

Historical Narratives in the 2025 Czech Parliamentary Election Campaign: Strategic Mobilisation and Moral Polarisation¹

Irena Skalová²

Abstract

This article examines how historical narratives were mobilised in televised pre-election debates preceding the 2025 Czech parliamentary election and what political functions they performed within electoral competition. Drawing on theories of memory politics, symbolic politics, populist communication, and framing, the study conceptualises references to the past as strategic discursive instruments shaping contemporary political conflict. The analysis is based on a qualitative discourse analysis of debates broadcast by major Czech media outlets during the 2025 campaign.

The findings demonstrate that history functioned primarily as a mechanism of emotional and moral mobilisation. Political actors framed issues such as migration, relations with the European Union, democracy, and national identity through analogies to normatively charged historical experiences, particularly the communist regime, the democratic breakthrough of 1989, and the Soviet invasion of 1968. Four dominant mechanisms were identified: analogical comparison, warnings against repeating past mistakes, the heroisation of democratic milestones, and relativising reinterpretations of historical parallels. These strategies moralised electoral competition and intensified value-based polarisation by transforming programmatic disagreements into existential conflicts over the direction of the state.

Keywords: 2025 Czech parliamentary election; political communication; populism; symbolic politics; politics of memory; historical narratives; discourse analysis

DOI: 10.5817/PC2026-3-43140

CC BY 4.0 (<https://www.creativecommons.cz/licence-cc/>)

¹ The article is supported by Charles University's grant SVV-260842 ('Conflict, cooperation and power in a changing world order')

² PhD Student, Institute of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, U Kříže 661/8, 158 00 Praha 5 – Jinonice, Czech Republic. E-mail: irena.skalova@fsv.cuni.cz. ORCID: 0009-0007-7929-592X.

1. Introduction

In the turbulent environment of contemporary politics, characterised by increasing polarisation and complex societal challenges, the strategic use of historical narratives has gained growing importance as a tool of political communication. The past has become a dynamic arena in which political actors actively construct, interpret, and mobilise historical events, figures, and symbols in order to shape present-day debates, legitimise their own positions, and delegitimise their opponents (Müller, 2002; Olick, 2007; Sierp, 2025). History and the past thus constitute a significant reservoir of symbolic meaning through which political actors interpret the present, justify their policy positions, and mobilise electoral support.

References to past traumas, democratic breakthroughs, or authoritarian experiences may at first glance appear as mere illustrative devices in political communication. In reality, however, they often function as framing instruments that structure political conflicts, generate moral evaluations, and demarcate boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Edelman, 1988; Assmann, 2010; Olick, 2016).

This process—commonly conceptualised as politics of memory or politics of history—extends beyond retrospective engagement with the past and becomes a central component of symbolic politics, effectively shaping public opinion and electoral behaviour (Assmann, 1995; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Particularly in post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where societies continue to grapple with transformation fatigue and unresolved historical traumas, memory politics constitutes fertile ground for populist discourses and the reinforcement of value-based cleavages (Blacker, Etkind & Fedor, 2013; Kubik & Mole, 2025; Zelinsky, 2025).

Election campaigns represent periods in which these mechanisms manifest themselves with particular intensity. Political parties and their leaders seek not only to present programmatic proposals but, above all, to offer interpretations of reality that enable voters to navigate complex political conflicts. In this context, the past plays a crucial role, as historical analogies and references provide a comprehensible moral framework through which contemporary political issues—such as relations with the European Union, migration, or the state of democracy—are framed as continuations of earlier struggles for freedom, sovereignty, or national identity (Entman, 1993; Couperus, Rensmann & Tortola, 2023).

The Czech political context is no exception. As analyses of pre-election debates suggest, historical analogies—such as references to the 1969 ice hockey victory over the USSR, the Velvet Revolution of 1989, or warnings against a ‘new communism’ and totalitarian practices—have become powerful instruments for shaping political discourse and reinforcing value-based polarisation in the public sphere.

The aim of this article is to analyse how political actors employ historical narratives in televised pre-election debates preceding the 2025 elections to the

Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. The primary focus lies on how references to the past are strategically mobilised to delegitimise political opponents and to mobilise voters through moral and emotional appeals.

Against this backdrop, the article asks how historical narratives are mobilised in televised pre-election debates and what political functions they perform within electoral competition. Theoretically, the study draws on concepts of politics of memory and politics of history, collective memory, framing theory (Entman, 1993), and symbolic politics, with particular emphasis on their interconnections with populist discourse (Manucci, 2019; Couperus, Rensmann & Tortola, 2023). These concepts allow us to capture how historical narratives generate cognitive and affective frameworks for interpreting current events and how they contribute to dichotomising tendencies in political competition.

The empirical part of the study employs interpretative discourse analysis combined with qualitative content analysis of statements from televised debates broadcast on three major Czech television platforms (Czech Television, TV Nova, and TV Prima, including their news channels ČT24, TN Live, and CNN Prima News). The analysis examines how different historical analogies are used during the campaign to construct narratives of political responsibility, national identity, and threats to democracy.

The article is structured as follows. It first outlines the theoretical framework, elaborating in greater detail on the concepts of politics of memory, collective memory, framing, and their connections to populism and the far right. This is followed by the methodological section, which specifies the analytical approaches and techniques employed, including case selection and data collection procedures. The empirical section presents the findings of the qualitative content and discourse analysis of televised debates and describes the analytical process in detail. The concluding section interprets the empirical findings within a broader theoretical and political context, identifies the main mechanisms through which historical narratives are utilised in the pre-election campaign, summarises the key insights of the study, discusses their theoretical implications, and reflects on the limitations of the research and avenues for future inquiry.

2. Literature review

2.1 Politics of memory and collective memory in the social science discourse

The study of the relationship between the past and politics in contemporary political science and sociology is grounded in the concepts of politics of memory and collective memory. As Müller (2002) and Olick (2007) emphasise, politics of memory does not constitute a mere objective reference to historical facts; rather,

it represents a dynamic process in which interpretations of the past are actively constructed, negotiated, and mobilised to legitimise or delegitimise contemporary political actors and positions. It is not a matter of passive remembrance but of the deliberate production and reproduction of particular versions of the past that serve specific ideological or power-related interests.

