Exploring neoliberal resilience: the transnational politics of austerity in Czechia

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Abstract

Neoliberalism has been allegedly challenged in East Central Europe. The neoliberal rollback by both nationalist forces and their economic nationalism in Hungary and Poland is commonly used to confirm this regional generalisation. In this generalisation, economic nationalism promotes anti-neoliberal state strategies because it challenges the economic globalism which was formerly privileged by the neoliberal globalist forces in these strategies. This paper challenges such a generalisation. Focusing on Czechia, it counterargues against this rollback thesis by stating that neoliberalism has overcome the global economic crisis and the political crisis of its austerity management. The transnational class approach is then offered as an alternative to the rollback scholarship: contrary to the rollback thesis, Czechia illustrates how economic nationalism can also promote neoliberalism. Moreover, Czech neoliberalism remains resilient because a pragmatic coalition of two neoliberal—nationalist and globalist—forces retains an enduring influence on the country's economic strategies. These findings cultivate the regional generalisation but contribute subsequently to the broader debate on the worldwide rollback of neoliberal globalisation due to the political rise of economic nationalism.

Keywords Austerity · East-Central Europe · Economic crisis · Economic nationalism · Neoliberalism · Resilience

Introduction

There is an ambivalent debate on the rollback of neoliberalism as we knew it in East Central Europe (ECE) before the global economic crisis (GEC). On the one hand, this rollback scholarship showcases post-2010 Hungary and post-2015 Poland

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to argue for the political rise of conservative nationalist forces which promote economic nationalism in their state projects (Appel and Orenstein 2018; Naczyk 2019; Scheiring 2019; Bluhm and Varga 2020; Toplišek 2020). These nationalist projects are characteristic of anti-neoliberal economic strategies because they challenge the economic globalism which was formerly promoted by the Polish and Hungarian neoliberal forces in their globalist state projects and economic strategies. They also privilege the economic interests of domestic capital over those of foreign capital. The rollback analysis thus identifies a binary competition between the rising conservative nationalists and the losing neoliberal globalists, and their respective state projects. On the other hand, the outcome of this neoliberal rollback is found to be ‘asymmetric’ (Bohle and Greskovits 2019), ‘partial’ (Buzogány and Varga 2018), ‘heterodox’ (Toplišek 2020), ‘recombinant’ (Shields 2015) or ‘seemingly contradictory’ (Fabry 2019). Moreover, by neglecting other ECE cases (Bohle 2018; Bohle and Greskovits 2019), the rollback debate risks overgeneralising the regional trends when addressing this ambivalence.

Against this background, I firstly offer the Czech case of neoliberal resilience as counterevidence to the rollback thesis which nuances the regional generalisation of ECE trends. Going beyond the rollback analysis of their competition over state power, I secondly identify other forms of relations among the leading forces such as pragmatic cooperation to understand the ambivalence. The key argument is then: in Czechia, neoliberalism remains resilient because a pragmatic coalition of two neo-liberal—nationalist and globalist—forces and their state projects retain their influence over the state economic strategies.

For testing the key argument, I use the neo-Gramscian perspective because it analyses both competition and cooperation of leading forces in state-civil society relations. Neo-Gramscianism is already used in the synthesis of the Comparative Capitalism and International Political Economy fields (Bieler and Morton 2008; Nölke 2011; Ebenau et al. 2015) and their debates on ECE (Holman 2004; Shields 2012; Bohle 2017). Since this article studies the neoliberal expert networks and their enduring influence over the state strategies in ECE, the neo-Gramscian understanding of these experts as a civil society broadens the exploration. Although some see causality between the governmental alternations and the change in neoliberal state strategies (O’Dwyer and Kovalčík 2007; Toplišek 2020), I investigate the influence of civil society on such changes. Some have already explored this influence beyond such political turns (Fisher et al. 2007; Buzogány and Varga 2018; Bluhm and Varga 2020), but they have ignored the economic dimension, which I consider here.

The neo-Gramscian understanding of civil society exposes the Czech difference. Gramsci understood civil society as a military metaphor of ‘trench-systems’ (Gramsci 1971: 235). Civil society accordingly constrains the historical movement from the declining power of formerly leading forces to the rise of new forces during economic and political crises. Therefore, Czechia has experienced a political shift since 2013, which is often compared to the rise of the Fidesz governments in post-2010 Hungary and the PiS governments in post-2015 Poland (Císař 2017; Buštková and Guasti 2019; Hanley and Vachudova 2018). The political rise of Andrej Babiš’s ANO has not, however, translated into a radical shift in the Czech economic strategies. Solving this puzzle, I document how the neoliberal experts *entrench* ANO’s

governmental rise to retain their influence over these strategies. By doing so, I show how the different configurations of Czech state-civil society relations condition the different results of this power shift. If the Hungarian and Polish rollback is shaped by the historical competition between conservative nationalists and neoliberal globalists, the Czech resilience is sustained by both competition and cooperation between two leading forces: neoliberal globalists and neoliberal nationalists. Moreover, the neoliberal leadership continues despite the political turn thanks to their unending alliance with foreign and national capital.

The subject of our case study is the National Economic Council of the Government (*Národní ekonomická rada vlády*, NERV), which served between January 2009 and August 2013, and its austerity discourse of fiscal responsibility. The original NERV was a technocratic group of ‘top economic experts’ who, according to the then prime minister Petr Nečas (2010), offered their ‘independent intellectual potential’ to advise the government during the GEC. Rather than as a mere lobby or ‘advisory board’ (Myant et al. 2013: 394), I explore them as a more far-reaching coalition between the two rival camps of neoliberal globalists and neoliberal nationalists. Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, the NERV brand has been resuscitated in the new governmental NERV and the civic KoroNERV-20. Although investigating the original NERV, I lead our analysis up to these two groups to document the post-2013 resilience.

This case study also deciphers the group’s austerity discourse and uses the 2013 pension reform to illustrate its policy impact. I survey how the austerity became a moral worldview which enables the national coalitions between neoliberal nationalists and neoliberal globalists. The reform was partially reversed in 2015. The pension privatisations are one of the key policy areas for measuring the success of neoliberal economic strategies in ECE. In the 2000s, such pension privatisations succeeded in most of the ECE countries. Their partial reversal in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia indicates a neoliberal rollback in the post-crisis period (Drahokoupil and Domonkos 2012; Naczyk and Domonkos 2016). The absence of pension privatisation in Czechia made it look less neoliberalised until the 2013 reform. Analysing the discursive content of the broader political struggle over this reform and its partial rollback, I argue, however, that the partial institutional reversals of such strategies stand for neoliberal resilience.

Broadened with Czechia, the debate is also theoretically deepened by the transnational class approach. For ECE, the transnational class approach synthesises neo-Gramscianism (Bruff 2008, 2011; Shields 2012) with neoclassical sociology (Burawoy 2001; Eyal et al. 2001b, 2003). The synthesis offers power bloc and common sense analyses. The power bloc analysis is operationalised as a collective biographical analysis of NERV members which investigates their biographical links to decipher the—transnational and historical—class configurations of power relations in Czechia. Common sense analysis is a variety of discourse analysis. It investigates the historical content of these class configurations, while decoding the influence of the austerity discourse on the moral legitimisation of the Czech globalist state project and its neoliberal strategies. By comparing the different configurations and content of the Czech power relations with the Hungarian and Polish ones, it is possible to nuance the regional generalisation.

