800S).

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