Waiting for a Tragedy? Exploring the Czech Republic's Ability to Detect Radicalised Individuals

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Abstract: Radicalisation had long been seen as something foreign, belonging more to Western Europe than to post-communist Central Europe. Considering the recent events in the Czech Republic and the 2022 Bratislava shooting, the article investigates the Concept of the Fight against Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred 2021–2026 to explore the currently involved stakeholders in its efforts to detect radicalised individuals vis-à-vis possible radicalisation-related threats emerging from its contemporary extremist landscape. As the document solely centres on the Police, Prison Service and the Probation and Mediation Service, it turns to similar institutions and services in Slovakia and Germany to outline potential inspiration and solutions for the Czech Republic. By synthesising this with the reasoning about the effective detection of radicalised individuals of predecessor Czech scholars, the article concludes that the MoI's 2025–2026 action plan should incorporate three other stakeholders, i.e. 1) teachers, 2) children, teenagers and young people, and 3) the general public, to more appropriately meet the B2-specific objective and, crucially, to more adequately address the contemporary complexity of radicalisation.

Keywords: **radicalisation, counter-radicalisation, extremism, the Czech Republic, security**

Introduction

Radicalisation had long been considered something foreign, belonging more to Western Europe or other regions of the world, as the Czech Republic does

not have much experience with terrorism. Indeed, it does have some with non-terroristic violence of right-wing and left-wing extremists (Strnad 2023); however, the country has not encountered anything similar to its Western counterparts. A wake-up call rang on 12 October 2022 when Juraj Krajčík, a 19-year-old student, killed two and injured one in a Bratislava-based LGBT+ bar, Tepláreň. While this happened in Slovakia, the historical and social closeness between the former compatriots only indicates that the Czech Republic might not be exempt from such a threat either.

What might have been forgotten is that the Czech Republic was not far from experiencing something similar. In 2021, two Czech teenagers were arrested for planning[1] a terrorist attack in Prague to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Timothy McVeigh's Oklahoma City bombing (Hesová 2022). Also, as much as Jaromír Balda's deed did not quite resemble traditional terrorist attacks, he became the first Czech citizen convicted of terrorism (Ciroková 2021). Despite the far-right ideological leaning of those acts, it is necessary not to forget other forms of extremism when debating potential radicalisation into violence. Aside from that, the 2023 shooting at Charles University's Philosophical Faculty also indicated the tangibility of the threat. Indeed, no existing evidence shows that the perpetrator was radicalised (Ciroková & Valášek 2024); however, the event only underscored the necessity of exploring the Czech Republic's ability to detect radicalised individuals. After all, those efforts might also have the potential to uncover non-radicalised shooters. Hence, the article answers the following research question: 'What stakeholders are involved in the Czech Republic's counter-radicalisation efforts to detect radicalised individuals?'

To do so, it proceeds as follows. In the next section, a theoretical framework anchors the inquiry in the existing literature on radicalisation. Then, the article turns its attention to the Czech Republic. It consecutively explores its extremist landscape, synthesises the Czech Ministry of the Interior's (MoI) warning about isolated online extremist communities with the author's ongoing doctoral research, and outlines the most probable radicalisation threats it might face. Afterwards, it explores the Czech Republic's Concept of the Fight against Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred 2021–2026. The penultimate section analyses similar reports of Slovakia and Germany to indicate potential inspiration for the country, and recommendations for the MoI's 2025–2026 action plan conclude the article.

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1   They not only planned the attack but also started undertaking real-life steps, such as documenting the places of interest, mapping access roads and acquiring chemicals necessary for making explosives, which they had already started testing (Kozelka 2022).

Theoretical background

Theorising radicalisation

Although no universally accepted definition of radicalisation exists, the article approaches it as a gradual process through which people start accepting violence as a legitimate instrument for achieving political objectives (Crossett & Spitaletta 2010; Wilner & Dubouloz 2010; Borum 2011; Schmid 2016). Whereas this concerns both offline and online radicalisation, the latter likely functions as its main component nowadays (Silber & Bhatt 2007: 20), defined as 'a process by which individuals through interactions with and exposures to various types of internet content come to adopt beliefs that not only justify violence but compel it to the point where these beliefs are translated into violent action' (Mølmen & Ravndal 2023: 464). Despite this apparent straightforwardness, the concept of online radicalisation remains contested among scholars. While some admit that the internet might have the power to facilitate the process predominantly alone (Sageman 2008; Thomas-Evans 2022), others consider it redundant due to the inseparability of online and offline life nowadays (Winter et al. 2020; Valentini, Lorusso & Stephan 2020; Whittaker 2022; Herath & Whittaker 2023). In contrast, another group finds itself somewhere in the middle, suggesting that the internet serves only as one of many components influencing radicalisation whose significance is embedded in the opportunity to meet and interact with like-minded people living anywhere on the planet and access all kinds of propaganda (Precht 2007; Von Behr et al. 2013; Koehler 2014; Cherney et al. 2022; Gunton 2022).