The article is structured as follows. First, I theoretically deepen the rollback debate with the transnational class approach. Then, I empirically broaden it with the Czech difference by historicising the competition and cooperation between the two neoliberal forces. Finally, I substantiate it with the power bloc and common sense analyses of the NERV, which show the concrete level of neoliberal resilience in Czechia.

Theorising neoliberal resilience in ECE

This section situates the transnational class approach in the rollback debate to operationalise the power bloc and common sense analyses. The debate is dominated by the institutionalist and ideational approaches. Although they offer two different answers for the rollback, both fail to take the power relations between the nationalist and globalist forces seriously due to their economistic bias. Overcoming this bias, our approach emphasises power relations (Shields 2015; Fabry 2019; Scheiring 2019; Toplišek 2020). The bias explains how the continuing power of neoliberal globalists is solely contingent on the ECE's dependency on foreign direct investment (FDI), which has been declining since the GEC. Appel and Orenstein's (2018) ideationalist account highlights the one-way change. Neoliberal globalists therefore lose to conservative nationalists due to the declining FDI because the ECE societies are reduced to calculating subjects which simply adjust their ideas to the economic flows. Foregrounding the ambivalent continuity instead, Bohle and Greskovits (2019: 2) see the discursive 'rhetoric' of conservative nationalists to cause an 'asymmetric' impact because the ECE economic dependency remains firmly institutionalised. Without denying these institutional constraints, I use the power bloc analysis to focus more on how the power relations between these forces shape this ambiguity. The common sense analysis then takes the rhetoric of these forces seriously as being driven not only by economic interests but also by moral worldviews.

Thus, I measure the scale of neoliberal rollback or resilience as the degree of change in the power leadership of neoliberal forces vis-à-vis other rival forces in the national power blocs. However, the Czech case asks for a broader definition of power relations beyond the binary competition over the FDI between the neoliberal globalists and conservative nationalists. Recognising the cooperation between the neoliberal nationalists and neoliberal globalists in Czechia, the varieties of inter- and intra-class forms of cooperation and competition are considered. These leading forces share worldviews such as austerity or reciprocally incorporate each other in pragmatic coalitions such as the NERV rather than one-sidedly 'replace' (Buzogány and Varga 2018: 822) or neutralise their own projects in the competition over state power.

The definition of neoliberalism is consequently broadened to measure the scale of neoliberal rollback or resilience (Brenner et al. 2010). This departs from the institutionalist reading which identifies neoliberalism with the reform set of market liberalisation, ownership privatisation, and fiscal austerity. The study of these market-oriented reforms defines the scale of neoliberal rollback as a degree of their institutional reversal. However, the broadened power relations recognise diversity of

state projects and economic strategies. In contrast to Hungary and Poland, Czechia evidences that neoliberalism is associable not only with economic globalism but also with economic nationalism. Therefore, I define neoliberalism broadly as a set of discourses produced by and for those social forces which privilege the restoration of capitalist relations through these market-oriented state projects and their economic strategies. By analysing this discursive content of political struggles, the institutional reversal of Czech pension privatisation can be interpreted as an example of neoliberal resilience.

The transnational class approach is further operationalised below. Although neo-Gramscians and neoclassical sociologists disagree over its use, I synthesise their disagreement into nuanced power bloc and common sense analyses. First, the synthesis studies different national configurations of power relations, *de facto* power blocs, as the key factor in the national variation of neoliberal trajectories. Second, it researches the discursive content of these power blocs, *de facto* common sense, which orients the national economic thinking to decide which economic strategies are legitimised as moral and in the national interest. A methodological note on the use of the gathered empirical data concludes this section.

Power bloc analysis

The power bloc analysis is operationalised as a collective biographical analysis of economic experts. Providing conceptual framework for this analysis, Table 1 provides for exploring the class configurations of national power blocs in the state-civil society relations. This extends the rollback investigation of neoliberal globalists' replacement by conservative nationalists in Hungary and Poland (Buzogány and Varga 2018; Naczyk 2019; Scheiring 2019), as well as the pragmatic coalition between the neoliberal nationalists and neoliberal globalists in Czechia. I differentiate between two types of forces: economic and cultural, and nationalist and globalist. The cultural forces denote expert elites such as the NERV which align themselves with the economic elites to represent their class interests as national interests. The transnational integration shapes these relations because it forms cleavage between the nationalist and globalist forces. The globalist cultural forces align themselves with the foreign capital as promoters of transnational integration, while the nationalist forces align themselves with the national capital to oppose this integration. To understand the relations between these two procapitalist forces, the organised labour is considered as the third force below (Burawoy 2001; Eyal et al. 2001a, b).

Table 1 combines the theory and the empirical findings from the NERV biographies. These relations are then structured in the following (trans)national fields: academic, public, civil, and private. The table captures how the intermediary positions of the economic expert networks give them prestige as mediators between these formally separate fields. Their prestige as technocratic and managerial facilitators of neutral expertise derives from the roots of these networks in the academic and civil society fields, which mediate the interactions between the public and private fields. Differentiating between the national fields and transnational integration, I also make sense of the division between the globalist and

Table 1 Fields of state-civil society relations according to the NERV collective biography

Field	Biographical type
Force	Membership in either nationalist or globalist networks, which are further differentiated according to neoliberal, conservative, and other ideological orientations
Academic field	Education and/or employment as professors or senior researchers in the economics departments of universities and research institutions with national or international prestige
National public field	Political (party membership, member of parliament or government), bureaucratic (bank board of a national central bank, deputy minister, director of a public agency) and/or expert positions (advisory committee, board of directors in a state-owned enterprise) in the state apparatus
National civil and private field	Membership in a national think-tank, interest and/or consultancy networks (including business or other professional associations); employment as CEO, strategists and/or members of the boards of directors in national enterprises or subsidiaries of foreign enterprises
Transnational civil and private integration	Membership in a transnational think-tank, interest and/or consultancy networks (including business or other professional associations); employment as CEO, strategists and/or members of the boards of directors in transnational enterprises
Transnational public integration	Local consulting for and/or employment and/or national representation in international organisations and economic institutions

Source Own preparation based on the biographical data of the NERV included in Table 2

nationalist forces. The neoliberal globalists have more transnational links which used to empower them nationally in exchange for their subordinate positions in the Western neoliberal hegemony (Holman 2004; Shields 2012). These positions include tight links with the Western transnational corporations (TNC), memberships in the neoliberal elite networks such as the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS), and cooperation with the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the European Commission (Plehwe and Walpen 2006). In opposition to these transnational coalitions, the nationalist forces are more likely to occupy national fields while having fewer transnational links.