Maslowski (2013) distinguishes between two principal dimensions of politics of memory: first, state control over legitimate culture and collective memory, aimed at reinforcing national identity and the legitimacy of the political system; and second, the 'duty of memory' (*devoir de mémoire*), which emphasises the ethical dimension of remembrance and the obligation to learn from the past. Both dimensions underscore that the past constitutes an active arena for contemporary political struggles (Maslowski, 2013).

An illustrative example of an intense political struggle over the interpretation of the past is the commemoration of Kristallnacht in Germany in 1988, during which political actors clashed over how to confront the Nazi past. This debate, marked by controversial speeches and political protests, demonstrated that memory is not a static archive but a living and politically sensitive construct, continuously shaped by social negotiation and power struggles (Olick, 2016).

Closely related to politics of memory is the concept of collective memory, developed by scholars such as Assmann (1995) and Olick and Robbins (1998). Collective memory is not understood as the mere aggregation of individual recollections, but rather as a socially constructed entity composed of shared frameworks, symbols, and narratives through which societies interpret their past. These frameworks are transmitted and reinforced through institutions, rituals, and media. Olick (1999) distinguishes between collective memory as an aggregation of socially framed individual memories and as a collective phenomenon *sui generis*.

In both conceptualisations, collective memory is inherently dynamic and often politically sensitive. It plays a crucial role in politics and society, as representations and recollections of key historical events—such as wars, revolutions, or dictatorships—profoundly shape public debate and influence both domestic and foreign policy (Olick, 1999). Somers (1992) further highlights the importance of narrativity in identity formation and social action, arguing that individuals and groups orient themselves in the world and articulate their positions through narratives.

2.2 Framing, populism, and the strategic instrumentalisation of history in political communication

Understanding how historical narratives are deployed in political communication is inseparable from framing theory. Entman (1993) defines framing as the process through which media and political actors selectively emphasise certain aspects

of reality and assign them greater salience, thereby shaping public perceptions of problems, their causes, moral evaluations, and potential remedies.

A growing body of scholarship highlights the link between historical narratives and populism, as well as the activities of the far right. Manucci (2019) argues that the success of right-wing populism is closely connected to the collective memory of the fascist past, particularly to the ‘stigma’ associated with that legacy. Where this stigma is weaker—such as in Italy, Austria, or France—populism finds more fertile ground for its development. Populism is conceptualised as an ideology that often resonates with fascist conceptions of power, characterised by anti-pluralism and limited protection of minorities.

In this sense, collective memory becomes a key ‘opportunity structure’ for populism (Manucci, 2019). Within the Czech context specifically, the party system has been characterised as structured around a populist–anti-populist divide, with ANO and the Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD) positioned as the principal populist actors, and the SPOLU coalition, STAN, and the Pirates coalescing around an explicitly anti-populist discourse (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). This divide reflects not only party-level positioning but also a broader pattern of anti-elite, anti-establishment discourse and appeals to ‘ordinary people’ against a corrupt or incompetent establishment (cf. Manucci, 2019), a boundary that, as this article's analysis will show, is frequently reinforced through the strategic deployment of historical narratives.

Empirical studies further demonstrate that far-right parties across various European contexts strategically reinterpret historical events in order to redefine national identity and challenge dominant liberal-democratic narratives. Dilling and Krawatzek (2024), for example, analyse the German AfD's call for a ‘Wende 2.0’, which symbolically reappropriates and redefines the meaning of the peaceful revolution of 1989. Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann (2023) show how political actors such as Éric Zemmour mobilise historical references to reinforce ethno-nationalist interpretations of the past. These examples illustrate a broader trend commonly described as the ‘weaponisation of the past’, characteristic of contemporary right-wing populist discourses.

2.3 Gap in the literature and contribution of this study

Although a substantial body of literature addresses politics of memory, collective memory, and populism, systematic analyses of the strategic mobilisation of historical narratives within the dynamic environment of intense political competition—particularly in televised pre-election debates—remain limited. Existing research frequently focuses on institutionalised forms of memory, such as monuments and museums, or on its long-term role in shaping national identity (Sierp, 2025; Dilling & Krawatzek, 2024).

A related, though thematically distinct, contribution is offered by Novotný (2016), who examines the role of Czech-German historical narratives, specifically the Beneš Decrees and the expulsion of Sudeten Germans, in the 2013 Czech presidential election campaign. While demonstrating that such narratives retained social relevance, Novotný finds that their actual influence on the electoral outcome was limited, attributing this partly to the 'Europeanisation' of Czech public opinion. This contrasts with the dynamics observed in the present study, suggesting that the intensity and polarising function of historical narratives in Czech electoral competition may have shifted considerably over the intervening decade.

This study seeks to address this gap by shifting attention to the micro-level of political communication. It examines how political actors in the Czech Republic mobilise historical narratives in direct political confrontation and investigates the discursive strategies and political functions these narratives perform. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how the past becomes an active agent in contemporary political communication and how it influences electoral dynamics.

3. Theoretical framework

Historical narratives are conceptualised in this article as strategic interpretative resources through which political actors connect the past to contemporary political conflicts. They are not understood as mere recollections of historical events, but as selectively mobilised frames that enable the structuring of moral evaluations, the delineation of collective identities, and the legitimisation of political positions.

At the core of the study's theoretical grounding lies the concept of politics of memory. Here, it is understood not merely as a general process of constructing the past, but as an analytical perspective that allows for the examination of how political actors strategically engage with historical interpretations within political competition (Müller, 2002; Olick, 2007). In this research, politics of memory is operationalised as a set of discursive practices through which particular versions of the past are actively mobilised in order to legitimise one's own positions and delegitimise opponents.

The concept of collective memory provides a complementary framework for understanding why such narratives are politically effective. Collective memory is conceptualised as a shared repertoire of symbols, events, and interpretative frameworks that constitute cultural resources available to political actors (Assmann, 1995; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Political competition thus unfolds not only at the level of programmatic differences, but also as a struggle over the meaning of the past and its interpretative hegemony. Narrative structures function

as a key mechanism linking past and present, as identities, moral evaluations, and political attitudes are shaped through narrative articulation (Somers, 1992).

