

## Migration Discourse in the Czech Republic. Populist vs. Pragmatic Approach

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### Abstract

*This article aims to identify and explain the similarities and differences in how political parties in the Czech Republic construct the topic of migration. The study is methodologically based on critical discourse analysis, using a comparative approach to analyze language strategies, evaluative attitudes, and argumentation strategies in the political communication of the political parties under study. The research focuses on how individual political entities use the topic of migration to legitimize political attitudes, mobilize voters, and reinforce ideological boundaries between "us" and "them." An analysis of selected speeches shows that the topic of migration in Czech political discourse is predominantly polarizing, with the language used by populist parties more emotional than that of traditional political parties from the democratic center.*

<https://doi.org/10.53465/JAP.2025.9788022552806.544-556>

**Keywords:** migration, political discourse, Czech Republic, populism, political parties, critical discourse analysis (CDA).

### Úvod

Unlike Slovakia, migration was already being discussed in the Czech Republic before 2015. The Czech Republic was one of the countries with the fastest-growing migrant populations in the former socialist bloc. After 1993, these were mainly residents of Slovakia, later migrants from Ukraine. A large group of migrants was also made up of Vietnamese, whose historical trajectories date back to the period of socialist Czechoslovakia. Thanks to its growing economy, the Czech Republic has also become a sought-after destination for other European countries and countries around the world (such as Mongolia).

This article aims to identify and explain the similarities and differences in how political parties in the Czech Republic construct the topic of migration

in their public statements. According to Dulebová and Duleba (2021: 410), "global media and political discourse today tends to simplify meanings, which also leads to a simplification of the linguistic means used." I assume that my thinking will lead to similar conclusions, because it is precisely in the discourse on migration that we often witness simplistic approaches to complex social phenomena, such as international migration undoubtedly is.

The study is based on critical discourse analysis (Wodak, 2017; van Dijk, 2018) and uses a comparative approach to analyze linguistic strategies, evaluative frameworks, and argumentative approaches in political communication. My attention is focused on how individual Czech political parties use the topic of international migration to legitimize their own political positions, mobilize voters, and reinforce ideological boundaries between the categories of "us" and "them," or "the others," or "the foreigners."

Given the limited space of a conference paper, I examine only three political parties and their leaders. The winner of the 2025 elections was the ANO party led by Andrej Babiš, who already has experience as Prime Minister of the Czech Republic. Then there is the SPD party led by Tomio Okamura, and finally the ODS led by Petr Fiala. The analysis is based on the assumption that the topic of migration has a polarizing character in Czech political discourse, with the language of populist parties characterized by a higher degree of emotionality than the language of parliamentary parties, which are not usually referred to as populist in the literature (by Czech political scientists) (Kluknavská et al., 2024).

The main methodological tool for achieving the goal will be discourse analysis. Although the professional literature in this field mainly refers to authors from Western Europe or the USA, we can also identify several experts in the social sciences and humanities in Slovakia who use this method in their research. Ol'ga Orgoňová and Alena Bohunická (2013: 50) define discourse analysis as "a broad field of research focused on the actions of individuals socialized in a specific culturally and politically defined community through a complex of verbal and nonverbal activities, i.e., the production and reception of communicates." Their colleague from the same Comenius University in Bratislava, Irina Dulebová (2012), perceives discourse "as the sum of all speech acts used in political discussions and also the rules of public policy, verified by tradition and experience." According to Ľubomír Guzi (2016: 140) from the University of Prešov, "political discourse is part of political communication with its own specific language, which is often referred to as the 'language of power'." The study of political discourse is also an area primarily addressed by experts in political linguistics (Štefančík, 2021).

## Migration processes in the Czech Republic

The Czech Republic, while still part of Czechoslovakia, only began to address migration after the political, economic, and social changes of 1989. The communist regime, a country closed off from the outside world, and a barbed wire fence on the borders with Austria and Germany were natural barriers to the migration processes we know in Western European countries. For these reasons, Czechoslovakia was predominantly a country whose residents were leaving. Although there was also immigration of cheap labour and students from so-called friendly countries, its scale was not significant enough for migration to become a central topic of political decision-making.