Accepting the paradigm of two rival—globalist and nationalist—forces, I stress the history of their ‘uneasy coalition’-making (Eyal 2000; Eyal et al. 2001a: 4) to understand the neoliberal leadership in Czechia and the rivalry between conservative nationalists and neoliberal globalists in Hungary and Poland. Categorising the NERV biographical data from the 1980s up to 2020, Table 2 enables this historicisation. It shows how the (trans)national fields remain entrenched in the domestic class configurations (Eyal and Bockman 2002; Hanley et al. 2002). The configurations of economic expert networks are then recognised in the historical interactions among four biographical types of nuclear forces which shaped

Table 2 National Economic Council of the Government: biographical analysis (1980s–2020)

Name	Force	Academic field	National public field	National civil and private field	Transnational civil and private integration	Transnational public integration
Vladimír Dlouhý NERV I & II	Globalist	VŠE (1977–1983), University of Leuven (1977–1978), Forecast- ing Institute (1984– 1989)	Communist Party mem- bership (1978–1989), minister of economy/ industry-trade (1990– 1997), member of par- liament (1990–1997), advisor to President Zeman (2018–), NERV III (2020–)	Czech Chamber of Com- merce (2014–), Czech branch of International Chamber of Commerce (2015–)	Trilateral Commission (1990s–), Goldman Sachs (1997–), Euro 50 Group (2000s–), EUROCHAMBERS (2018–)	IMF (2010–2012)
Pavel Kohout NERV I & II	Nationalist	VŠE (1990s)	Advisor to ministry/ government (2002– 2004, 2006), Bezděk Committee II (2010), board of directors in state-owned enterprise (2011–2013)	PPF (1993–1994, 1999–2007), ING (1996–1999), Trans- parency International (2007–2011), PART- NERS (2007–2018)	–	–
Michal Mejstřík NERV I & II	Globalist	VŠE (1970–1983), Economics Insti- tute (1978–1982, 1986–1990), London School of Economics (1990–1991), CERGE- EI (1991–1993), IES (1993–)	Board of directors in state-owned enterprise (2009–2014), advisor to ministry/govern- ment (2006–2009, 2011–2015)	EEIP (1991–), Czech branch of International Chamber of Commerce (2011–), Koro- NERV-20 (2020–)	International Chamber of Commerce (2011–)	World Bank (1990s–), USAID (1990s–), EBRD (1990–), European Com- mission (2000s–)
Jiří Schwarz NERV I & II	Nationalist	VŠE (1979–2014)	Communist Party mem- bership (1984–1989)	Liberal Institute (1990–), Centre for Economic and Market Analyses (2013–)	Mont Pelerin Society (1994–)	–

Table 2 (continued)

Name	Force	Academic field	National public field	National civil and private field	Transnational civil and private integration	Transnational public integration
Tomáš Sedláček NERV I & II	Globalist	IES (1996–2016), Yale University (2006)	Advisor to President Havel (2001–2003) and minister (2004–2006), NERV III (2020–)	ČSOB/KCB Group (2006–), KoroNERV-20 (2020–)	World Economic Forum (2005–)	European Commission (2014–2018)
Jiří Weigl NERV I & II	Nationalist	VŠE (1977–1981), Economics Institute (1986–1990)	Communist Party membership (1984–1989), advisor and assistant to the minister of finance, the prime minister, and President Klaus (1990–1997, 2004–2013), board of directors in state-owned enterprise (1994–2003)	IPB/Nomura/KCB Group (1998–2002), CEP (2000–2003), Václav Klaus Institute (2012–)	–	IMF (1990–1991)
Miroslav Zámečník NERV I & II	Globalist	VŠE (1979–1984), Georgetown University (1993)	Czechoslovak News Agency (1985–1990), advisory council to ministry/office of President Havel (1990–1993), board of directors in state-owned enterprise (2000–2001, 2009–), NERV III (2020–)	Boston Venture CE (2001–2010), Transparency International (2007–2011), Euro Weekly (2010–), Czech Banking Association (2018–), KoroNERV-20 (2020–)	–	World Bank (1994–1998)
Martin Jahn NERV I	Globalist	VŠE (1990s), DePaul University (1997–1999)	CzechInvest (1994–2004), vice prime minister (2004–2005)	Škoda Auto (2006–2008), Czech Automotive Industry Association (2010–2016)	Volkswagen Group (2008–)	–

Table 2 (continued)

Name	Force	Academic field	National public field	National civil and private field	Transnational civil and private integration	Transnational public integration
Jiří Kunert NERV I	Globalist	VŠE (1970s)	ČSOB (1976–1982), Secret State Police collaborator (1980s), Ministry of Finance (1986–1988), Živnobanka/Živnostenská banka (1982–1986, 1988–1992)	Živnostenská banka/UniCredit (1992–), Czech Banking Association (1992–)	Trilateral Commission (1990s–)	–
Vladimír Bezděk NERV II	Globalist	VŠE (1990s), University of Manchester (1996–1997)	Czech National Bank (1997–2006), Bezděk Committee I and II (2004–2005, 2010)	Aegon (2007–2010), Generali-PPF Holding (2010–2015), ČSOB/KCB Group (2015–2018)	–	–
Eduard Janota NERV II	Nationalist	VŠE (1970–1979)	Communist Party membership (1984–1989), Ministry of Finance (1979–1999), deputy minister of finance (1999–2009), technocratic minister of finance (2009–2010), board of directors in state-owned enterprise (2003–2006, 2010–2011)	–	–	–

Table 2 (continued)

Name	Force	Academic field	National public field	National civil and private field	Transnational civil and private integration	Transnational public integration
Pavel Kysilka NERV II	Globalist	VŠE (1977–1986), Economics Institute (1986–1990)	Advisor to minister (1990–1992), vice governor and governor of Czech National Bank (1992–1999), board of directors in state-owned enterprise (2016, 2019–)	Česká spořitelna/Erste Group (2000–2015), Czech Banking Association (2011–2018)	-	IMF (1994–1997)
Lubomír Lízal NERV II	Globalist	Czech Technical University (1987–1992, 2017–), Tinbergen Institute in Amsterdam (1992), CERGE-EI (1993–2017), University of Pittsburgh (1994–1995), University of Michigan (1996–1997 and 2000–2001)	Bank board of the Czech National Bank (2011–2017), board of directors in state-owned enterprise (2010–2011, 2018–)	-	-	World Bank (1994–2000), European Commission (2000–2008)
Daniel Mlčinich NERV II	Globalist	Czech Technical University (1985–1991), CERGE-EI (1992–), University of Pittsburgh (1994–1995), University of Michigan (1997–1998)	Advisor to ministry/government (1997–1998, 2004–), Committee on Budgetary Forecasts (2018–)	IDEA (2009–), Koro- NERV-20 (2020–)	European Network of Economists of Education (2004–)	OECD (2000s–), World Bank (2000s–), IMF (2000s–), European Commission (2005–)

Table 2 (continued)

Name	Force	Academic field	National public field	National civil and private field	Transnational civil and private integration	Transnational public integration
Jiří Nekovář NERV II	Globalist	VŠE (1970s)	Public Audit Oversight Board (2009–), advisor to ministry/government (2010–)	Euro-Trend (1990–), Czech Chamber of Tax Advisors (1996–2011), KoroNERV-20 (2020–)	CFE Tax Advisors Europe (1990s–)	–
Jan Procházka NERV II	Nationalist	Palačský University in Olomouc (1990s), Mendel University in Brno (2001–2003)	Export Guarantee and Insurance Corporation (2012–), board of directors in state-owned enterprise (2012–)	CYRRUS (2003–2012), KoroNERV-20 (2020–)	–	–

Table 2 (continued)