Considering this, the article follows the latter reasoning. As much as the internet currently unquestionably dominates radicalisation, other real-life influences must not be underestimated. Imagine a firm adherent of the great replacement theory,[2] spending hours discussing and consuming it online, who lost a job to an immigrant from Africa or the Middle East. In this hypothetical scenario, which experience would influence this person's radicalisation more? Instead of asking this question, it is more critical to understand how ordinary people become violent extremists in the first place.

Understanding the radicalisation process

People's lives differ, and radicalisation does as well. What compels one to extremism may have little or no impact on others. For this reason, it appears reasonable to assume that a unique pathway precedes the journey of a given

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2   Proponents of this conspiracy theory believe in a systematic replacement of White Europeans by immigrants from Africa and the Middle East orchestrated by liberal politicians and powerful elites (Ekman 2022: 1130).

radicalised individual. While this might be true, the radicalisation process can be interpreted using existing literature. From a sequential view, Silber and Bhatt (2007) put forward a four-stage model leading one to terrorism, i.e. pre-radicalisation, self-identification, indoctrination and jihadisation, derived from the experience of homegrown Islamic radicalisation in the West. Despite that, they are also very likely applicable to other forms of extremism, as the behavioural patterns of radicalised individuals are probably similar.

Whereas the latter three sequences address the active engagement with extremist ideologies, the pre-radicalisation one concerns given attributes of one's life, e.g. family ties, religion, mental health illnesses or prior experience of violence, that have the potential to make somebody more vulnerable to radicalisation. What fuels the self-identification stage when millions experience such attributes but never get radicalised? Before answering, it is essential to remember that although anyone can radicalise, some are more susceptible than others. Indeed, no universal answer exists; however, it is believed that various crises, i.e. economic, social, political or personal, experienced particularly during some critical moment combined with the aforementioned preexisting vulnerabilities may compel one to seek alternative explanations of the world. Nowadays, the internet plays an essential role in doing this as it allows compensating for existing vulnerabilities by creating new identities and constitutes a marketplace where various ideological streams intersect. While this alone does not initiate radicalisation, the convergence between internal and external factors may severely challenge one's hitherto convictions. What is critical at this point is whether people decide to ignore such alternatives or choose to explore them further. If the latter prevails, they are on the brink of the self-identification stage (Silber & Bhatt 2007: 22–30; Mølmen & Ravndal 2023: 466–477).

During this sequence, radicalised individuals intensify their adoption of newly discovered beliefs through either self-exposure or interaction with like-minded peers offline or online. While both are essential, the latter likely dominates because it offers complex opportunities to connect with peers and, crucially, a remarkably accessible and highly secure environment for expressing true feelings. By interacting in such communities and becoming more involved in their activities, radicalised individuals slowly abandon their previous identities and redefine them according to the newly adopted beliefs because they actively engage with people who adhere to shared ideas and values and, therefore, constantly validate extremist explanations. Throughout this sequence, they develop the us-vs-them mentality in which the perceived out-groups become steadily dehumanised. At this point, the internet has the significant power to fuel the elevation from the self-identification stage, serving as a virtual marketplace providing access to radicalisation-conducive materials and networking channels. By reaching the indoctrination stage, radicalised individuals fully develop

their extremist identities, leading them to growing isolation and a subsequent withdrawal from previously established social relations because the membership in online communities is strong enough to diminish the importance of their real-life existence. To proceed through the penultimate stage and enter the jihadisation sequence, radicalised individuals must not only accept violence as a legitimate instrument for achieving political objectives but, critically, accept the duty to sacrifice themselves for a greater ideological cause. What is essential to understand is that the decision to perpetrate a terrorist attack does not come out of the blue, as such conduct is often activated by some subjective action trigger, e.g. personal setback, moral outrage or inspiration from other successful terrorists, fuelling one's determination to commit violence (Silber & Bhatt 2007: 30–53; Mølmen & Ravndal 2023: 467–470).

Radicalisation models, like Silber and Bhatt's, help abstract and conceptualise the radicalisation process; however, assuming that radicalisation operates linearly would indicate only one side of the phenomenon. It is also worth paying attention to other approaches, particularly those viewing radicalisation through the lens of identity-building. For example, Berger (2018) portrays it as a relationship between mutually reinforcing components of group and individual radicalisation, in which the former almost always precedes the latter, consequently leading to the full development and adoption of the in-group identity. This reflects his definition of extremism, which represents ideological beliefs arguing that 'an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group' (ibid.: 44–45). Törnberg and Törnberg (2024) suggested, based on analysing one of the most popular online communities of the extreme right, Stormfront, that radicalisation is predominantly a socialisation process during which people steadily learn about and indoctrinate into the in-group norms and ideology advocating for intergroup violence or domination through the passive exposure to the published content on the one hand, and the active engagement with other like-minded individuals on the other (ibid.: 6–7, 74). Another role of identity in the radicalisation process was shown by Kocmanová and Földes (2024), who investigated the susceptibility of the Romani minority in the Balkans to Salafi radicalisation. In their perception, prolonged crises of original identities caused by years of anxiety, uncertainty and war trauma combined with the existence and accessibility of an alternative one might indeed lead to the creation of new vulnerabilities emerging from the loss of the previously existing barriers against radicalisation and the adoption of the new identity (ibid.: 14). Although this reasoning was derived from the experience of the Romani minority, in the article's view, such an identity transformation also appears applicable to any group suffering from actual or perceived deprivation. Whether a ghettoised descendant of Muslim immigrants or a White European believing in their systematic replacement, their susceptibility to adopting extremist identities might be alike.