Following changes in political and economic conditions and the growth of the domestic economy, the Czech Republic also joined the ranks of countries with a rapidly growing number of foreigners with residence permits. Pavlík and Kučera (2005) distinguish three stages of incoming migrants in the last decade of the 20th century. The first stage was linked to the transformation of the regime. The democratization of the system and the associated political and economic reforms in the countries of the former socialist bloc were the main prerequisites for the opening of borders. During this period, it was mainly a question of so-called return migration. This category included people who left Czechoslovakia for political reasons. It also included the descendants of Czech and Slovak emigrants from the former Soviet Union, especially Ukraine and Russia. The first stage culminated in the migration of Czechs and Slovaks after the division of Czechoslovakia. Migration of Slovak citizens to the Czech Republic, also due to its industrial character, dominated during the first years of the state's existence. Due to the migrants from Slovakia, the population of the Czech part of the federation grew faster. The division of Czechoslovakia brought a new perspective on cross-border movement between the successor states. What was originally an internal migration took on an international dimension. The following two migration periods are already associated with independent states.

The second stage (1993-1997) was characterized by a reduced number of immigrants from Slovakia and an increased number of foreigners from other countries. Migrants from third countries were attracted to the Czech Republic by its growing economy and standard of living.

Finally, in the third stage (1997-2000), there was a gradual decline in immigration, and the number of immigrants from other countries fell. This was a reaction to the gradually deteriorating economic environment and the subsequent restrictive migration policy of the Czech government. In this situation, many Czechs began to perceive foreigners as a "threat to economic prosperity and social harmony" (Drbohlav, 2000). A significant increase in

the number of foreigners in the Czech Republic was again recorded mainly in 2004. The reason for this can be found primarily in the country's accession to the European Union. In that year, more than 250,000 migrants were registered in the Czech Republic. By the end of 2014, almost 450,000 foreigners were living in the Czech Republic (Chytil, 2016).

As in other V4 countries, there was intense debate in the Czech Republic about migration from African and Middle Eastern countries. However, the number of migrants grew enormously only after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The migration balance reached record levels that year (ČSÚ, 2023).

### **Political parties and migration**

The current political discourse in the Czech Republic is shaped by several political figures. One of the most active politicians is Andrej Babiš, chairman of the party ANO and the winner of the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2025. Babiš used this as one of his main themes in 2015 and 2016. Like the Prime Minister Robert Fico, Babiš rejected the proposal of some EU states to approve a mechanism for the redistribution of migrants, the so-called mandatory quotas, even among those member states that are not on the external border of the Schengen area, or among those states that were not among the destination countries for migrants, including the Czech Republic and Slovakia. However, Babiš, as the Minister of Finance, could imagine employing refugees in jobs that the Czech citizens were not interested in:

– *"We have 18,000 vacancies for unskilled workers. If our citizens don't want to fill these positions, then yes, why not"* (Babiš, A., 12. 9. 2014, cited according to iRozhlas).

During this period, the political party ANO considered providing humanitarian aid to refugees outside the Czech Republic. However, it categorically rejects the system of mandatory redistribution of migrants. Later, Andrej Babiš radicalized his rhetoric in relation to various international agreements on international migration management. In 2020, already as Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, he rejected the European Union's migration package. According to Babiš, the EU should focus on combating migrant smugglers, whom the Czech Prime Minister considered to be the main problem of illegal migration on the European continent (ČTK 2020).

– *"At first look, it seems that the European Commission still hasn't understood that the solution to illegal migration is to stop illegal*

*migrants when they arrive on European soil" (Babiš, A., 24. 9. 2020, cited according to ČTK).*

From his position as opposition leader in 2024, Babiš presented migration as the greatest betrayal in the history of the Czech Republic:

*"The mass illegal migration of people with completely different cultures, customs, and mentalities is a cancer that is destroying European society" (Babiš, A. 2024).*

Babiš probably deliberately uses the term "*illegal migration*," as he himself is originally from Slovakia, which makes him arguably the most famous migrant in Czech politics.