Name	Force	Academic field	National public field	National civil and private field	Transnational civil and private integration	Transnational public integration
Jiří Rusnok NERV II	Nationalist	VŠE (1979–1984)	Communist Party membership candidate (1980s), State Planning Committee (1984–1990), Ministry of Strategic Planning (1990–1992), Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions (1992–1998), deputy minister of social affairs (1998–2001), minister of finance (2001–2002) and industry and trade (2002–2003), ČSSD membership (1998–2010), Bezděk Committee II (2010), technocratic prime minister (2013–2014), bank board member and governor of the Czech National Bank (2014–)	ING (2003–2013), Czech Association of Pension Funds (2005–2012)	–	–

Table 2 (continued)

Name	Force	Academic field	National public field	National civil and private field	Transnational civil and private integration	Transnational public integration
Jan Švejnar NERV II	Globalist	Cornell University (1971–1974, 1978–1987), Princeton University (1975–1977), University of Pittsburgh (1987–1996), University of Michigan (1996–2012), CERGE-EI (1991–), Columbia University (2012–)	Advisor to President Havel (1994–2003), ČSSD official candidate for president (2008), board of directors in state-owned enterprise (1996–1999, 2014–), NERV III (2020–)	Board of directors in GE Capital (1999–2003) and ČSOB/KCB Group (2003–2014), IDEA (2009–)	Centre of Economic Policy Research (1995–), IZA Bonn (2004–)	World Bank (1980s–), OECD (1980s–), EBRD (1990s–)
Petr Zahradník NERV II	Globalist	VŠE (1980s), University of London (1991–1992), University of Leuven/Columbia University (1992–1993)	Advisor to ministry/government (2010–) and presidential office (1995–1999)	Patria Finance (1995–1997), Conseq Finance (1999–2003), Česká spořitelna/Erste Group (2003–2012, 2016–), KoroNERV-20 (2020–)	Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (both 1993–1995)	World Bank (1991–1993), European Commission (2006–), European Economic and Social Committee (2015–)

Source Own preparation, the most relevant and available official biographical data from public open access databases and mainstream media

the transition from the late communist to the post-communist power blocs (Eyal 2003; Eyal et al. 1997, 2001a). The NERV includes all these types: Nomenklatura managers denote mid-rank reform communist cadres and managers of state-owned enterprises. Neoliberal technocrats contain academics in the field of economics. Humanist dissidents constitute the main anti-communist opposition. Comprador managers serve TNC interests in ECE (Drahokoupil 2009; Pavlínek 2016). Apart from the comprador managers as ideal-type neoliberal globalists, the other three types developed into both nationalists and globalists. The success of neoliberal technocrats among the nationalist forces produces the Czech difference.

How is the biographical analysis of economic experts relevant for deciphering the class configurations in ECE power blocs? Because these experts mediate between the economic power and political power, their technocratic and managerial biographies are pivotal for exploring these power blocs. In the post-communist conditions, which were originally characterised by an absent capitalist class, these cultural elites are bearers of the capitalist restoration in ECE (Eyal et al. 1997, 2001a, b, 2003). While the neoliberal globalists operate as comprador managers who align themselves with the TNC, the nationalists align themselves with the emerging class of domestic entrepreneurs. In Hungary and Poland, the conservative nationalists and the domestic capitalists are said to take the power back from the TNC (Naczyk 2019; Scheiring 2019). In contrast, the Czech alliance between the nationalist experts and indigenous capital promotes economic nationalism with the shock-therapy neoliberalism to oppose the economic globalism with gradualist neoliberalism. The difference between shock-therapy and gradualism derives from tempo and scale of their market-oriented state projects and strategies. To understand the alternative in the relations of these leading forces, I consider a third class force, namely organised labour. The trade unions and various leftist groups shape the relations as a powerful protest force, which the two neoliberal forces either incorporate or neutralise, but fails to present a leading alternative to them (Císař and Navrátil 2017).

Common sense analysis

Common sense analysis studies the discursive content of power blocs and how it becomes institutionalised in state projects and their economic strategies. I use the Czech government's news database to study the corpus of NERV's austerity discourse during the GEC.¹ In short, the competition among the rival forces over state power is also the competition among their class projects which they promote as state projects through flagship economic strategies. Two competing types of state projects, namely those of economic nationalism and economic globalism, are identified in ECE (Drahokoupil 2009). The nationalist state projects define the 1990s. In the 2000s, the globalist projects replace them as a result of the EU accession and the

¹ The News Archive of Working and Advisory Councils of the Government includes 1138 media contributions in total, of which 909 are NERV-related. It can be accessed at <https://www.vlada.cz/scripts/detail.php?pgid=1021&conn=10233&pg=1> (last accessed on 20 March, 2021).

FDI inflows. Since the 2010s, the rollback scholarship observes the renationalising projects which replace the globalist ones (Appel and Orenstein 2018; Fabry 2019; Toplišek 2020). Besides these nationalist and globalist orientations, I recognise the role of economic interests and moral worldviews in shaping these projects. These interests and worldviews underpin the national power blocs as their common senses. The common sense denotes the national legacies of economic thinking which historically entrench the legitimisation of economic strategies as moral and in the national interest. We can thus explore why the Czech economic nationalism remains neoliberal in contrast to its Polish and Hungarian counterparts (Bluhm and Varga 2020) to understand the ambivalent diversity of neoliberal state projects in ECE.

Such national legacies of economic thinking are primarily underpinned by the moral worldviews. By various cultural forces like economic experts, these worldviews are discursively articulated into ‘*intellectual* class project[s]’ which compete but also share ‘affinities’ with each other (Eyal et al. 2001a: 86–99, 2003: 22–23). Accordingly, the ‘post-communist managerialism’ (Eyal et al. 1997) initially organised these moral affinities in ECE through four worldviews which I identify in the NERV discourse. Anti-communism privileges market liberalisation and privatisation as a moral repudiation of communist state ownership and planning, while delegitimising anti-market social regulation (Apple and Gould 2000). Anti-politics views technocratic decision-making as a more neutral and effective option than political regulation of the economy (Eyal 2000). Competitiveness furthers the market orientation to whole spheres of state regulation and social life to free the citizens from political power and make them market subjects instead (Shields 2012). Austerity enforces the cutting of public budgets so that fiscal responsibility is privileged over social redistribution to turn the market subjects into self-reliant populations (Eyal 2000, 2001a, 2003). These worldviews are analysed below to help us understand the competition and coalition-potential between the class projects of neoliberal nationalism and neoliberal globalism in the Czech economic thinking.

Only those class projects which are matched with powerful economic interests can become state projects and vice versa (Shields 2012). The renationalising projects in Hungary and Poland promote thus the domestic capital when replacing the globalist projects tied with the foreign TNC. However, I analyse the state projects as far from coherent units to understand both the Czech case and the ambivalent outcomes of neoliberal rollback in ECE. Because different common senses ‘*can co-exist*’ (Bruff 2008: 63) in the state-civil society relations, the leading state projects remain ‘complex, incoherent, and often contradictory’ (Bieler and Morton 2008: 121; Drahokoupil 2009: 30). Explaining this ambivalence, Czechia offers an investigation of how the rival class projects mutually incorporate, rather than replace, each other to produce the post-GEC resilience of its globalist state project.