That said, one critical matter must be emphasised before proceeding further. Radicalisation is not a straightforward process, even though it may seem so at first glance. Put differently, no universal timeline exists regarding its duration. While somebody may undergo it quite quickly, anyone else might do so in a couple of years or even decades (Berger 2018: 127). Aside from that, one must keep in mind that not all radicalised individuals automatically become terrorists, as the vast majority stop or abandon the process at some point before progressing to the violent stages (Silber & Bhatt 2007: 6). Hence, it is vital to distinguish between non-violent and violent radicalisation guiding the impacted ones to be either willing to engage in terrorism or remain committed to non-violent political mobilisation (Bartlett & Miller 2012).

Deradicalisation and counter-radicalisation

Addressing radicalisation is only one side of the broader discussion. To get the whole picture, it is critical to also pay attention to deradicalisation and counter--radicalisation. Despite their possible alikeness embedded in contradicting radicalisation, both concern different endeavours. As the former's name implies, its underlying nature lies in reversing the process after individuals become radicalised and indoctrinated into extremist ideologies to help them reintegrate into society based on two principal efforts. Whereas deradicalisation itself concerns the 'renouncement of radical beliefs and tactics', disengagement implies 'a behavioural change away from radical activities' (Lindekilde 2016: 534).

In contrast, counter-radicalisation strives to prevent the population from ever developing sympathies to extremist ideologies. Such efforts either concern community resilience or personal interventions. Whereas the former targets mitigating the risk of vulnerable groups from becoming adherent to extremist beliefs or groups through implementing various measures, e.g. social programmes or awareness campaigns, the latter aims at detecting and interrupting developing radicalisation by established monitoring networks of, among others, police, schools or youth clubs as early as possible. That said, it must be acknowledged that counter-radicalisation is not exempt from criticism, arguing that doing so might backfire and exacerbate one's radicalisation (ibid.: 543–544). While both counter-radicalisation instruments concern quite different areas, in the article's view, the expected outcomes of their implementation might potentially converge in reality. Put differently, as much as awareness campaigns or school programmes attempt to strengthen the target groups' resilience against extremist influences, they might also indirectly improve their ability to recognise radicalisation signs and, therefore, increase the likelihood of intervening. Hence, the article does not differentiate between them.

As the article centres on the Czech Republic, it is worth exploring what Czech authors have suggested regarding counter-radicalisation. Vegrichtová (2019)

argues that the timely detection of radicalised individuals is the most effective, preconditioned by the ceaseless education of professional personnel and raising the awareness of the general public on the one hand, and guaranteeing information sharing among all relevant actors and conducting coordinated and complex interventions by respective authorities on the other, because such a rigorous monitoring network has a high potential in identifying signals of those who are being radicalised, undergo the radicalisation process, radicalise others or behave in a way indicating considerable suspicion of violence planning (ibid.: 524–527). Also, she offers valuable insight into the detection of radicalised children and teenagers, as this represents a growing threat today (Pedersen, Vestel & Bakken 2018; Cherney et al. 2022; Schröder et al. 2022). In her perception, incorporating schools and families into such efforts is critical because early radicalisation signs become particularly visible at the former, and parents are very likely the first to notice personality or behavioural changes in their children (Vegrichtová 2019: 607–614). This resembles Smolík's (2020) view, suggesting that detecting radicalised individuals should not solely be expected from the personnel of the Police, Probation and Mediation Service, and Prison Service but also from other relevant stakeholders, e.g. social workers, teachers, community representatives and the general public – of those, schools and educational institutions are believed to have the highest potential to do so (ibid.: 144).

Having distinguished radicalisation, its process, as well as the differences between deradicalisation and counter-radicalisation, it is time to turn the discussion to the Czech Republic and explore its empirical readiness to face such a threat.