A discursive analysis of Andrej Babiš's entire speech from 2024 shows that migration is constructed in his rhetoric as an existential threat to the Czech Republic and the whole of Europe. He uses apocalyptic language ("*the greatest betrayal in modern history*," "*the cancer decomposing European society*," "*assisted suicide of Europe*") and systematically creates a dichotomy of us versus them. Migrants are referred to as "*illegal*," "*with a different culture, customs, and mentality*," thereby linguistically placing them outside the moral and cultural framework of "*our society*." This lexical choice supports the image of a collective threat, with immigration becoming a metaphor for chaos, violence, and the decay of civilization.

From the perspective of political linguistics, this discourse is highly polarizing. Babiš creates an image of the nation as a homogeneous whole (the category "*us*") that must be protected from "*foreign cultures*" and "*treacherous elites*." In his communication strategy, migration is presented as a reason for conflict between the national interests of the Czech Republic (and other European states) and Brussels as the decision-making center of the European Union, thus combining a nationalist framework with anti-European rhetoric. His language is radicalized, containing metaphors of violence, ridicule, and emotional contrasts, confirming the shift in Babiš's migration discourse from rational criticism to openly confrontational, mobilizing language.

I draw particular attention to the term "*cancer*." In Babiš's language, it is a metaphor in which a social phenomenon (in this case, migration) is presented as a (usually fatal) disease. This transfer from the medical sphere to political discourse presents migration not as a natural social process, but as a destructive, uncontrollable, and deadly process that must be "*stopped*" if society is to survive. This type of metaphor serves to dehumanize and morally delegitimize—if migration is a "*cancer*," then migrants are not individuals,

but symptoms of a disease. Such language justifies repressive policies and at the same time reinforces the identitarian boundary between the "healthy body of the nation" and the "infected foreign element." "Cancer" is also a metaphor for internal decay, creating the idea that the threat comes not only from outside (from migrants), but also from within society, from the political elites (representatives of the European Union) who create the conditions for the spread of this disease.

Another equally critical and radical critic of international migration is Tomio Okamura, a politician with a migrant background and leader of the political party SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy). The party describes itself as "patriotic." As the name suggests, it supports direct democracy, and one of its defining features is its anti-immigration stance. The SPD generally emphasizes the negative impacts of migration on the destination country. According to Charvátová and Filipc (2022), the SPD frames migration in the context of other negative phenomena (especially rape, crime, and terrorism). The SPD uses images of aggressive Muslims on social media to evoke emotions of fear, anger, and hatred in the recipients of these political messages, which contributes to the radicalization and sustainability of voter mobilization.

Tomio Okamura's rhetoric on migration is based on a dichotomous contrast between the categories of "us" and "them." In line with analyses of other populist politicians found in the professional literature, the category "us" represents the (Czech) nation, and "them" are migrants. The latter are constructed as a threat to the cultural, religious, and personal security of the inhabitants of the Czech Republic or Europe. Okamura uses expressive terms such as "illegal intruders," reinforcing the image of foreigners as disruptors of order. He uses dehumanizing language, depriving migrants of their individual characteristics. He uses dehumanizing language, depriving migrants of their individual characteristics. In professional literature, we find Okamura perceived through his xenophobic attitudes towards Muslims (Stojarová 2018). Instead of refugees in need, his communication strategies portray them as an amorphous mass threatening Czech cultural patterns of behavior and the safety of the indigenous population.

*"The facts speak for themselves – migration is becoming an unmanageable security risk"* (Okamura, T. 2018).