Why study austerity-oriented flagship strategies such as the pension reform? First, investigating the discursive content of political struggles over these reform processes nuances the understanding of neoliberal ambivalence. Researching the Czech pension reform, I further break the binary association between economic globalism and neoliberalism on the one hand, and that between economic nationalism and anti-neoliberalism on the other. The ECE pension privatisations epitomise the globalist projects in the 2000s, while their partial reversal is characteristic of the

nationalist projects in the 2010s (Naczyk and Domonokos 2016; Appel and Orenstein 2018). The 2013 Czech pension privatisation presents, however, a fusion of neoliberal nationalism and globalism in the self-imposed austerity management of the GEC (Myant et al. 2013). In 2015, the flagship reform was partially reversed to follow the Czech legacy of neoliberalisation ‘by decay’ (Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2009), which proceeds by cutting social expenditures through parametric changes in terms of retirement age and replacement ratios. I use the Czech difference of self-imposed austerity to document how such worldviews enable the fusion of economic nationalism and economic globalism under a neoliberal leadership despite these failing flagship reforms. This also benefits from identifying the similar fiscal orthodoxy in Hungary and Poland as rather an effect of the fusion between their nationalism and neoliberalism (Fabry 2019) than an external transnational imposition (Toplišek 2020).

Against this background, I follow Eyal et al. (2003) and Bruff (2011) on the methodological treatment of the NERV biographies (see Tables 1 and 2) and discourse (see Footnote 1). The power bloc and common sense analyses are operationalised in a historicised and interpretative manner. In the power bloc analysis, I link the biographical data with the fixed categories of two leading forces. The main factor for linking concrete experts with concrete forces is their relationships with the economic interests and civil society institutions of these respective forces at the time of the NERV’s functioning. The side factor is their biographical history. Using the NERV collective biography, I then interpret the structural configurations of Czech state-civil society relations but also appreciate the ambivalence in individual biographies which include overlapping globalist and nationalist affiliations.

For the common sense analysis, the corpus was collected by the Office of the Czech Government and includes NERV members’ appearances (interviews, op-eds, debates) in broadcast and print media. Tracing the aforementioned worldviews therein, I investigate whether and how they morally legitimise the powerful economic interests as a national interest. Furthermore, I deconstruct the NERV’s austerity discourse in the political struggle over the 2013 pension reform to illustrate this. Before arriving at the NERV study, I proceed with its historicisation.

Historicising the neoliberal resilience in Czechia

This section periodises the historical transformation of the Czech power bloc and the subsequent relations between economic nationalism and economic globalism from the late communism of the 1980s until the late neoliberalism of 2010s. The historicisation documents how austerity became the central worldview of Czech economic thinking, which enables the pragmatic coalition between neoliberal nationalists and neoliberal globalists, and their state projects and economic strategies. The periodisation highlights the unending influence of technocratic and managerial networks of economic experts. Thus, historicising the NERV, I study it as an austerity coalition of these leading forces during the GEC between 2009 and 2013. To better understand their contested leadership, I also bring organised

labour into the analysis. The post-2013 political turn can be subsequently understood as an ambivalent continuity of the neoliberal globalist project.

During the transition from late communism, the neoliberal expertise organised itself in an academic network of three Prague-based institutions of economic research: the University of Economics (VŠE) and the two institutes of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, namely the older Economics Institute and the newly established Forecasting Institute (Appel 2004). Rather than dominating one institution, the neoliberal technocrats became leading economic experts in a heterogeneous but much larger procapitalist movement of technocratic and managerial cadres (Eyal 2000, 2003; Kopeček et al. 2019). Consolidated around the Forecasting Institute, the 'Forecasting Boys' (*Prognostici*) such as Václav Klaus and the NERV member Vladimír Dlouhý used their profiles as translators of modern Western economic thinking to legitimise themselves as both economic experts and prospective state managers. Dlouhý's position between a nomenklatura cadre and a neoliberal technocrat exemplifies their intermediary role in the procapitalist movement. Blending the Austrian School and American monetarism, they succeeded in privileging 'monetarist austerities' (Eyal 2000: 81) as the main bond of their anti-communist coalition with Václav Havel's humanist dissidents. Because Czechoslovakia was the only communist state with low foreign debts (Drahokoupil 2009: 100), the fiscal responsibility resonated with nomenklatura managers as well. The technocrats simply rearticulated the historical legacy of austerity discourse in the Czech economic thinking (Hájek et al. 2018).

After 1989, the nationalist state project emerged under Klaus's leadership as the Czechoslovak minister of finance and then the Czech prime minister. By its collapse due to the national currency crisis in 1997, the neoliberal nationalists consolidated within it. Their economic nationalism won legitimacy through the shock-therapy privatisation which produced the new domestic capitalist class (Myant 2003). This strategy prevailed over the gradualist strategy which preferred strategic partnerships with foreign capital in combination with less shock therapy. Moreover, the project distinguished itself by stretching fiscal orthodoxy beyond the constraints of the Washington Consensus organised by the WB and the IMF (Orenstein 2001). Combined with partial concessions, the austerity and anti-communist discourses were then used by neoliberal nationalists to neutralise trade unions and incorporate the gradualists (Appel 2004; Eyal 2003). Politically organised through the centre-right coalition governments led by the 'Thatcherite' and 'Eurosceptic' Civic Democratic Party (ODS) (Hanley 2006: 187–8), the neoliberal nationalists developed a robust academic and think-tank network. The VŠE's Economics Faculty remains its central academic node. Established by the NERV member Jiří Schwarz and other VŠE affiliates in 1989, the Liberal Institute (LI) is integrated in the MPS think-tank network (Plehwe et al. 2018). Once the nationalist project collapsed, the Centre for Economy and Politics (CEP) was established in 1998 and led by NERV member Jiří Weigl as Klaus's personal think-tank before being twinned with the newly founded Václav Klaus Institute in 2012. Foregrounding austerity as a national virtue, the neoliberal nationalist expertise realigns it with anti-communism and the primacy of fiscal orthodoxy as a national sovereign interest.

The neoliberal globalist forces emerged from within the nationalist project only to reshape it into a globalist one after the 1997 crisis. The neoliberal globalists incorporated a more heterogeneous force (Hanley 2006; Drahekoupil 2009): the network of the gradualists-turned-globalists, the Social Democracy-led (ČSSD) governments initially under Prime Minister Miloš Zeman and then in a coalition with post-dissident and centre-right parties, Václav Havel's presidential office, and the comprador managers. Their economic globalism privileged FDI inflows into financial and industrial sectors and established tight links with foreign capital. It combined them with adherence to the austerity-oriented EU accession criteria and the subsequent Eurozone criteria (Drulák and Beneš 2015). Although a gradualist alternative to shock-therapy neoliberalism, the globalist academic and think-tank network retains a procapitalist bias which asymmetrically incorporates organised labour. Academically, it centres around the Institute of Economic Studies (IES) of Charles University and the Economics Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences, which merged the former Economics and Forecasting Institutes. Under the leadership of the NERV members Jan Švejnar and Michal Mejstřík, the Centre for Economic Research and Graduate Education—the Economics Institute (CERGE-EI) has interconnected both institutions since 1991. In 2009, Švejnar extended it with the new think-tank IDEA. Hence, neoliberal globalists appropriate austerity as both a dedication to the EU and a national interest of Czech global competitiveness.