Turning the discussion to the Czech Republic

Exploring the broader extremist landscape in the contemporary Czech Republic

By differentiating between right-wing, left-wing and religious extremism, one can understand a broader landscape from which radicalised individuals might emerge. Beginning with the latter, the MoI's (2024) report on extremism and prejudicial hatred indicates that the Czech Republic's security apparatus encountered individual cases of Islamic radicalisation, primarily in the cyber domain, despite the moderateness of the Czech Muslim community. Regarding this current and potential radicalisation, according to the report, the most endangered groups are teenagers, converts and individuals who did not practice religion in the past (ibid.: 14). This reflects Lišková and Ťupek's (2022: 482–483) reasoning about the presence of Salafi Jihadism in the Czech Republic, mainly thanks to accessible online propagandist materials. Turning to the former two,

it shows a coinciding development between them. Whereas a growing threat of isolated online right-wing extremist communities is debated and synthesised with the author's ongoing doctoral research on Terrorgram below, both traditional edges of the political spectrum, i.e. neo-Nazis, and orthodox Communists, experience stagnation and marginalisation in contrast with their past successes (MVČR 2024: 9, 12; Mareš 2015; Charvát 2023). Notwithstanding, assuming that such sentiment disappeared from Czech society would be false. To get the whole picture, one must understand the transformed nature[3] of the contemporary Czech political system in which the so-called antisystem movement[4] replaced them (MVČR 2024: 8).

Its roots trace back to the 2015 Migration crisis, when various new anti-Islam/immigrant groups formed, and the disinformation scene began consolidating its position as an alternative to mainstream media by taking over false narratives from Western Europe without any considerable reaction, allowing them to garner followers. This proved critical as the topicality of immigration started weakening. For this reason, the platforms and remaining groups shifted their sole focus on immigration more towards the antisystem sentiment embedded in the criticism of the mainstream political parties, manifestation against the EU and animosity towards Western European liberalism and liberal democracy. This deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic when more people became more inclined to lean towards conspiracies and disinformation. During this time, the disinformation scene did not only absorb the remnants of the far-right but also began closely aligning with the so-called anti-vaccination movement. Although some abandoned such stances when the pandemic ended, others remained adherent to the scene and continued consuming disinformation and conspiracies. After the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, this deteriorated even more, also due to the coinciding economic crisis, allowing the antisystem movement to exploit the widespread social fear and financial insecurity, leading to the demonstration on 3 September 2022 (Charvát 2023), attended by approximately 70,000 people (ČTK 2022). From the contemporary perspective, this is critical because the antisystem movement represents the most potent agent of the high social polarisation and radicalisation the Czech Republic faces

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3   Charvát (2023) associates the transformation with three coinciding factors: 1) the formation of 'Dawn' and 'Freedom and Direct Democracy' offering a less extreme alternative to the population with antisystem views who, however, refused to support neo-Nazi parties before; 2) the global shift of right-wing extremist actors from racism, antisemitism and authoritarianism/totalitarianism to anti-Islamism, Euroscepticism and support for direct democracy, making them more attractive to ordinary people; and 3) the socioeconomic crises in the last 15 years, ranging from the 2008 Financial crisis over the 2015 Migration crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. Moreover, such negative development has been exacerbated by the dawn of disinformation since as early as 2015.

4   By the word 'antisystem' the article understands actors challenging the current system's legitimacy with the intention of restructuring it. Notwithstanding, they are not always necessarily antidemocratic (Zilvar 2023: 35).

nowadays, taking advantage of a large group of unsatisfied people who might even be prone to accept the overturn of the currently existing political system (Charvát 2023). What also must be mentioned lies in the link between platforms of the disinformation scene and the remnants of the far-right, embedded either in significant occurrence of antisemitic and racist content,[5] presenting opinions of individuals associated with the milieu, or a direct connection to it (MVČR n.d.). Such conduct is possible by exploiting the so-called borderline content protected by the freedom of speech. Therefore, more ordinary Czechs may encounter such convictions and narratives containing extremist content, likely without recognising them based on the use of well-tried manipulative techniques of the disinformation scene (ibid.).

Why does this transformation matter when the antisystem movement and disinformation scene have the most likely potential to mainly influence social polarisation and non-violent radicalisation, as aforementioned? The answer lies in the lesson the Czech Republic learned about its dark side in 2017 when Jaromír Balda, a seventy-year-old pensioner and a firm supporter of the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD),[6] became the first Czech convicted of terrorism.[7] Although there are unknowns about his radicalisation process, according to his wife, Balda spent an enormous amount of time online, likely consuming disinformation and conspiracy theories about immigration (Svobodová 2019). What must be taken into consideration is that he has a personality disorder influencing his behaviour and judgment, as well as explosive anger and aggression converging into impulsivity (Lazarov 2020: 49), which might have made him more susceptible to radicalisation at the pre-radicalisation level leading to the self-indoctrination stage as a result of the then-ongoing migration crisis (Silber & Bhatt 2007). While Balda's action did not resemble a traditional terrorist attack, it only unveiled the potential of the antisystem movement and disinformation scene to indirectly contribute to somebody's radicalisation, especially should the individual have some preexisting vulnerabilities, as the consumption of disinformation and conspiracy theories has been associated with its initiation (Leonard & Philippe 2021; Vegetti & Littvay 2022; Moskalenko & Romanova 2022; Piazza 2022).

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5   For example, the great replacement theory, Kalergi plan, or attacks against George Soros.