Framing theory represents a central analytical tool for examining how historical narratives are integrated into contemporary political communication. Following Entman (1993), framing is understood as a process of selective meaning construction that defines a problem, identifies its causes, implies moral evaluation, and suggests preferred remedies. Within the context of this study, historical references are analysed as a specific form of framing in which the past serves as an interpretative filter for contemporary political conflicts.

The strategic instrumentalisation of history is conceptualised here as a discursive practice through which political actors rearticulate historical events in order to support their own political positions and delegitimise competitors (Couperus, Tortola & Rensmann, 2023). Historical references therefore do not merely constitute thematic content within debates, but function as structuring elements that shape moral dichotomies, identity boundaries, and emotional mobilisation. In the pre-election context, this mechanism becomes particularly visible in moments of direct confrontation, where the past operates as a source of symbolic capital and a tool of political struggle.

Historical analogies and references provide a comprehensible moral framework through which contemporary political issues—such as relations with the European Union, migration, or the state of democracy—are presented as continuations of earlier struggles over freedom, sovereignty, or national identity (Couperus, Rensmann & Tortola, 2023).

3.1 Linking historical narratives to populism and the far right

The relationship between historical narratives and populist discourse can be understood as a specific form of political mobilisation in which the past serves as a source of symbolic legitimacy and as a mechanism for constructing moral boundaries. Research shows that populist and far-right actors often operate as ‘memory entrepreneurs’, strategically reinterpreting historical events in order to redefine collective identity and delegitimise established elites (Dilling & Krawatzek, 2024).

In this context, collective memory does not merely constitute the cultural background of political action, but functions as an opportunity structure that enables the articulation of resentment, nostalgia, or perceived threat (Manucci, 2019). Historical narratives thus serve as a form of symbolic capital through which contemporary conflicts are framed as continuations of allegedly unfinished historical struggles over national sovereignty, identity, or moral order.

Far-right political actors are frequently characterised in the literature as engaging in strategic reinterpretations of the past in order to reinforce ethno-na-

tional models of identity and to position themselves against liberal-democratic norms (Couperus, Tortola & Rensmann, 2023). Historical references here do not merely serve an illustrative function; rather, they structure the dichotomy between the 'authentic nation' and its alleged adversaries.

In post-communist contexts, where competition over the interpretation of the former regime and the transformation period remains ongoing, politics of memory constitutes a particularly salient arena of political conflict (Kubik & Mole, 2025). Historical narratives operate here as mechanisms of value-based polarisation and as tools for constructing external or internal threats (Zelinsky, 2025).

3.2 Functions of historical narratives in political competition: Moral appeal, emotion, and dichotomisation

Historical narratives in political communication perform a range of strategic functions that primarily revolve around moral appeals, emotional mobilisation, and the construction of dichotomous divisions. These functions effectively mobilise voters and delegitimise political opponents. Political actors frequently invoke historical events—such as references to totalitarian regimes or 'heroic' moments in national history—in order to present their own political positions as morally justified and uniquely legitimate, while portraying opposing positions as ethically questionable or dangerous (Zelinsky, 2025). Such appeals resonate with voters' conceptions of justice and national identity.

Another important function lies in the mobilisation of emotions. Historical narratives possess a distinctive capacity to generate strong emotional responses, including pride, fear, indignation, nostalgia, or a sense of threat. As Entman (1993) argues, emotions are central to the framing process, as they contribute to the construction of cognitive and affective frameworks through which current events are interpreted. Nostalgia for a perceived 'golden age' or fear of repeating historical mistakes may therefore become powerful mobilisation mechanisms (Couperus, Rensmann & Tortola, 2023; Boym, 2001).

An additional crucial element is the construction of dichotomous divisions. Populist discourse frequently relies on sharp polarisation between 'us' and 'them' (Manucci, 2019). Historical narratives provide an ideal vehicle for reinforcing this dichotomy, whereby 'we' represent the 'pure people' and 'they' stand for 'corrupt elites' or 'enemies'. References to historical milestones strengthen collective belonging among 'us', while invocations of 'historical traitors' serve to delegitimise contemporary opponents.

These strategic functions are particularly effective in polarised political environments, where voters may be more receptive to simplified and emotionally charged messages. Analysing these dynamics is essential for understanding

contemporary political landscapes, as historical narratives contribute to the reinforcement of value-based polarisation and structure political conflict.

4. Methodology

In order to achieve the stated objectives and address the research questions, the study employs a combination of interpretative discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis. This methodological integration makes it possible to capture both the manifest content of historical narratives and their latent, strategic, and discursive functions within political communication (Fairclough, 2003; Krippendorff, 2019). While content analysis enables the systematic identification and categorisation of historical references, discourse analysis provides the analytical tools necessary to interpret their strategic and symbolic roles within debate interactions.

The research focuses on televised pre-election debates preceding the 2025 elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. Specifically, it examines the so-called 'hot phase' of the campaign (the final month before the election), during which media confrontation between political actors intensifies. The unit of analysis is an individual verbal statement by a political actor that contains a reference to the past, identified within the context of a televised debate.

4.1 Data collection and selection of the analytical corpus

The analytical corpus consists of transcripts of televised pre-election debates broadcast during the so-called 'hot phase' of the campaign preceding the 2025 elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, that is, during the final month before the election. This period was selected due to the heightened intensity of media confrontation between political actors and the increased emphasis on mobilising communication.

The primary data sources were recordings and transcripts of debates broadcast on three major nationwide Czech television stations—Czech Television, TV Nova, and TV Prima, including their news platforms (ČT24, TN Live, and CNN Prima News). These stations were selected because of their significant position within the Czech media landscape and their broad national reach.

From these debates, all verbal interventions by political actors containing explicit or implicit references to the past were systematically extracted. A reference to the past was defined as including both direct references to specific historical events, periods, or regimes, as well as analogies, metaphors, or implicit histor-

ical references used to frame a contemporary political issue. Explicit references were straightforward to identify, as they involved direct naming of historical events, periods, or figures. Implicit references required interpretive judgement: a statement was coded as an implicit historical reference when its framing clearly invoked a historically grounded moral or political schema, even in the absence of explicit naming. In cases where the historical referent was ambiguous, the unit was coded according to the dominant interpretive frame suggested by the broader debate context.

