

Preliminary Report on antisemitism in the Czech Republic

Summary:

The Czech Republic is generally considered a safe country for the Jews and despite the turbulent events in the international arena, the 2019 did not bring any significant change to this trend. The country feels torn between East and West, between euroskepticism on the one hand and fears of Russian or Chinese influence on the other. Despite the political polarization of the society and growing anti-PC discourse, the political leaders have manifested their resolve to fight antisemitism by means of parliamentary resolution denouncing all forms of antisemitism including the attempts to single out Israel for boycotting. The social panic caused by the Refugee Crisis has somewhat dissipated, leading to a decline of anti-immigration and far-right parties, forcing them to seek alternative topics instead. Social media, such as Facebook or discussion feeds under mainstream media articles have seen the most common “mainstream” cases of antisemitism in the “mainstream society”. The Jewish community reports several cases of vandalism and harassment annually, but the exact data for 2019 are currently not available.

The far-right and right-wing populist scenes are burdened by personal disagreements between leaders of various factions, while voters of both right-wing and left-wing populist parties are attracted by the populism of the leading centrist political party ANO. Three significant trials with defendants facing charges of terrorism took place in Czechia. None of these cases was directly linked to antisemitism, but the age-category and ideological backgrounds of the attackers may force us to reconsider our anti-terrorism strategies and commonly used perpetrator profiles.

Legislative affairs:

On 15 October 2019, the Constitutional Court ruled against the law, which was supposed to tax financial restitutions to churches for property stolen or destroyed by the Communist regime. Unlike the Catholic church, which received most of its property back in physical form, the Jewish communities, along with smaller Protestant and Evangelical churches would have been severely damaged by this law as their property is mostly lost and was expected to be reimbursed financially. Some of this property included buildings or pieces of art originally stolen by the Nazis, but never returned or later destroyed by the Communist regime, which took power in the country three years after the WWII. The court decision to invalidate the law was welcomed by the Jewish communities as well as by the Israeli diplomacy, which criticized the controversial legislation.¹

On 22 October 2019, the Czech Parliament approved a non-binding resolution denouncing antisemitism and calls for boycotts of the State of Israel.² The resolution, among others “*strongly condemns all manifestations of anti-Semitism directed against individuals, religious institutions, organizations as well as the State of Israel, including the denial of the Holocaust; rejects any questioning of the State of Israel’s right of existence and defense*” and it also “*condemns all activities and statements by groups calling for a boycott of the State of Israel, its goods, services or citizens.*”³

Attitude surveys:

Only one survey on attitudes of Czechs to other national groups, including Jews, was performed in 2019. The survey, performed in March 2019, shows no significant changes in the mostly indifferent

1 Ústavní soud zrušil kontroverzní zdanění finančních náhrad z církevních restitucí. E15.cz 15 October 2019, available at: <https://www.e15.cz/domaci/ustavni-soud-zrusil-kontroverzni-zdaneni-financnich-nahrad-z-cirkevnych-restituci-1363309>

2 Sněmovna odsoudila antisemitismus, odmítla výzvy k bojkotu Izraele. *iDnes.cz*. 22 October 2019, available at: https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/snemovna-antisemitismus-izrael-usneseni.A191022_163907_domaci_kop

3 EU official welcomes Czech resolution that calls Israel boycott anti-Semitism, *The Times of Israel* 26 October 2019, available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/eu-official-welcomes-czech-resolution-that-calls-israel-boycott-anti-semitism/>

attitudes of the society towards Jews. Whole 41 percent have expressed indifferent stance. 32 percent of the respondents found Jews to be „sympathetic“ or „somewhat sympathetic“, while 15 percent have described them as either “un-sympathetic” or “somewhat un-sympathetic”. As a result, Jews were ranked similarly to Greeks and Vietnamese and slightly better than Germans in the survey by Center for Public Opinion Surveys from March 2019.⁴ Comparison with previous surveys shows no significant change of trend between 2013 and 2019.