6   When connecting Jaromír Balda with SPD, it must be acknowledged that the circuit court of Prague 7 complied with the latter's claim regarding its fallacious denomination as a xenophobically oriented populist political party and attributing to it a dominant role in amplifying prejudiced hatred by the Ministry of the Interior (ČTK 2024).

7   Jaromír Balda intentionally chopped down tree logs onto rail tracks between the stations Mladá Boleslav-Bakov nad Jizerou and Bělá pod Bezdězem-Bezděz, which two incoming trains collided with in June and July 2017. Besides, he left leaflets with the exclamation 'Allahu Akbar' at the crime scene and distributed materials written in broken Czech to incite public hostility against immigrants (Svobodová 2019).

Synthesising the MoI's warning about online extremist communities with the author's doctoral research on Terrorgram

As aforementioned, the MoI considered isolated online right-wing extremist communities the most severe threat in its latest two reports (MVČR 2023a; 2024). According to them, such entities constitute an ideal radicalisation-conducive environment, particularly due to a specific subculture defined by a unique language, ideology, lifestyle and values, despite their limited number. The latter warned that the Czech Republic is not exempt from this growing transnational phenomenon based on the arrest of the two teenagers for planning a terrorist attack on three embassies in Prague (MVČR 2024). While various platforms host them, e.g. Stormfront, 4chan or TamTam (Tuters 2020; Weimann & Pack 2023; Törnberg & Törnberg 2024), Telegram, nicknamed Terrorgram[8] by the ecosystem (Katz 2022), became a prominent sanctuary of the extreme right due to high anonymity and lenient content moderation (Molla 2021). Importantly, at least one of them is known to have participated in Telegram extremist groups (Dohnalová 2023). Besides, this extremist community became infamous thanks to Juraj Krajčík, the perpetrator of the Bratislava shooting, who thanked it in his manifesto.[9] To understand and expand the MoI's warning, the author synthesises this with the hitherto knowledge from his ongoing doctoral research on Terrorgram, mainly studying the in-group interaction among members of two public groups, i.e. Sigmaland and Aryan Guild.[10]

First and foremost, such isolated online communities serve as virtual marketplaces offering their participants a highly secure and anonymous environment for engaging in various activities necessary for maintaining their transnational existence, ranging from socialising with like-minded peers, exchanging all sorts of propagandist materials and, crucially, exhibiting extremely violent behaviour embedded in fantasising about mass killing of ideological enemies, e.g. Jews, Muslims or the LGBTI+ community, facilitated by the available communication tools of the Telegram platform, i.e. textual messages and various audiovisual stimuli. That said, one must understand that they are comprised of already indoctrinated individuals into right-wing extremist ideologies and conspiracy theories. For this reason, those at the beginning of the radicalisation process would not

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8   In the author's view, the Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies provides the best definition of Terrorgram, portraying it as 'a self-called collective of channels and chatrooms involved in spreading dissident ideas, glorifying terrorism, calling for violence, spreading extremist ideological materials and demonising minority groups' (ITSTIME 2022), which has no official structure and operates as a loose network (Kriner & Ihler 2022).

9   Although the author owns the manifesto, he will not cite it so as not to propagate the document.

10 It must be acknowledged and emphasised that neither study has yet been published at the time of writing the article. Whereas the former was presented at the NoPSA 2024 XX Nordic Policial Science Congress in Bergen in June 2024, the latter was submitted to a peer-reviewed academic journal Patterns of Prejudice.

very likely join them due to the aforementioned conduct, which might still be too extreme for them. What became particularly concerning regarding their membership base was the probable presence of teenagers and adolescents in the analysed groups. Although this cannot be generalised because their participants diligently protect their identity and personal information, some indeed either shared their age with others (ranging from 12-years-old to early 20s), debated topics typical for them, e.g. school or computer games, or used a language of this age group rather than adults (Zilvar & Mareš 2024; Zilvar 2024).

Considering Törnberg and Törnberg's (2024) view of radicalisation as a group socialisation process, this is concerning as such isolated online communities represent a quite easily accessible and anonymous radicalisation-conducive ecosystem where indoctrinated individuals can deepen their radicalisation by interacting with one another and potentially convert the exhibited violent fantasies into real-life violence without being detected by law enforcement or intelligence agencies. This reasoning reflects the empirical knowledge about the Bratislava shooting. According to a comment made by Jaroslav Naď[11] after the arrest of another Slovak right-wing extremist known as Slovakbro – an influential figure in Krajčík's radicalisation according to his manifesto – Slovakia had no intelligence about Krajčík beforehand (Vilček 2022).

Radicalisation threats the Czech Republic must be ready to potentially counter

Based on the analysed extremist landscape in the contemporary Czech Republic, the following three radicalisation threats are the most probable. First, although the Czech Muslim community is moderate and small, the country cannot rule out the possibility of individual radicalisation considering the highly available propaganda online. Second, the persisting sociopolitical polarisation and economic hardship might initiate the radicalisation of vulnerable individuals, resembling the case of Jaromír Balda. Third, the existence of transnational online right-wing extremist communities, whose members are likely teenagers and adolescents, constitutes, in the author's view, the most severe radicalisation threat for the country, as the two teenagers and Juraj Krajčík indicated. The reason lies in the fact that their participants are already indoctrinated into extremist ideologies who might only accelerate their radicalisation to violence due to socialising with like-minded peers adherent to extremely violent fantasies against the out-groups.