Each identified intervention was subsequently transcribed into text form and included in the analytical corpus, which comprises 56 units of analysis. To ensure transparency of the corpus construction process, all televised pre-election programmes broadcast on the three selected stations during the hot phase of the campaign (2 September–2 October 2025) that met the inclusion criteria specified above were systematically screened, regardless of whether they ultimately contained historical references. In total, 44 debate broadcasts were screened: 19 on Czech Television (ČT24), 18 on CNN Prima News, and 7 on TV Nova (including TN Live). These included thematically structured multi-topic debates on individual policy areas (e.g., security, the economy, social affairs), one-on-one leader duels ('ČT Duel'), and multi-party leader 'super-debates'. Of these 44 broadcasts, 23 contained at least one verbal intervention meeting the definition of a historical reference, while 21 contained none; the 56 units of analysis were extracted exclusively from the 23 broadcasts in which such references occurred. This screening procedure ensured that the corpus reflects the full population of eligible debates within the hot phase rather than a purposively selected subsample.¹

For the purposes of this study, pre-election programmes were defined as televised debate formats explicitly labelled by the broadcasters as part of pre-election coverage (e.g., designated as a 'pre-election special' or using similar terminology) and broadcast during the final month preceding the 2025 parliamentary elections.

Only programmes based on direct confrontation between relevant political actors (e.g., one-on-one debates or multi-party debates) were included in the analytical corpus. Individual interviews with single politicians were excluded, as they do not provide space for the interactional mobilisation of historical narratives within the context of direct political competition.

4.2 Analytical strategy and coding framework

For the systematic analysis of historical references, a structured coding framework was developed to capture the key dimensions of their occurrence, form, and strategic functions within televised political debates. The framework is grounded in the theoretical foundations of the study and operationalises its core concepts into specific analytical categories.

Each unit of analysis was coded according to a set of contextual, actor-related, content-related, and functional variables, enabling the linkage between the identification of the type of historical reference and its discursive role in the interaction between political competitors.

The analysis proceeded in two consecutive phases. In the first phase, qualitative content analysis was applied in order to systematically identify and categorise references to the past according to their type, temporal framing, and mode of engagement with history. This phase enabled the mapping of the distribution of historical references across political actors, political positions, and thematic segments of the debates. In the second phase, interpretative discourse analysis was employed to achieve a deeper understanding of their strategic function. The analysis focused on how historical references were used to delegitimise opponents, legitimise one's own position, mobilise audiences, and construct moral boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. At the same time, it examined how these references contributed to the framing of contemporary political issues and to the emotional mobilisation of voters.

The coding framework comprised several types of variables. Contextual variables captured identifying information about the debate broadcast (television station, format, thematic segment, date of broadcast). Actor-related variables focused on the characteristics of the speaker (party affiliation, role in the debate, institutional position—government, opposition, or extra-parliamentary actor). Content-related variables identified the type of historical reference (specific event, historical period, regime, or unspecified past), the temporal scope of the reference, and the mode of engagement with the past (e.g., analogy, warning, heroisation, moral lesson). Functional variables captured the strategic role of the historical reference within debate interaction, particularly delegitimation of an opponent, legitimisation of one's own position, mobilisation appeals, warning or alarmist framing, and the dominant emotional appeal.

The structure and operationalisation of the individual categories are summarised in Table 1. Coding was conducted consistently according to predefined categories, with each unit of analysis assessed in relation to the broader context of the debate interaction.

Table 1:
Structure of the Analytical Coding Framework

Dimension	Category	Analytical Function
Contextual	Debate ID, TV station, debate title, thematic segment, date of broadcast	Identification of the media context and placement of the statement within a specific debate interaction
Actor-related	Speaker's name, political party, role (leader, minister, candidate), institutional position (government/opposition/extra-parliamentary)	Analysis of the distribution of historical references across political positions
Textual evidence	Verbatim quotation, paraphrase	Preservation of the authenticity of the statement and its analytical summary
Content-related	Type of historical reference (communism, 1989, totalitarianism, national crisis, other)	Identification of which segments of the past are mobilised
Content-related	Temporal scope (specific event, historical period, unspecified past)	Determination of the degree of historical specificity
Discursive strategy	Mode of engagement with the past (analogy, warning, trauma, heroisation, moral lesson)	Capturing the instrumental use of history
Functional	Delegitimisation of opponent (yes/no)	Identification of whether the past is used to weaken the opponent's legitimacy
Functional	Legitimation of own position (yes/no)	Identification of self-legitimation through historical framing
Functional	Voter mobilisation (yes/no)	Capturing the mobilisation function of the statement
Functional	Warning / alarmism (yes/no)	Identification of threat construction
Emotional	Dominant emotion (fear, pride, indignation, responsibility, shame/guilt)	Analysis of the affective dimension of framing
Normative	Moral frame (good/evil, democracy/totalitarianism, us/them, victim/perpetrator)	Identification of the value structure of the statement
Communicative	Target of the statement (opponent, voters, nation, institutions – e.g. EU, state)	Determination of the primary addressee and strategic orientation of communication

Source: Author's own elaboration^{*}

The coding categories for the type of historical reference were initially derived from existing scholarship on memory politics in post-communist contexts, which foregrounds references to the communist regime, democratic transition, and experiences of totalitarianism as the primary repertoire of historical narratives in Central and Eastern European political discourse. However, the coding process also allowed for inductive expansion where the empirical material required it. In particular, references to the Second World War emerged as an analytically relevant category that was not fully anticipated at the outset. The

distribution of the 56 units of analysis across the main categories of historical reference was as follows: references to totalitarian and authoritarian experience, including both the communist regime and more broadly formulated invocations of totalitarianism, constituted the largest group ($n=13$, 23%), followed closely by references to the Second World War ($n=12$, 21%), the Soviet occupation of 1968 and related national crises ($n=5$, 9%), and the democratic breakthrough of 1989 ($n=4$, 7%). The remaining units drew on a range of other historical repertoires, including the Cold War, geopolitical East vs. West narratives, historical figures, and references to the interwar First Republic.