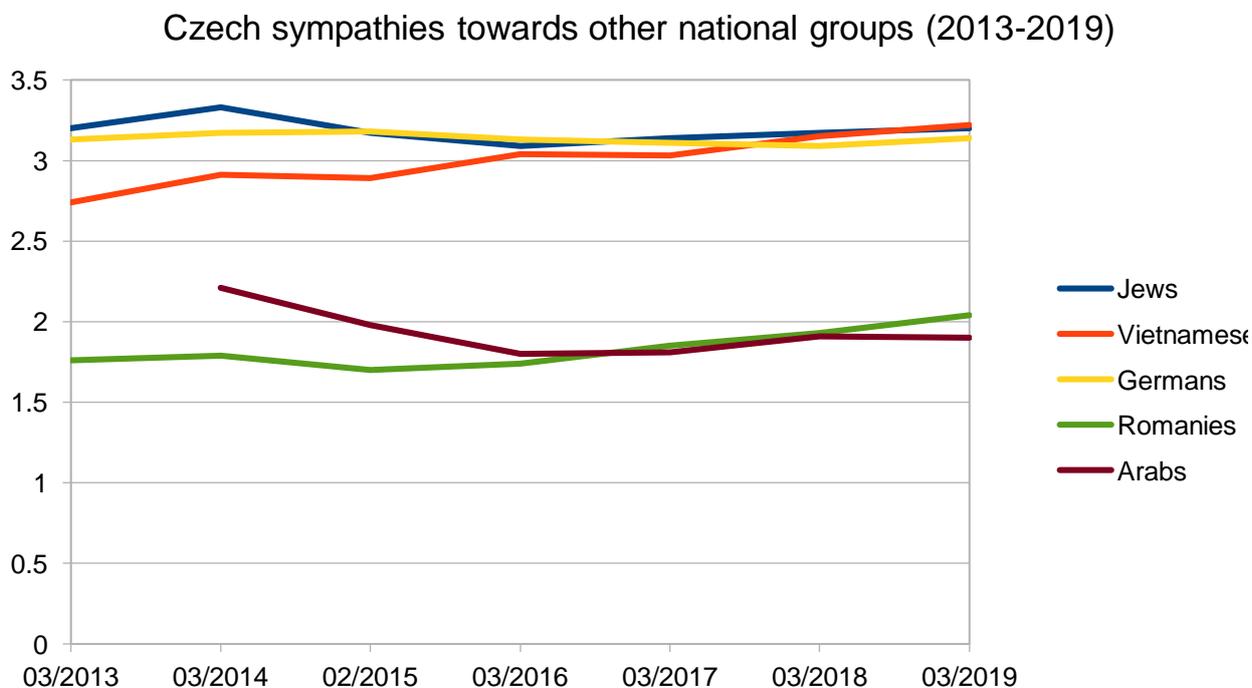


Figure 1: Czech attitudes towards other national groups (2013-2019). Jews ranked similarly to Vietnamese or Germans (source: Center for Public Opinion Surveys – Czech Academy of

Incidents:

Hard data about the antisemitic incidents are still being processed by the responsible authorities, but nothing seems to be hinting that 2019 would bring any significant change of course in the Czech Republic in terms of amounts of antisemitic incidents. The last Annual report on antisemitic manifestation was published by the Czech Federation of Jewish Communities in April 2019 and covered the period between January and December 2018. This report, which counts together manifestations on the internet as well as physical attacks on humans or property, recorded 333 incidents in 2018, vast majority having taken place online. The wave of harassment and threats recorded in 2014 and 2015 seemed to have dissipated in 2018. The data for 2019 will be published by the community in Spring 2020.

Concerning its perception of antisemitism in 2019, the Jewish Community in Prague responded:

In 2019, we have recorded a significant growth of online antisemitism (articles, discussion boards, social media posts). This growth, however, must not necessarily point to a worsening relationship of the Czech society to the Jewish community. It might be just a result of a more effective monitoring and detection.