This way, fiscal orthodoxy became a cornerstone of the pragmatic cooperation between the neoliberal globalists and nationalists in the two ODS-led coalition governments with the small anti-establishment and post-dissident parties between 2006 and 2013 (Hanley 2012). Meanwhile, Klaus replaced Havel to serve as president between 2003 and 2013. The globalist project remained preserved but its former gradualist and social-democratic concessions were neoliberalised in this coalition. The initiation of austerity reforms thus preceded the GEC rather than being externally enforced by the EU, the IMF, and the WB in its consequence as in Hungary (Lütz and Kranke 2014). Neither did the aspirations for Eurozone membership justify such reforms because the neoliberal nationalists delegitimised it as a threat to national fiscal sovereignty already before the crisis (Pechova 2012). Because the GEC posed a legitimacy threat, this was the time for the neoliberal expert networks to jointly rearticulate this threat as a national opportunity to deepen the reform process. The NERV was thus formed to mediate the long-standing 'corporate [state] capture' (Innes 2016: 602; Pavlínek 2016: 575) by securing the domestic and foreign—industrial and financial—capitalist interests (Myant et al. 2013; Ban and Bohle 2020). The pension reform illustrates this capture. This procapitalist coalition incentivised the trade unions and other leftist groups to reorganise into a powerful protest force which symptomatically called for restoring the pre-crisis concessions rather than overcoming the austerity altogether (Císař and Navrátil 2017).

The post-2013 electoral rise of Babiš's ANO and Zeman's political return as a nationalist president signified the first ever loss of political leadership by the two neoliberal forces. These forces retain, however, their expert leadership and the alliance with powerful economic interests. The political shift brought the ČSSD back to the government despite its rapidly decreasing electoral support (Chmelař et al. 2016; Potůček 2017), the trade unions' rising political assertiveness (Myant

and Drahoukoupil 2017), and the popularity of some leftist economists (Švihlíková 2015). The ANO and ČSSD coalition governments partially reversed the austerity reforms, including the pension reform. Thanks to the ČSSD, they opened public debates on the anti-FDI strategies but hardly initiated them. There are two explanations for this. First, as a former nomenklatura manager turned national capitalist, Babiš only innovated open ‘technocratic’ (Bušítková and Guasti 2019) and ‘managerial’ (Císař 2017) strategies of state corporate capture without producing any alternative to the globalist project. Following a short-term technocratic government led by Zeman’s nominee and NERV member Jiří Rusnok in 2013, Babiš did this as the minister of finance and then the prime minister. Second, ANO has neither grown from, nor implanted its own expert networks (Hanley and Vachudova 2018), while remaining entrenched in the neoliberal networks as the next section details.

Transnational politics of austerity: the National Economic Council of the Government

We now proceed with the power bloc and common sense analyses of the NERV. Using Table 2, I firstly investigate the coalition between the neoliberal globalists and the neoliberal nationalists in the NERV, while unmasking the links between its neutral expertise and the interests of national and foreign capital. Second, using the governmental news database (see Footnote 1), I identify the NERV’s austerity discourse as a moral legitimisation for translating these economic interests into the governmental crisis management. Austerity is then decoded as a central worldview in the Czech economic thinking besides anti-communism, anti-politics, and competitiveness. Focusing on the 2013 pension reform, I document how these worldviews were discursively articulated to conceal capitalist interests but simultaneously remained moral convictions of the economic experts. Finally, I document post-2013 neoliberal resilience from the original NERV to the resurrection of its brand during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020.

The NERV brand has thus come to denote an extraordinary advisory board which is activated by the Czech government during economic crises. During the GEC, it operated in two versions. In January 2009, the NERV I was established to provide advice on the immediate anti-recession strategies to the first ODS-led coalition government. In March 2009, this political government collapsed and was replaced by a technocratic government which included the future NERV member Eduard Janota as the minister of finance. The NERV II was reactivated in a more comprehensive version under Nečas’s ODS-led coalition government in August 2010 to serve until its 2013 collapse. The NERV I and II memberships overlapped. The group was suspended in August 2013 by its own member Rusnok, who then served as the new technocratic prime minister. By the end of this section, overlapping memberships with the NERV I and II are identified in the new NERV III and the KoroNERV-20 to expose the neoliberal resilience.

Power bloc

According to Prime Minister Nečas (2010), the NERV represented a group of ‘top economic experts’ who offered their ‘independent intellectual potential’ in times of economic crisis. The foregrounding of their expert neutrality aimed at concealing the experts’ political selection and links with capitalist interests. Being a ‘NERV member’ and simultaneously serving these economic interests nevertheless reinforced the group’s expert prestige as a ‘[technocratic] theory verified by [managerial] practice’ (Mejstřík 2012). For example, Dlouhý (2012) was primarily ‘an economist, a NERV member, [and then] an advisor to Goldman Sachs, and also a former minister of industry and trade’. Such aggregations of functions thus legitimise the experts’ intermediary positions as a sign of neutrality in the media.

Nevertheless, the collective’s source of expert prestige rests mainly in the Prague-based academic field: the Economics and Forecasting Institutes, VŠE, CERGE-EI, and IES. Neoliberal globalists show a more distinguished expertise thanks to their Anglo-American education. The US-based professor Švejnar and Professor Mejstřík were commonly introduced with mentions of their academic credentials. The widely-read public intellectual Tomáš Sedláček (2012) was regularly presented as ‘one of the most prospective young economists’ by *Yale Economic Review*. Although possessing a less prominent expertise, neoliberal nationalists legitimised themselves through the dense think-tank network. The CEP founder Weigl personified President Klaus’s voice, while the LI founder Schwarz organised the VŠE connections as a long-term dean of its Economics Faculty. The prolific columnist Pavel Kohout then formed a nationalist parallel to Sedláček as far as public outreach is concerned. These diverse roles and the blend of nationalist and globalist orientations made the group look like a national coalition rather than a representation of particularistic interests.

Transnational affiliation is another source of expert prestige. The NERV nuances the expectation about the ECE globalists forming more transnationalised and thus zealous neoliberal forces. Although there is a correlation between the deeper transnationalisation and the globalist orientation, the neoliberal nationalists are integrated too. Moreover, the less integrated nationalists tend to express such a neoliberal zeal. The NERV was fully incorporated into the Western elite networks, including the WB, the IMF, the MPS, the Trilateral Commission (TC), the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), the World Economic Forum (WEF), and the European Commission, among others. Originally co-opted into these networks to transmit Western economic expertise, Czech neoliberals no longer occupy subordinate positions in them. Dlouhý has been a long-term deputy chairman of the TC’s European Group, while serving in the IMF’s European Regional Advisory Group during the crisis. The nationalist Schwarz served in the MPS’s Board of Directors during the same period. Švejnar and Kohout’s contrast is then the best example of the nationalists’ neoliberal zeal. Advising the OECD, the WB and other organisations on transition economics, Švejnar is a devoted gradualist. Kohout embodies the exact opposite position, given his shock-therapy passion and the absence of any transnational links in his biography.