5. Presentation of results

5.1 Occurrence of historical references, actors, and party affiliation

The analysis identified a total of 56 units of analysis containing explicit or implicit references to the past across the televised pre-election debates examined. Historical references appeared consistently throughout the entire analysed period and across various thematic segments, suggesting that the mobilisation of the past constitutes a stable and systematic component of pre-election political communication rather than an incidental rhetorical device.

In terms of thematic context, historical references were not confined to debates focused on foreign policy, security, or the state of democracy, although these two thematic segments accounted for a disproportionate share of the corpus: debates on foreign policy ($n=11$, 20%) and on security and defence ($n=7$, 13%) together comprised nearly one-third of all coded units (32%). This pattern is consistent with the prevalence of references to the 1968 occupation and the Second World War, which were frequently mobilised to frame contemporary security threats, particularly in relation to Russia (see the discussion of Rakušan's and Fiala's statements below). Historical references also appeared, albeit less frequently, in discussions of economic policy, social policy, education, and relations with the European Union. In this sense, the past did not function as a separate thematic domain, but rather as an interpretative framework through which contemporary political issues were explained, normatively evaluated, and embedded within a broader field of meaning with a clear gravitational pull toward the thematic areas of security and international relations, where existential and civilisational framing is most readily available.

This mode of engaging with the past corresponds to the concept of framing (Entman, 1993), according to which political communication does not merely present facts, but structures their meaning through processes of selection, emphasis, and moral interpretation. Historical references thus function as

cognitive as well as normative shortcuts that allow political actors to connect current political issues with established collective experiences and shared symbolic meanings (Olick, 2016; Assmann, 2010).

With regard to political actors, the mobilisation of historical narratives was distributed across the political spectrum, albeit with varying intensity and functional orientation, closely linked to the speakers' institutional position and party affiliation. Both government and opposition representatives employed historical references; however, their normative direction and strategic purpose differed.

Government actors primarily mobilised the past as a source of legitimacy for current policies—particularly in the areas of security and foreign policy—and as an argument for defending the democratic order. Opposition representatives, by contrast, more frequently used historical analogies to delegitimise governmental measures and to frame the present situation as a potential threat to democratic principles.

Party affiliation further shaped the mode of engagement with the past, but this pattern requires disentangling from institutional position, since populist actors in the corpus were disproportionately concentrated among opposition and extra-parliamentary speakers. To assess whether populism has explanatory power independent of the government-opposition divide, speakers were classified into a populist and a mainstream bloc following the established distinction between populist and anti-populist competition in Czech party politics (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022), which places ANO and SPD, together with their electoral list partners, on the populist side, and the SPOLU coalition (ODS, TOP 09, KDU-ČSL), STAN, and the Pirates on the anti-populist side. Stačilo! (a coalition led by the Communist Party), Přísaha, and Motoristé sobě, all newly prominent in the 2025 campaign, are not yet covered by peer-reviewed classifications of the Czech party system; they are provisionally included in the populist bloc on the basis of their consistent characterisation as anti-establishment or populist actors in expert and journalistic commentary, and this classification should be treated as provisional pending confirmation in the academic literature.

This reclassification shows that institutional position alone does not account for variation in delegitimising use of the past: the share of units directed at delegitimising a political opponent was similarly high across government (70%), opposition (71%), and extra-parliamentary speakers (68%). The populist/mainstream distinction shows a comparable, though somewhat less pronounced, pattern: 72% of units by populist-bloc speakers performed a delegitimising function, compared to 67% among mainstream speakers. The clearest test is available within the opposition itself, where populist and mainstream actors are represented in equal numbers ($n=7$ each): here, 86% of populist-opposition units delegitimised an opponent, compared to 57% among mainstream-opposition units (Table 2). Given the small cell sizes, this comparison is illustrative rather

than conclusive, but it suggests that populism carries some explanatory weight beyond institutional position, consistent with Dilling and Krawatzek's (2024) characterisation of the populist radical right as a 'memory entrepreneur' that redirects established historical frames against democratic institutions rather than in their defence. At the same time, self-legitimising use of the past was widespread across both blocs (96% mainstream, 90% populist), suggesting that the two groups differ less in whether they mobilise history to legitimise their own position than in how frequently they simultaneously use it to delegitimise an opponent.

Table 2:
Delegitimising and self-legitimising function of historical references, by institutional position and by populist/mainstream bloc

	N units	Delegitimising opponent	Self-legitimising
By institutional position:			
Government	20	70 %	-
Opposition	14	71 %	-
Extra-parliamentary	22	68 %	-
By populist/mainstream bloc:			
Populist bloc	29	72 %	90 %
Mainstream bloc	27	67 %	96 %
of which opposition only:			
Populist-opposition	7	86 %	-
Mainstream-opposition	7	57 %	-

Note: the two functions are coded as separate, non-exclusive binary variables; a single unit may perform both, or neither function, so rows do not sum to 100 %. The full coded dataset underlying this table, including every unit's classification, is publicly available at Zenodo (see note 3), so that all reported percentages can be independently checked against the source data.

Opposition actors, in some cases, employed analogous historical frames to delegitimise the government by symbolically associating it with practices of authoritarianism or a 'new totalitarianism'. The same historical repertoire was thus deployed in opposing directions, depending on the actor's position within the power structure.

5.2 Types of historical references

The analysis identified that the dominant historical narratives in the 2025 pre-election debates drew on two primary clusters of collective memory. The first, and most frequently mobilised, consisted of references to totalitarian and authoritarian experience, encompassing both the communist regime and more

broadly formulated invocations of totalitarianism (n=13, 23%). The second, of comparable frequency, comprised references to the Second World War, including analogies to appeasement, Nazi aggression, and the broader experience of twentieth-century violence (n=12, 21%). Together, these two clusters accounted for nearly half of all identified units of analysis, suggesting that Czech political actors in 2025 drew on the full repertoire of traumatic twentieth-century memory rather than exclusively on post-communist experience.