⁴ https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4905/f9/ov190415.pdf

Cases of physical violence or direct threat are rare, even less than in 2018. We have recorded several cases of vandalism with a clear or at least suspected antisemitic motive and there seems to have been the same or slightly higher number of such cases than in the previous year.

The Jewish Community paid significant attention to the BDS movement and to the issue of what can be considered a legitimate criticism of the State of Israel and what should be labeled as antisemitic according to the [Working] definition. The growth of activities of foreign far-right extremists and White Supremacists is seen as a worrisome trend, yet no direct threat to the Czech Jewish community was found.⁵

According to my research, the most productive sources of online antisemitism in the country in 2019 were websites combining conspiracism with esotericism and pro-Kremlin propaganda. From the 100 antisemitic websites in the country in September 2019, about 70 can be labeled as conspiracist or esoteric, 23 far-right and 6 as Catholic traditionalist. This is a continuation of trend that has been continuing since at least 2014. When using these numbers, please note that my research lists entire websites or blogs, while the Jewish community lists individual articles. Also, not all websites identified as antisemitic in my research must have published an antisemitic article in 2019. Some may have published antisemitic content in the previous years, but continue to host it in 2019.⁶

Table 1 – Summary of currently available data on antisemitic incidents in the Czech Republic according to multiple sources

Source Description	Variable	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Police records*)	Crimes targeting “Jewish Race”	8	9	37	9	22	25	10	13	x	x
	Crimes targeting “Jewish Religion”	2	0	1	0	2	3	2	1	x	x
Interior Ministry’s Report on Extremist Manifestations**)	Extremist crimes with antisemitic subtext	28	18	9	15	45	47	28	27	15	x
Jewish Community reports on antisemitic incidents***)	Physical attack on property (vandalism)	5	5	6	3	5	5	x	x	3	x
	Physical attack on human	0	1	0	1	1	0	x	x	2	x
	Harassment & Threats	11	11	10	9	37	34	x	x	9	x
	Other verbal manifestations (articles, websites, pictures, videos)	31	26	82	156	191	182	x	x	333	x

Sources:

*) Data obtained from the Czech Police Directorate under the Free Access to Informations Act (č. j. PPR-20789-3/ČJ-2018-990140).

**) Compilation of Interior Ministry’s Reports on Extremism.

***) Compilation of Jewish Community’s Reports on Antisemitic Manifestations,⁷

(x – no data available)

Table 2 – Timeline of crime-rate with extremist subtext in the Czech Republic from 2005 to 2019 according to the Ministry of Interior

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
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⁵ E-mail correspondence with the Prague Jewish Community representative (2 January 2020).

⁶ Own research

⁷ “Výroční zpráva o projevech antisemitismu,” *Federace židovských obcí v ČR*, accessed February 12, 2018, <https://www.fzo.cz/wp-content/uploads/Výroční%20AD-zpráva-o-projevech-antisemitismu-v-České-republice-za-rok-2015.pdf>.

Extremist crimes in the Czech Republic	196	217	265	252	238	173	211	201	175	143	153	179	90*	
Percentage of overall crime-rate (%)	0,05	0,06	0,08	0,08	0,08	0,06	0,06	0,07	0,07	0,07	0,08	0,09	x	
Cases solved	119	126	186	168	157	116	144	132	114	99	102	136	x	
Numbers of defendants	181	195	293	231	246	208	198	157	154	x	132	102	69*	
Hate crimes targeting specific groups (out of the total extremist crimes):	Anti-Romany	59	75	77	65	69	52	42	53	33	25	27	x	x
	Anti-Muslim	0	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	5	7	3	x	x
	Anti-Arab	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	5	8	x	x	x
	Antisemitic	18	27	48	28	18	9	15	45	47	28	27	x	x