As it is grounded in the academic, civil society and then public fields and integrations, we can appreciate how this expert prestige justifies the technocratic and managerial links with the economic power. The group reveals a coalition between national and foreign capital in both financial and industrial sectors rather than any competition. The financial sector prevailed when it was represented by foreign-owned banks, insurance companies, and exchange stock players directly or through business associations. Respected as a founding president of the Czech Banking Association, Jiří Kunert represented UniCredit Bank as well. Rusnok represented not only the Czech branch of ING but presided also the Czech Association of Pension Funds. Another key person of bank privatisation and a high-profile banker, Pavel Kysilka was nominated by Česká spořitelna (Erste Group) to the NERV only to simultaneously become the vice-president of the Banking Association. Participation in the NERV could indeed lead to a career promotion. Representing industrial interests, Mejstřík moved from promoting his own EEIP consultancy to becoming the president of the ICC's Czech branch. As a former Social Democratic vice-minister and now an executive manager in Škoda Auto (Volkswagen Group), Martin Jahn became the president of the Czech Automotive Industry Association. Furthermore, the expectations of the pension reform incentivised the open coalition between the foreign and national capital in the newly established Generali-PPF Holding. Having emerged from the shock-therapy privatisation in the mid-1990s, the PPF grew into the most powerful national financial group. Following its merger with Generali, the nationalist Kohout and the globalist Vladimír Bezděk defended the holding's interests during the pension reform preparations.

Enabling this intra-capitalist coalition, the collective also shows inter-class incorporations and neutralisations. Incorporating economic experts with former ties to the ČSSD, trade unions, and public service, the NERV could present itself as a truly national coalition. Some had served as high state bureaucrats or former Social Democratic politicians, and others as long-term members of advisory bodies to the government and/or advisors to ministers or presidents. Bezděk (2010) was nominated to the board as a 'symbol' because he headed two 'Bezděk Committees' on pension reform during the ČSSD-led coalition government in the mid-2000s and the technocratic government in 2010. The second committee was convened by Janota during his term as a technocratic minister of finance. Admired as the 'biggest expert on fiscal policy', Janota (2011) was a recognised deputy minister of finance responsible for designing governmental budgets since the ČSSD governments in the late 1990s. Rusnok himself served as a trade unionist and a Social Democratic minister before transferring into the financial sector. Švejnar (2012) exemplified a blend of incorporation and neutralisation given his public credentials as a former advisor to President Havel, a Social Democratic economist and an already unsuccessful but still potential presidential candidate 'with support from the ČSSD'.

The NERV was not a mere advisory board, or a plain lobby group. It rather formed as a crisis coalition of neoliberal thinkers who strived to relegitimise the globalist project and use this as a parallel opportunity for its further neoliberalisation. The group's expert status was far from accepted by all, and was regularly questioned in the political struggle by the opposition parties, trade unions, and other leftist groups. Countering the criticism of the pension reform as a product of 'pension fund

representatives', Rusnok (2011) pointed to the heterogeneity of the consulted forces, such as former public servants and the 'trade unions'. Bezděk (2010) downplayed his links with the 'financial group PPF', while Mejstřík (2012) faced an inquiry into whether he was a 'truly independent advisor'. Although representing the capitalist interests, the experts are likewise consumed by their own worldviews, as explained below.

Common sense

The common sense analysis decodes the NERV discourse and the pivotal role of austerity in organising the other worldviews inherent in the Czech economic thinking: anti-politics, anti-communism, and competitiveness. I document how these worldviews were rearticulated by the NERV to consolidate the coalitions between neoliberal nationalists and neoliberal globalists. Moreover, I show how these worldviews were simultaneously instrumentalised to morally legitimise the capitalist interests and translate them into economic strategies of national interest, particularly the 2013 pension reform. In this sense, the discourse aimed at incorporating labour or neutralising its organised protests from the left.

Therefore, the NERV's flagship report 'The Framework of Competitiveness' associates the FDI-based competitiveness with balanced budgets, as they are seen as two mutually reinforcing national interests (Mejstřík et al. 2011: 13–16): the GEC and the subsequent Eurozone crisis exposed the 'long-term indebtedness of the state' not only as a threat but also as an opportunity for a comprehensive reform towards an economic model 'established on one's own savings but no external lending'. The budget 'cutting' was thus legitimised as an economic necessity, although it was supported only as long as it did not affect the productive investment into the long-term 'competitiveness' (Dlouhý 2012). The cuts in the government's social expenditures were thus necessary, while the preservation of infrastructural investment and business assistance was justifiable. Even though the gradualists such as Švejnar (2010) opposed the shock-therapy orthodoxy of plain 'cutting', their austerity visions legitimised the discourse of advanced restructuring through pension, healthcare and other 'reform[s]' (Janota 2011). The competitiveness could thus reconcile the differing interpretations of the budget cutting when rearticulating them from immediate cuts to the long-term sound economic strategies.

The resultant social pains had to be morally legitimised. Because 'we have lived above our means', the debts restructuring elsewhere taught Czechs a moral lesson: to make the necessary reforms or otherwise face a 'debt of up to 70 percent of GDP by 2020' with all the painful consequences (Švejnar 2011). High indebtedness indicates a failure of self-governance and disobedience to capitalist worldviews. For neoliberal nationalists and globalists alike, this was a moral weakness of individuals and nations but also the civilisational deviance of the whole of Europe. It had to be stopped at home and punished abroad. Because 'debt and sin are synonyms' (Sedláček 2012), the severity of the fiscal crisis was an inevitable result of past debt 'doping' (Kohout 2012a). Making Europe 'addicted to a debt drug' only compensated for the loss of its competitiveness (Kohout 2011). The 'fiscal sinners' had to

be thus rightfully ‘punished for their misconduct’ (Zahradník 2010) so that the harsh treatment would bring them back on the competitive path.

Anti-communism further reconciled the conflict between nationalist Euroscepticism and globalist Eurooptimism, while making it a powerful neutralising argument. The social resistance and the organised protest against the reforms were accordingly demeaned as a communist legacy and a moral hazard. ‘The decades of communist economic darkness’ (Zahradník 2011) made the structural reforms still necessary for catching up with the West European competitiveness. Sadly, the persistent ‘communist mentality’ (Sedláček 2011) explained the domestic resistance against the comprehensive reform of the whole state, which was still reminiscent of the malfunctioning ‘socialist enterprises’ (Schwarz 2011). This communist experience was simultaneously helpful for finding a common diagnosis of the Eurozone crisis: Europe itself has not learnt from its own socialist legacy. The Eurooptimist Sedláček (2010) thus saw the bail-outs for debtor economies as akin to ‘a sin against capitalism’ and an imposition of ‘communist rules’. For the Eurosceptic Kohout (2012b), it was another manifestation of the collapsing ‘West European debt socialism’. Therefore, anti-communism underpinned the austerity as a never-ending quest to overcome the communist legacy, while consolidating a national diagnosis of the European context.

We can therefore counterargue against the common association between economic globalism and neoliberalism on the one hand, and that between economic nationalism and anti-neoliberalism on the other. Rather than simply imposing structural constraints, the Eurozone crisis management mediated a discursive framework which shaped but hardly determined the domestic struggle. It positioned Czechia in the club of fiscally disciplined member states, while allowing it to criticise the undisciplined *others* and envision the consequences of remaining unreformed through their pain. Indeed, these visions were legitimized through multiple rankings such as the ‘original WEF data according to the Global Competitiveness Index’ (Mejstřík et al. 2011: 48), which equates fiscal orthodoxy with competitiveness. The crisis management by the “doctors” from the IMF, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank’ (Zámečník 2011) was also widely referenced. However, its failure to solve the debt crisis elsewhere only incentivised the NERV’s scepticism and search for domestic strategies.