Further categories included references to the Soviet occupation of 1968 and related national crises (n=5, 9%), and the democratic breakthrough of 1989 (n=4, 7%). These categories correspond to the operationalisation of the type of historical reference within the coding scheme and represent the most frequently mobilised reference points of collective memory in the analysed corpus.

In addition to these dominant frames, references to specific historical figures also appeared, functioning as personalised carriers of particular value traditions or political legacies. Mentions of historical actors enable speakers to symbolically align themselves with a particular line of national continuity or, conversely, to portray their opponents as denying or betraying that tradition. The personalisation of the past thus intensifies the normative dimension of argumentation and facilitates the moral categorisation of contemporary political conflict.

To a lesser extent, references falling into the category of 'other' were also identified. These included symbolically salient yet less frequent moments of modern history, such as references to the ice hockey victory over the Soviet Union in 1969 or allusions to extreme forms of twentieth-century violence (e.g., genocides), employed in analogical or ironic contexts.

The reference to the 1969 ice hockey victory over the Soviet Union is used in the analysed corpus as a symbolic moment of national pride and resistance against a hegemonic power (TV Nova, 2025b). Rather than providing a detailed historical reconstruction of the event, the reference mobilises a shared emotional symbol that, within Czech collective consciousness, is associated with a sense of moral satisfaction following the experience of the 1968 occupation. Through this reference, the speaker indirectly reactivates a narrative of resistance to external pressure and frames the present situation as a continuation of a historical struggle for dignity and sovereignty. The sporting event is thus transformed into a political symbol that performs a mobilising and identity-building function, rather than serving a primarily delegitimising purpose.

An illustrative example of a distinct use of the 'other' category is a statement by Petr Macinka (CNN Prima News, 2025m), who, in response to warnings framed in terms of twentieth-century genocides, ironically questions their relevance and ridicules the claim that a particular political actor is capable of protecting society from such developments: 'No offense, but the idea that from the genocides that happened in the last century, which apparently now threaten us again according to Zdeněk Hřib the Pirates are going to save us from them, that's really funny'.²

In this case, the historical experience of mass violence is not mobilised as a cautionary precedent, but rather as a tool of ironic analogy and relativisation: the mocking tone and the dismissive '*that's really funny*' strip the historical comparison of its gravity, turning the opponent's invocation of genocide into an object of ridicule rather than a legitimate warning. The past thus serves primarily to discursively undermine the legitimacy of an opponent rather than to mobilise moral consensus.

Although these historical motifs do not constitute the core of debate argumentation, they demonstrate that the historical imagination of political actors is not confined solely to the period of communism and the year 1989, but extends to broader symbolic resources of collective memory.

The findings further confirm that historical narratives are not mobilised randomly within the debate arena, but selectively, depending on their mobilising potential, emotional resonance, and capacity to structure political conflict into a moral dichotomy. They carry different normative charges, activate distinct emotional responses, and are associated with diverse discursive strategies. While some references primarily serve to delegitimise political opponents through warnings against a 'return of the past', others function as sources of legitimacy and value continuity, through which actors position themselves as defenders of the democratic order.

The following section therefore systematically elaborates on the individual types of historical narratives and demonstrates how they are mobilised in the context of televised political debates.

a) The communist regime and the period before 1989

The most frequent and normatively most heavily charged category of historical references consists of references to the communist regime and the period before 1989. Within the analysed corpus, these references constitute the dominant frame of reference against which contemporary political reality is symbolically measured. Communism appears not only as an object of historical reconstruction, but also as a negative moral archetype—a shorthand for unfreedom, suppression of pluralism, state control, and restrictions on individual rights.

Within the debate context, this category appears in two primary forms. The first consists of general warnings against a 'return to the period before 1989', which function as a strongly normative frame without detailed historical argumentation. The second form involves more specific analogies in which the actions of a contemporary political opponent are likened to the practices of the former regime. In these cases, a direct symbolic linkage is established between a present-day actor and a historically discredited category.

An illustrative example is a statement by Miroslav Ševčík (Czech Television, 2025d), who, in response to a question concerning education about Russian aggression, compared the government's current official position to the practices of the Politburo of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in the 1980s:

That's what the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party used to say too that if this is what's going to be taught in schools, then whatever the government says must be true. Well, God help us then. I myself, back in the 1980s, spoke out against what the government said and what the Central Committee of the Communist Party said.³

The reference to personal experience from the period of 'normalization' functions here as a historical precedent intended to warn against the adoption of a 'single truth' imposed by state power: by drawing a direct equivalence between today's government-endorsed position and the Party line of the 1980s, the statement recasts an official interpretation as an act of ideological conformity rather than a factual judgment. The communist past is thus mobilised as a negative corrective to the present, and the current situation is framed as a potential repetition of authoritarian practices. In this way, the governmental interpretation is delegitimised through historical analogy.

It is characteristic that these references are often not elaborated through detailed historical reconstruction but rather function as shorthand moral categories. They activate the affective dimension of communication—particularly fear, indignation, or a sense of threat—and contribute to a sharp dichotomisation of the political space.

Similarly, Petr Fiala (CNN Prima News, 2025a) mobilises the historical experience of communism in the form of a warning, yet does so through a broader civilisational dichotomy:

We will decide whether we continue along the path of freedom, quality democracy, security, and prosperity or whether we head off somewhere to the East, as Andrej Babiš and his allies from the ranks of extremists and communists are offering us.⁴

The election is framed as a choice between the 'path of freedom, democracy, and prosperity' and a 'turn to the East', with the 'East' explicitly associated, through the direct reference to 'communists', with the communist past and authoritarianism. Unlike Ševčík's statement above, the historical experience is not elaborated through personal recollection but functions as a compressed symbolic counterpoint to democratic identity, reduced to a single oppositional label.

Communism thus appears as a negative historical archetype whose return is presented as a real risk associated with specific political actors. The reference therefore performs a dual function: first, a mobilising function (an appeal for electoral participation), and second, a delegitimising function (the symbolic association of the opponent with an authoritarian tradition). The past operates here as an implicit moral lesson, because democracy is portrayed as the outcome of a historical struggle that may be undermined if voters choose the 'wrong' path.