Source: Compilation of Annual reports on extremism from 2005 to 2016, Ministry of Interior (x – no data available, *preliminary data only from January to August 2019)

Terrorism:

There were no cases of terrorism against the Czech Jewish community in 2019. However, three noteworthy trials with defendants facing charges of terrorism have taken place in the country in 2019. In the first case, the perpetrator, a 72-year old Jaromír Balda, who an active supporter of the right-wing populist party Freedom and Direct Democracy, cut down trees on railroad tracks in 2017, causing train derailment and several injuries in order to create a false-flag terrorist attack that would be blamed on Muslims. A more severe disaster was avoided only thanks to the vigilance and quick reflexes of the train drivers. Balda was sentenced in December 2019 to four years in prison on charges of terrorism and while the case had no antisemitic linkage, it is a noteworthy example of radicalization taking place among the oldest generation.⁸ According to his own testimony, Balda became radicalized after reading the conspiracist, pro-Kremlin websites, which also happen to be the most important source of antisemitism in the Czech Republic. Also the second terrorism trial in the country involved a defendant, who has radicalized himself online after reading the conspiracist pro-Kremlin websites. In this second case, Erik Eštu was sentenced to probation for having joined the pro-Kremlin militias in Eastern Ukraine.⁹ In the last case, a Slovak national, who converted to Islam and radicalized himself online, gathered larger amounts of chemicals and explosives, possibly intended for a lone-wolf terrorist attack. The defendant, Dominik Kobulnický, faces up to nine years in prison under charges of terrorism. The trial has not concluded at the time of writing this report.¹⁰

The country has seen one case of mass shooting in a hospital in Ostrava.¹¹ The killing spree, which left behind six dead is considered the worst incident of such kind in the country since 2014. The case was not an antisemitic nor politically motivated attack. It does not fulfill the definition of terrorism. It is mentioned in this report due to the role of pro-Kremlin conspiracist websites in the aftermath of the massacre. Possibly the most notorious of these websites in the country, titled *Aeronet* attempted to hint at some alleged Jewish or “Rothschild” connection to the shooting, having constructed an antisemitic conspiracy theory in less than 24 hours after the incident.¹² *Aeronet* itself

8 Balda spáchal teroristický čin. Nejvyšší soud odmítl skutek překvalifikovat, *Česká televize*, available at: <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3007673-ani-nejvyssi-soud-nezbavil-seniora-baldu-trestu-za-terorismus>

9 Boj za proruské separatisty nebyl terorismus, řekl soud. Vojákoví dal jen podmínku. *Aktuálně.cz* 17. 9. 2019, available at: <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/soud-zmimil-vojakovi-trest-za-ucast-v-bojich-na-ukrajine/r~5fe1de66d93211e984260cc47ab5f122/>

10 Islamistovi ze Slovenska navrhli za přípravu teroristického útoku devět let. *iDnes.cz* 24 October 2019, available at: https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/dominik-kobulnický-soud-devet-let-teroristicky-utok-propagace-islam.A191024_111111_praha-zpravy_rsr

11 Gunman shoots dead six in Czech hospital then kills himself. *The Guardian* 10 December 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/10/gunman-kills-czech-hospital-ostrava-shooting>

12 See: Masakr v Rothschildově Ostravě vyvolává více otazníků, než je množina poskytovaných odpovědí!... *Aeronet* 11 December 2019, available at: <https://aeronet.cz/news/masakr-v-rothschildove-ostrove-vyvolava-vice-otazniku-nez-je-mnozina-poskytovanych-odpovedi-proc-strelec-zabijel-pacienty-kdyz-mel-pry-spadeno-na-lekare-proc-na-unikle-fotografii-z-cekamy/>

is a secretive online outlet with unknown personal background and suspected links to Russian or pro-Russian groups and has intensified its anti-Jewish agenda in 2019 from unknown reasons.