The pension reform documents such a strategy. The reform introduced a private second pillar, which was to be administered by the financial sector, to complement the public first pillar and the existing third pillar of life insurance. Further parametric changes were introduced. In the moral legitimisation of the pension privatisation as a national interest, the capitalist interests were concealed through the blend of anti-communism and international expertise. Accumulating only six percent of its private funding through the third pillar, the pension system was ‘still ninety-four percent communist’ and thus in need of reform (Sedláček 2011). If left unreformed, the first pillar risked producing ‘annual deficits of 150 billion crowns’ (Bezděk 2011). ‘According to the OECD data’, the system thus became outdated, which was why the IMF ‘recommended’ introducing the second pillar (Rusnok 2011). Purifying the moral hazard and warning against the economic risks, the group thus strived for both winning public support and neutralising the social protest. The so-called

intergenerational ‘burden’ (Bezděk et al. 2011) presents the best illustration of this because it was no longer justifiable to shift the pension debt to the shoulders of future generations. The reform relieved this burden because it tended to ‘increase the meritocracy of the system, diversify risks, and decrease the rate of intergenerational injustice’ (Rusnok 2012). Moreover, the second pillar offered an investment opportunity thanks to its ‘diversified global stock portfolio’ (Zámečník 2012), which promised generating private savings instead of public debts.

The austerity discourse thus rests heavily on the common sense of Czech economic thinking. As the NERV discourse documents, this thinking is continually rearticulated through the interactions between the neoliberal nationalists and neoliberal globalists, as well as their strategies of incorporating or neutralising organised labour. At the same time, this rearticulation legitimises the powerful economic interests behind the governmental economic strategies in the wider society. The pension reform and its partial reversal in 2015 show how the austerity politics narrows the power struggle to whether there should be more shock-therapy or more gradualist neoliberalism in the Czech globalist state project rather than their alternatives.

Resilience

It is now possible to explore why the post-2013 political turn signifies more continuity than change. The post-2013 biographies and the pension reform reversal evidence this. Although the NERV was suspended by Rusnok’s new technocratic government, the neoliberal thinkers were hardly replaced as leading economic experts by any other alternative. The austerity discourse was deprioritised by the following governments but remains a common sense underlying the political struggles over the state economic strategies. The same neoliberal experts redeploy it also as a civic critique through the worldview of anti-politics. By analysing the anti-politics, we understand the failure of the pension reform as a morally legitimate economic strategy in the national interest even before its real implementation. The following reversal of the second pillar can be then interpreted as a neoliberalisation by decay whereby the pension privatisation is reversed but the parametric changes are preserved to rein in the pension expenditures.

The NERV III and the civic KoroNERV-20 facilitate the latest evidence of the neoliberal experts’ enduring influence. These two new groups are organised through the practices of mutual incorporation analysed above, while overlapping with the original NERV. Sedláček and Miroslav Zámečník are members of both groups. Švejnar is ČSSD’s nominee in the NERV III, while the globalist Dlouhý entered it as the president of the Czech Chamber of Commerce, which is the most influential national business association. Furthermore, the KoroNERV-20 includes other members of the original NERV such as Mejstřík, Daniel Münich and Petr Zahradník, among others.

The NERV brand thus documents a strong neoliberal leadership across the whole state-civil society relations. Once he finished his technocratic premiership, Rusnok moved immediately into the Czech National Bank, where he has acted as its Governor since 2016. Many NERV members retain their previous or new positions in

governmental or ministerial advisory bodies and boards of directors in state-owned enterprises. Münich's membership in the Committee on Budgetary Forecasts within the Czech Fiscal Council is exemplary of this. Established according to the EU pattern in 2018, the council reflects the NERV's proposal to depoliticise the overview of governmental budgeting. Besides being the president of the Czech Chamber of Commerce, Dlouhý simultaneously leads the ICC's Czech branch since 2014. And perhaps unsurprisingly, Zahradník represents this chamber in the European Economic and Social Committee. Indeed, the neoliberal leadership still relies on the mutually reinforcing recognitions of their expertise at home and abroad.

Let us finish with the anti-politics and the neoliberalisation by decay. Anti-politics explains why the governmental shape of the pension reform failed in the NERV's technocratic discourse already prior to its implementation, while thus detaching austerity from the political struggle as a neutral expertise and a national worldview. The NERV's anti-political phantasies called for handing the state power from the incompetent and corrupt political leaders to an unbiased technocratic management already during its functioning. Therefore, a 'Budgetary Council' was proposed to reduce the political risk of 'excessive indebtedness of the state and [thus of] jeopardizing its competitiveness' (Mejstřík et al. 2011: 71). This way, anti-politics distanced the NERV as neutral experts and their links with the capitalist interests as well from what they interpreted as biased outcomes of political struggles. The hopes of the pension privatisation were subsequently dashed by governmental politicians who 'did not explain the purpose of the reform to the people and sometimes failed to understand it themselves' (Münich 2013). The second pillar 'cracked' (Zámečník 2011) due to the ongoing political struggle. In a collective article, NERV members accordingly explained how their proposals were 'twisted or deliberately misinterpreted' (Bezděk et al. 2011) by the political opposition, trade unions, and other left-ist groups. Drawing boundaries with politics, fiscal orthodoxy retains thus its technocratic appeal as the moral worldview behind the widely accepted national rather than merely neoliberal economic strategies.

Conclusion

Applying the transnational class approach to Czechia, this article has two implications for the rollback debate. First, the Czech economic nationalism promotes a shock-therapy neoliberalism in the country's economic strategies, which challenges the rollback expectation about the political rise of economic nationalism as an indicator of neoliberal reversal in ECE. Consequently, the gradualist bias of Czech economic globalism questions another rollback assumption which equates the transnational integration with the sole source of neoliberal emergence and resilience in ECE. Moreover, the leading nationalists and globalists do not only compete but also cooperate with each other through their neoliberal affinities and negotiating the powerful economic interests. Second, the Czech difference brings theoretical implications for those rollback scholars who use a few 'leading countries' (Appel and Orenstein 2018: 142) for making general statements about ECE, if not the whole so-called post-communist world. The class approach instead invites studying the

actually existing continuity and change in ECE power relations and economic strategies on the ground.

Historicising the Czech difference, the approach likewise eschews studying the political rise of economic nationalism as a ‘backlash’ (Buzogány and Varga 2018). I rather suggest studying the contemporary power relations as a ‘great variety of morbid symptoms’ inherent more to the historical contradictions of the ‘dying’ neoliberal hegemony than to a ‘[new]born’ one (Gramsci, 1971: 276). We can explain this way the ambivalence of neoliberal rollback. While the backlash thesis implies a straightforward replacement of globalist state projects by the renationalising ones, the class approach considers also their mutual fusions.

Foregrounding resilience, I am not denying that the neoliberal hegemony may have entered its late stage in ECE and globally. The COVID-19 crisis could even speed up this process, although the NERV analysis asks for remaining on the ground when discussing the pandemic’s future impact. Nor am I against studying Hungary and Poland as illustrations of the nationalist challenge to neoliberal globalisation in ECE or worldwide. However, the Czech difference asks for caution when making such overarching arguments generally or when approaching particular cases in the region.

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