From the perspective of discursive strategy, it is characteristic that references to communism are often formulated in a condensed manner and without historical specification. The primary aim is the mobilisation of a symbolically powerful collective experience. This type of reference activates above all the emotional dimension of communication—particularly fear of a return to authoritarianism and indignation at its perceived signs. In the analysed corpus, the communist regime thus represents a key negative normative frame through which boundaries between the ‘democratic’ and the ‘unacceptable’ are constructed, contributing to the moral dichotomisation of the political space.

b) 1989 as a foundational democratic moment

In contrast to the negatively connoted references to the communist regime, the year 1989 is mobilised in the analysed corpus predominantly as a positively normative frame of reference. It represents a symbol of democratic breakthrough, the restoration of freedom, and a return to European value alignment. References to this historical moment are not primarily used to delegitimise opponents, but rather to legitimise one’s own political position and to mobilise voters through appeals to responsibility and the defence of the democratic order.

An illustrative example is a statement by Vít Rakušan (TV Nova, 2025b), who frames the current election as a decision about whether the Czech Republic will preserve the democratic character defined by the experience of 1989:

So today we saw what we’re up against in these elections, and I think we showed that when democrats cooperate, we can weather it together, that we’ll win like we did in hockey in ‘69, or that we won’t let our democracy be taken away and we’ll keep it here like in ‘89. We just need to get fired up to go vote, to mobilise.⁵

The year 1989 functions here as a normative anchor of contemporary political identity, explicitly paired with the 1968 occupation within a single mobilising sentence. The then Minister of the Interior sought to mobilize a shared symbol representing freedom, pluralism, and civic engagement. The past is reactivated as a commitment, because democracy is presented as a historically hard-won achievement that requires active protection.

A specific mode of engaging with this historical moment is also reflected in the defence of 17 November as a national holiday:

I wouldn’t reduce the number of state holidays... and perhaps with one reminder from our eastern neighbour, where it is now being proposed that, at least for this year, 17 November should not be a state holiday I would like, and I am sure that with our “Democratic 101” [author’s note: a campaign slogan of the coalition of democratic parties], this will not happen, for 17 November to remain a state holiday.⁶ (Czech Television, 2025n)

Its preservation is framed as confirmation of the continuity of democratic memory and as an expression of the Czech Republic's civilisational orientation, implicitly contrasted with an unnamed 'eastern neighbour'. The year 1989 thus performs both a mobilising and an identity-building function, primarily by delineating the boundary between democratic and authoritarian models of political order.

From the perspective of discursive strategy, it is characteristic that 1989 is mobilised predominantly as a positive historical precedent. Unlike references to communism, which function as a negative cautionary archetype, 1989 represents a source of legitimacy and continuity of values. It contributes to the moral structuring of political conflict yet does so primarily through appeals to the defence of achieved values rather than through direct symbolic exclusion of opponents from the framework of democratic competition.

c) The general experience of totalitarianism / authoritarianism

In addition to historically anchored references to the communist regime or the year 1989, the analysed corpus also contains broadly formulated references to 'totalitarianism', 'dictatorship', 'fascism', or authoritarianism without precise temporal specification. These references are not linked to a detailed historical reconstruction of a specific period, but function instead as highly normative and condensed categories through which the current political situation is framed as a potential threat to democracy.

Unlike specific historical analogies, the past here appears rather as an abstract cautionary archetype. Terms such as 'totalitarianism' or 'fascism' are employed as symbolic signals indicating the crossing of the boundary of democratic legitimacy. This type of reference has a distinctly alarmist character and seeks to mobilise fear, vigilance, and moral rejection of certain political actions.

An illustrative example is a statement by Miroslav Ševčík (CNN Prima News, 2025h), who interprets a specific incident, the disruption of a gathering in Příčovy by a group associated with the controversial activist Mikael (Mike) Oganessian, as a symptom of the emergence of 'fascist militias':

I was personally present when that Oganessian group, together with some ODS people and others, one of whom is actually a councillor in one of the municipalities, attacked civilians in Příčovy who had gathered there to listen to some lectures. So I witnessed that. And I saw how the police intervened. They arrived late, but they did intervene. I want to draw attention to a great danger. This is how fascist militias began. This is how it started, as I saw it happen with my own eyes in Příčovy.⁷

The historical experience of interwar authoritarianism is not elaborated as a complex historical context, but serves as a warning parallel through which a real, verifiable public-order incident is reframed through an alarmist historical

lens, casting a disruptive counter-protest as the genesis of organised political violence. The past thus functions as a dramatising device that shifts the current conflict into the realm of existential threat.

From the perspective of discursive strategy, this category is characterised by the absence of concrete historical specification and the dominance of strongly evaluative terminology. Totalitarianism or authoritarianism here represent abstract negative models against which contemporary politics is measured. This type of reference thus contributes to the intensification of political polarisation by framing the conflict not as a dispute over policy programmes, but as a confrontation between democracy and its endangerment.

d) National crisis and the threat to sovereignty (1968 / Russia)

A specific mode of engaging with the past is represented by references to national crises associated with threats to state sovereignty, particularly the experience of the Soviet occupation in 1968. These narratives are mobilised in the debate context primarily in relation to security policy and relations with Russia.

An illustrative example is a statement by Vít Rakušan (TV Nova, 2025b), who frames the current situation as a continuation of the struggle against an aggressive state in the East and legitimises increased defence spending as a response to an unprecedented security risk:

There's a kind of hidden contest going on here, Czechia versus Russia. Zdeněk Hřib and I are playing for Czechia, and just like in '69 in hockey, we're simply going to win! We have an aggressive state here to the east, and we as a country have to be prepared. This is about the fate of our children. And the fact that we, as a government, this government now governing until 2030, have committed to spending 3% on defence is absolutely right.⁸

The reference to the historical experience of occupation serves here as an implicit argument for the necessity of defence capacity and political unity. The past is reactivated as a cautionary precedent: the experience of the loss of sovereignty in 1968 is invoked, through the sporting analogy of the 1969 ice hockey victory over the Soviet Union, to justify contemporary measures aimed at strengthening national security.