Having said that, one must ask: What stakeholders does the Czech Republic include in its efforts to detect such radicalised individuals?

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11 A former Slovak minister of defence.

The Czech Republic's Concept of the Fight against Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred 2021–2026 vis-à-vis the identified radicalisation threats

Because the concept covers a wide range of objectives bound to three identified problem areas,[12] which the MoI considers insufficient regarding contemporary trends and developments in the field of extremism and prejudicial hatred, counter-radicalisation efforts solely constitute a narrow part of the broader endeavour targeted at strengthening the responsiveness against the contemporary threats. Of those, the B2-specific objective is the most relevant for the article's inquiry because it focuses on maximising the Czech Republic's ability to detect radicalised individuals embedded primarily in terrorism prevention, particularly the threat of the so-called lone wolves. Not only does the objective expect law enforcement and security agencies to be responsible for this agenda, but it also anticipates their cooperation with other relevant stakeholders potentially capable of assisting them. Besides, the concept foresees adopting efficient measures from other countries (MVČR 2021). Regarding particular initiatives leading to the success of specific objectives, the MoI outlines them in three two--year action plans. Since the concept's introduction, two have been published. Of them, the 2023–2024 one is particularly valuable as it not only introduces planned activities for the two-year period, but also evaluates the implemented measures from the 2021–2022 action plan. Whereas four were conducted during the latter, two are outlined for 2023–2024 (MVČR 2023b).

After analysing them, it became clear that the initiatives do not seem rigorous enough to address the complexity of radicalisation nowadays. Despite the concept's attempt to strengthen the Czech Republic's ability to detect radicalised individuals, the outlined measures concern only the Police, Prison Service, and the Probation and Mediation Service (ibid.: 9–10, 26–28). By saying that, the article does not underestimate those agencies' roles in detecting radicalised individuals. However, such a one-sided focus on state authorities appears to insufficiently react to the whole complexity of radicalisation and might leave the country vulnerable to radicalised individuals should they proceed through the process like Jaromír Balda or Juraj Krajčík, who were not detected before perpetrating their attacks. Considering the current role of the internet in radicalisation and the existence of anonymous online communities, in particular, neither the Police, Prison Service, nor the Probation and Mediation Service seem likely to identify such persons. Also, even if they were able to detect them, that would likely happen at a point when such individuals would already be indoctrinated into extremist ideologies before or after committing a crime.

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12   Thay are A) protection of crime victims, B) protection of democracy and C) building and strengthening resilience.

However, the desired intervention, in the article's view, should occur as early as possible to prevent vulnerable individuals from adopting such beliefs or joining extremist online communities.

Considering the concept's focus on the Police, Prison Service, and the Probation and Mediation Service, as well as the B2-specific objective, the article moves to Slovakia and Germany to investigate their counter-radicalisation efforts involving other stakeholders affiliated neither with law enforcement nor intelligence agencies from which the Czech Republic may learn and possibly incorporate similar plans into the MoI's 2025–2026 action plan.

Seeking inspiration in Slovakia and Germany

The following sections investigate implemented detecting instruments in similar strategic documents of Slovakia and Germany to indicate potential lessons from which the Czech Republic might learn. Whereas the former was selected due to the historical and social closeness between both countries, which makes it the most appropriate mirror for the Czech Republic among other Central European countries, the latter constitutes the state with the most extensive experience with terrorism (Statista 2023). Therefore, Slovakia and Germany might provide the Czech Republic with not only valuable inspiration regarding how to improve its ability to detect radicalised individuals, but Slovakia also provides a feasible model due to the economic similarity between itself and the Czech Republic.

Slovakia

As aforementioned, the historical and social closeness between both countries makes Slovakia the most suitable example for the Czech Republic among other Central European states. For this reason, the article explored the Conceptual Framework for Countering Radicalisation and Extremism's Appendix No.2 to indicate stakeholders involved in Slovakia's counter-radicalisation efforts regarding the detection of radicalised individuals. Reading through the list of specified measures indicated that five of them reflect such efforts. Indeed, three do not explicitly formulate this ambition; however, in the article's view, their character may indirectly contribute to developing such an ability in the target groups.