When discussing this topic, Okamura uses negative attributes—such as potential criminals, perpetrators of violence, and cultural conflicts. He argues for the need to protect borders, sovereignty, and national identity, thereby emphasizing his refusal to help refugees. He often uses the argument of

security, presenting migration as an existential threat, not as a humanitarian problem. This type of argument fits into a broader populist framework in which elites are accused of inaction and "treacherous" actions against the interests of the majority of citizens, with common sense."

Okamura's language is clearly radical. He often presents his views openly, without attempting to use mitigating language, thereby reinforcing the polarization of society. From the perspective of discursive analysis, his language becomes a tool for constructing an enemy, through which the politician builds his own authority, mobilizes support, and thus gains the support of voters.

Not only does Andrej Babiš use expressions from the medical field. We can also find expressions from the medical field in Tomio Okamura's language when he spoke about migrants, among other things:

*"The most common disease brought to the Czech Republic by migrants is syphilis. Other diseases include lice, scabies, and Salmonella. However, migrants also suffer from chickenpox, HIV, hepatitis, and tuberculosis"* (Okamura, T. 2016).

The quoted statement is an example of exclusive and stigmatizing discourse in which the politician presents migrants as a threat to hygiene and health. Okamura refers to migrants in general ("migrants") without distinguishing between their origin, status, or individual circumstances. This generalizing term presents migrants as a homogeneous group, which is associated with negative connotations in language. Migrants are thus linguistically reduced to carriers of disease, narrowing their social identity to a biological aspect. The SPD chairman attributes primarily negative attributes to them (morbidity, uncleanliness, and a threat to public health). The naming of specific diseases (syphilis, scabies, HIV, tuberculosis) evokes a strong emotional response, the aim of which is to provoke aversion and fear. This communication strategy legitimizes and reinforces the idea that international migration poses a risk and justifies the exclusion of migrants from the indigenous society.

Today, the SPD can be described as the main representative of anti-immigration discourse in the Czech Republic. According to Lidák and Štefančík (2022: 154), "anti-immigration parties present migrants as enemies who pose a threat to the society of the target country. This threat is multidimensional, but as a rule, attention is drawn to the security, economic, political, and cultural threats." These levels of threat are also reflected in the communication strategies of the SPD leader Tomio Okamura.

Petr Fiala, the Prime Minister (2021-2025) and leader of the political party ODS, represents a different type of Czech politician. Fiala is a university professor, political scientist, and leader of a conservative party, so, understandably, his communication strategies differ from the previous two Czech politicians. However, if we look at Petr Fiala's statements as chairman of the ODS, some of his comments correspond to those of populist parties. As an opposition politician, Petr Fiala, like Orbán, Babiš, and Fico, rejected mandatory quotas and emphasized the security framework of migration.

*"If Europe is committing suicide in some respect, then it is in its attempt to solve the migration crisis in the form of quotas, sending people where they do not want to go"* (Fiala, P. 2015).

As the Czech author Jan Krotký (2019) points out, the securitization of migration can be considered a pragmatic approach to migration, which is not necessarily an expression of populism. In the Czech Republic, political parties across the entire party spectrum emphasize the security aspect of migration, regardless of their ideological affiliation, attitude toward the EU, or rhetoric.

In the above statement, the ODS chairman uses the metaphor of death as a warning. In his view, Europe is understood as a collective entity that is destroying its own identity and undermining its fragile stability. Such a rhetorical figure is not descriptive, but emotionally charged and therefore mobilizing, with the ability to evoke a sense of threat to civilization. In this way, Fiala reinforces the polarization between the categories of "us" (Europe, which must defend itself) and "them" (migrants, who are supposed to threaten Europe). Migrants are predominantly presented as a risk group, not at all as active contributors to society. Although Petr Fiala seems to be drawing attention to European Union policy, in this statement, we can identify his interest in avoiding a decision that would have a direct impact on the national policy of the Czech Republic.