By synthesising them, elementary and secondary school teachers seem to have a considerable role in Slovakia's efforts to combat radicalisation and extremism. This is particularly visible in the tasks 1.6, 2.3 and 2. 9. Not only does the former assign the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport together with the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights to monitor violations of human rights and expressions of extremism at elementary and secondary schools, but it also aims at utilising such knowledge for formulating

recommendations for teachers instructing them about recognising and monitoring such behavioural deviations. Also, the 2.3 measure seeks to increase the responsiveness of various actors, among others, teachers and youth workers, to radicalisation-conducive influences on the internet and social media. The latter strives to expand the awareness and foreknowledge of elementary and secondary school teachers about the threat of radicalisation and extremism online and offline. Additionally, this measure also concerns pupils and students (MVSR 2020: 3, 8–9, 11). The reason why those efforts appear relevant for detecting radicalised individuals lies in task 4.1, targeted at individual interventions at schools if pupils or students were suspected of a fundamental change in ideological views or exhibiting extremist manifestation (ibid.: 16). Although the conceptual framework does not specify the particular actors responsible for performing such monitoring efforts, teachers seem to be the most likely to consider the previous measures and the fact that the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport is the responsible authority for implementing this task.

Besides, task 2.1 aims at strengthening the activities of a comprehensive interdepartmental network of professionals, i.e. local school administrators, the municipal and state police, social workers, representatives of registered churches and religious associations, non-profit organisations, youth workers and community centres, to monitor and identify threats associated with radicalisation and extremism to protect vulnerable groups at the local level. Also, it strives to produce a manual for frontline workers to ensure and increase their awareness of violent extremism and radicalisation (ibid.: 7–8).

Germany

Unlike Slovakia, which was chosen due to its historical and social closeness with the Czech Republic, Germany is the state with the most extensive experience with terrorism in Central Europe (Statista 2023). Hence, exploring its counter-radicalisation initiatives might provide valuable insight from which its eastern, less experienced neighbour could take inspiration. Not only has it faced Islamist radicalisation in recent years, but the country has also encountered left- and right-wing extremists (Caniglia, Winkler & Métais 2020; Böckler et al. 2020; Koehler 2023). For this reason, Germany's Federal Government Strategy to Prevent Extremism and Promote Democracy, particularly its appendix specifying undertaken and planned initiatives, was explored to indicate stakeholders engaged in detecting radicalised individuals.

First and foremost, a manual called 'Faith or extremism?' seems to constitute an excellent example of increasing the general public's awareness, mainly parents, relatives and teachers, about radicalisation and available local professional multilingual counselling. The reason lies in its aim targeted at strengthening

ordinary people's role in recognising and intervening in one's developing radicalisation without the involvement of law enforcement (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2015; BMFSFJ 2017: 40). Besides, other implemented educational and preventive measures, falling under the federal 'Live Democracy!' programme, intended for various groups, like parents, relatives or young people, might also enhance their ability to detect radicalised individuals due to their emphasis given on topics like antisemitism, antiziganism, homophobia and, critically, intervention formats in the field of Islamist and right-wing extremism, as well as left-wing militancy (BMFSFJ 2017: 34, 41).

What also deserves attention lies in the strategy's comprehensive focus on raising awareness about extremism and radicalisation trends among children and young people. Indeed, such efforts rather reflect the resilience-building domain of counter-radicalisation; however, as aforementioned, doing so might also simultaneously influence the ability of regarded groups to detect radicalisation signs. Its 'Media and Internet' section unveils rigorous initiatives targeted at educating children and young people about online radicalisation threats. For example, the Federal Agency for Civil Education was assigned to create a video campaign informing about various forms of extremism. Another called 'No Hate Speech' endeavoured to make young people more knowledgeable about hate speech online, and a measure using the 'jugendschutz.net' platform analysed extremist websites from the point of view of child protection to formulate evidence-based strategies and reports summarising the findings for the public. While the initiatives undertaken in this section centred on children and young people, the Federal Ministry of the Interior's initiative intended to inform citizens about extremism and potential preventive options (ibid.: 42–43).

Recommendations for the MoI's 2025–2026 Action Plan

Whereas the Czech Republic's detecting efforts are rested upon the Police, Prison Service, and Probation and Mediation Service, Slovakia and Germany's concepts provided valuable insight into the engagement of other stakeholders – something that the Czech concept also anticipates, after all. Although they primarily concerned resilience-building against extremist influences, the same endeavours might also likely strengthen the detection ability as more people might recognise radicalisation signs and, therefore, intervene. Considering the current complexity of radicalisation, counter-radicalisation should likely operate in a two-level format to be efficient, i.e. law enforcement and intelligence agencies on the one hand, and other supporting stakeholders on the other. By synthesising the identified evidence from Slovakia and Germany with Vegrichtová's (2019) and Smolík's (2020) reasoning, representing the Czech research on counter-radicalisation, the MoI should include the following three stakeholders in the 2025–2026 action plan to properly address the B2-specific

objective of the Czech Republic's Concept of the Fight against Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred 2021–2026.