Although Petr Fiala rejected migration quotas and expressed concerns about uncontrolled migration, his language was moderate and factual. A typical feature of his communication strategies is technocratic argumentation. The ODS chairman talks about the need for "*effective border protection*," "*real help in countries of origin*," or "*cooperation at the European level*." He does not use expressive or dehumanizing terms for migrants (e.g., "*invasion*," "*horde*") commonly used by Tomio Okamura and Andrej Babiš.

As the Prime Minister, he acted sensitively toward Ukrainian refugees while emphasizing his own successes. In November 2024, he highlighted the economic benefits for the Czech economy:

*"Ukrainians contribute more money to the state budget because they are employed and we have managed to integrate them"* (Fiala, P. 2015, cited according to Kopecký 2024).

In any case, this approach stands in stark contrast to statements about migrants as a threat. The former prime minister presents Ukrainian refugees as active, hard-working, and valuable members of society with a positive impact on public finances. In this way, Fiala is changing the perception of migration from a "problem" and a "burden" to a topic of effective management and integration, emphasizing the success of his government. His language is factual, technocratic, and pragmatic; instead of emotions, he works with measurable facts such as employment and contributions to the state budget.

The ODS chairman implicitly distinguishes between different types of migrants. He views those who are culturally close and capable of successful integration positively. Ukrainians, or Ukrainian war refugees, are presented as migrants with whom Czech society has been able to cope, thus emphasizing the importance of selective and controlled immigration. This contrasts with the populist approach described above, which presents migrants as a threat and perceives them as carriers of various diseases. Fiala's statement expresses a pragmatic approach based on economic rationality with an emphasis on state sovereignty in decision-making on migration processes.

## Conclusion

The article focuses on the Czech migration discourse by analyzing selected statements by three politicians representing three relevant political parties. Based on a discourse analysis of some of the quoted statements, there is a clear difference between the populist and pragmatic approaches to international migration, which lies primarily in the way migrants are talked about and the impact these discourses have on society and political sentiment. In the Czech Republic, the populist approach is mainly represented by Tomio Okamura and Andrej Babiš. Both present migration as a factor that threatens national identity and has negative economic, security, and cultural consequences. Migrants are portrayed as sick, dangerous, or culturally incompatible, thereby provoking emotional mobilization based on fear,

hatred, or rejection. It is precisely this polarizing and dichotomous language, emphasizing the security aspects of migration, that is typical of populist political actors (Dulebová, Štefančík, Cingerová 2024). The language of Czech populists is also expressive and appealing, and we can identify collective labels in it that reinforce the boundary between the categories of "us" and "them, the strangers." The aim of such communication strategies is not a rational discussion of migration policy (immigration, asylum, or integration), but rather to confirm the identity of the "protector of the nation," to gain political points by evoking a sense of threat, and to gain legitimacy in approving repressive measures.

The text also analyzed some of the statements made by the ODS chairman. Although in 2015 and 2016, Fiala, who was an opposition politician at that time, also pointed out the incorrect approach to the mandatory redistribution of migrants to several EU states, Fiala's statements have the attribute of technocratic-pragmatic communication, in which migration is not evaluated morally or emotionally, but economically and utilitarianly. In the case of Petr Fiala, as with Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico (Štefančík, 2025), we can see that some politicians, once they enter the government and assume governmental responsibility, may soften their originally critical or even radical statements.

In Petr Fiala's political language, we find the presentation of certain types of migrants (such as Ukrainian refugees) as economic contributors to the state budget. Fiala uses the language of measurable results, talking about employment, tax contributions, or methods of integration. This approach reduces the polarization of public debate and presents migration as a manageable phenomenon that can benefit the state and society. However, migration processes must be managed responsibly and in a controlled manner. In contrast to populist rhetoric, Fiala's stance appears to be a rational, competent approach to migration, seeking to restore confidence in the state's ability to respond to global challenges without unnecessary hysteria or polarization.

## Corpus Resources

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**Funding acknowledgment:** This text is a result of the project APVV-23-0040, "Migration Discourse in the V4 Countries from the Perspective of Political Linguistics".

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