Teachers

Elementary and secondary school teachers have the potential to be a vital detecting component should they be provided with adequate training about radicalisation, extremism and instruction on appropriate monitoring and intervening. As much as the Czech concept emphasises the ceaseless strengthening of the ability of the Police, Prison Service, and Probation and Mediation Service personnel to detect radicalised individuals or recognise radicalisation signs, elementary and secondary school teachers should get similar attention, providing them with identical expertise. Teachers spend an enormous amount of time with children and teenagers; therefore, reflecting Vegrichtová's (2019) and Smolík's (2020) assumptions, it seems reasonable to consider them one of the most potent frontline stakeholders able to recognise radicalisation signs or suspicious changes in behaviour if adequately trained. Put differently, teachers might play the same role in detecting radicalised individuals as do correctional officers in prisons. Hence, the action plan should assign the MoI and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to develop an educational evidence-based training or workshop for teachers about radicalisation and extremism similar to the one, e.g., for police officers.

Children, teenagers and young people

Paying attention to schools and educational institutions, teachers are not the only stakeholder likely capable of detecting radicalised individuals. As Ellefsen and Sandberg (2022) argue, peers bear a similar potential to do so and recognise early radicalisation signs and intervene likely without any unwanted consequences (ibid.). Such conduct was visible in the aforementioned case of the two teenagers where, according to Judge Kafka, classmates of the one played an important role in uncovering them (Kozelka 2022). Also, as Juraj Krajčík showed, this generation can easily participate in transnational extremist ecosystems due to their language skills if radicalised. Instead of joining some local Slovak right-wing extremist group, he engaged in online isolated communities on 8chan and later Telegram. Hence, the action plan should urge the MoI and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to create an evidence-based training or workshop for children, teenagers and young people to prepare them for potential encounters with extremist ideologies and recognising radicalisation signs. By doing so, they might become a vital monitoring component inside their social bubbles, likely capable of successfully interrupting developing radicalisation.

The general public

Aside from teachers and children, teenagers and young people, the general public should also be perceived as a potent stakeholder in detecting radicalised individuals, reflecting Vegrichtová's (2019) reasoning about the effective detection of radicalisation as a society-wide problem (ibid.: 524–525). Considering its current complexity, increasing the general public's awareness of various aspects of radicalisation, mainly indicators and warning signals, is vital to raise their ability to detect radicalised individuals. This should also provide lucid guidance on when, how and where to report reasonable concerns over someone's radicalisation or engagement with extremist groups and, critically, available options for professional help. The latter might resemble Germany's 'Faith or extremism?' manual. For instance, the MoI might do this in cooperation with the Police and Czech Television, as well as social media companies, by initiating a public awareness campaign similar to other recent ones, e.g. 'Czechia on Drugs'[13] (Růžičková 2024). In particular this should centre on parents, considered a key stakeholder in the detecting efforts alongside schools (Vegrichtová 2019), and who, however, often lack the necessary knowledge about the adequate reaction to the growing adherence of their children to extremist beliefs (Sikkens et al. 2018). Should they be able to notice radicalisation signs at the beginning of the process, parents might constitute the most pivotal stakeholder in intervening in radicalisation in children without any undesirable consequences possibly caused by law enforcement (Ellefsen & Sandberg 2022).

Conclusion

Recent years have indicated that post-communist Central Europe is not exempt from the threat of radicalisation. Therefore, the article analysed the Czech Republic's Concept of the Fight against Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred 2021–2026 to explore the involved stakeholders in the efforts concerning the detection of radicalised individuals vis-à-vis the country's recent experience embedded in the arrest of the two teenagers for planning a terrorist attack in Prague, the radicalisation of Jaromír Balda, the 2023 shooting at Charles University's Philosophical Faculty and also the 2022 Bratislava shooting because of its historical and social closeness with Slovakia. The analysis indicated that the concept's B2-specific objective of strengthening the ability to detect radicalised individuals concerns only the Police, Prison Service and Probation and Mediation Service. Whereas those stakeholders are vital in doing so, it completely omits other relevant ones able to assist them despite the document's such expectation. The apparent weakness of this one-sided focus is that those agen-

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13 Translated from the Czech original 'Česko na drogách'.

cies often detect and work with already indoctrinated individuals into extremist ideologies before or after committing a crime. However, the desired intervention should happen as early as possible, which they likely do not have the potential to execute. Thus, the article recommended incorporating teachers, children, teenagers and young people, as well as the general public, into the MoI's 2025–2026 action plan to address the complexity of radicalisation nowadays.

Finally, yet importantly, no one should start panicking and expect a sudden surge of radicalised individuals in the Czech Republic, as only few advance through the whole radicalisation process and decide to commit a terrorist attack. Notwithstanding, this threat must not be downplayed because even a single person can cause indiscriminate violence and damage. Jaromír Balda and the two teenagers, as well as the perpetrator of the 2023 shooting at Charles University's Philosophical Faculty, who was not radicalised (Ciroková & Valášek 2024), proved that the Czech Republic does not exist in a vacuum. As the old saying goes, 'It is better to be safe than sorry'. The country was neither of those things in 2017 or in 2025 when the two teenagers planned to perpetrate their terrorist attack to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Timothy McVeigh's Oklahoma City bombing (Hesová 2022). Will it be next time?

Acknowledgements

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