From the perspective of discursive strategy, this constitutes a form of security framing, in which historical memory is used to legitimise specific policies. The reference to the occupation functions as an emotionally powerful symbol of collective trauma, shifting the present conflict into the realm of existential threat. Political debate is thus structurally displaced from a programme-based dispute toward a question of national security and survival.

Not all historical references in the analysed corpus served polarising or delegitimising functions. A smaller but analytically significant subset of statements

mobilised the past in an integrative or constructive manner. Olga Richterová (CNN Prima News, 2025k) invoked the Baťa model of interwar urban development as a positive historical precedent for contemporary housing policy: ‘(...)so that we can build entire new districts here the way they did under Baťa, comprehensively planned and in cooperation with private developers’.⁹ The reference frames the interwar precedent as an achievable standard to be replicated rather than a cautionary warning to be avoided. Similarly, Lubomír Zaorálek (Czech Television, 2025m) recalled the founding of the Visegrád Group by Václav Havel as an example of successful regional cooperation and dialogue, evoking pride rather than threat. Martin Baxa (Czech Television, 2025k) drew on the democratic traditions of the First Republic and T. G. Masaryk as a source of national self-confidence, without directing the reference against any political opponent. These cases illustrate that the historical repertoire available to Czech political actors is not exclusively weaponised: the past can also function as a shared resource for constructive political legitimisation and identity affirmation.

In summary, the different types of historical references differ not only in their thematic content, but above all in the discursive functions they perform within televised debates. While references to the communist regime and to the broadly framed experience of totalitarianism are predominantly cautionary and delegitimising in character, the year 1989 is mobilised as a positive source of legitimisation and a normative anchor of democratic identity. By contrast, references to national crises and the experience of the 1968 occupation primarily serve to frame contemporary conflict in security terms and to legitimise defence or geopolitical decisions.

In pre-election debates, the past functions as an active instrument of political framing through which boundaries are constructed between the legitimate and the illegitimate, between the ‘democratic’ and the ‘threatening’. Historical narratives thus become structuring elements of political conflict and contribute to its moral polarisation.

5.3 Political functions and communicative orientation of historical narratives

The analysis based on the applied coding framework demonstrates that historical narratives in the 2025 televised pre-election debates perform a set of strategic political functions that are systematically integrated into the argumentative structures of individual statements. These are not incidental reminiscences of the past, but deliberately mobilised interpretative resources through which political actors structure political conflict.

The most prominent identified function is the delegitimation of political opponents. Historical analogies and references to totalitarian experience are used to symbolically associate a contemporary adversary with normatively discre-

dited periods or ideologies. Such framing challenges not only a specific political position, but also the moral competence of the actor as a legitimate participant in democratic competition.

References to ‘communism’, ‘totalitarianism’, or a ‘return to the period before 1989’ are mobilised in these cases as a moral benchmark against which a present-day opponent is implicitly or explicitly measured. This mechanism corresponds to the theory of symbolic politics (Edelman, 1988), according to which political conflict is not merely a clash of programmes, but a contest over meanings and moral interpretations of reality.

At the same time, historical narratives fulfil a function of legitimising one’s own position. Political actors present themselves as continuators of democratic tradition or as defenders of historically hard-won values. The past functions here as a source of symbolic capital that stabilises one’s programme-based stance and embeds it within a broader civilisational framework. In particular, references to 1989 or to moments of national resistance against authoritarianism allow current political agendas to be portrayed as historically justified and normatively grounded.

Another significant dimension is the mobilising function of historical references. Analysis of the category ‘dominant emotion’ shows that historical narratives are systematically linked to the mobilisation of fear, indignation, pride, or responsibility. Emotions do not represent a secondary effect, but a constitutive component of argumentative strategy: they intensify the persuasive impact of the statement and contribute to the moral sharpening of conflict.

A specific form of this mobilisation is alarmist framing, in which historical events are presented as precedents for potential future threats. References to communism or totalitarianism structure contemporary political competition as a situation in which the democratic order itself is at risk. Historical experience functions here as a cautionary scenario legitimising heightened mobilisation.

Another key dimension of the analysis concerns the functional role of historical references within debate interaction. The coding framework made it possible to identify whether the past was mobilised primarily for delegitimising an opponent, legitimising one’s own position, mobilising the audience, or constructing threat. The findings show that historical narratives are in most cases used not as neutral illustrations of an argument, but as instruments of strategic boundary-drawing.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that in the 2025 campaign, history is employed primarily as a tool of emotional and moral mobilisation. Historical narratives enable political actors to frame contemporary social and political issues—from foreign policy orientation to questions of democracy and national identity—and contribute to the value-based intensification of political conflict in the public sphere.

5.4 Moral structure and the dichotomisation of political space

The analysis reveals a distinction between historically specific references and more broadly formulated historical invocations. Concrete historical moments (e.g., 1989 or the 1968/1969 occupation) generally strengthen the argumentative weight of a statement and serve to legitimise a particular political position through reference to a shared and relatively stabilised historical experience. In such cases, the past functions as a source of continuity and normative grounding.

By contrast, broadly formulated references to ‘communism’, ‘totalitarianism’, or a ‘return to the period before 1989’ are typically not elaborated through detailed historical argumentation but operate as condensed moral categories. Historical narratives are simultaneously embedded within binary frames such as democracy vs. totalitarianism or ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. Here, the past functions as a symbolic threat or a cautionary precedent rather than as a historically reconstructed experience. Such references primarily activate the affective dimension of communication—they evoke fear, indignation, or a sense of threat—and thereby contribute to a sharp dichotomisation of political space into ‘defenders of democracy’ and ‘bearers of threat’. Political conflict is thus structurally transformed from a programme-based dispute into a value-based confrontation.

This mechanism corresponds to the conception of collective memory as a source of normative framing (Assmann, 2010; Olick, 2016), whereby the past provides not only an interpretation of reality but also a value-based distinction between acceptable and unacceptable political action.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that the moral structure of historical narratives does not function as a secondary effect of political communication, but as one of its constitutive principles. Through references to the past, contemporary actors and their positions are morally categorised. As a result, political conflict is transformed: disputes over specific policies or measures are translated into a framework of confrontation between the ‘defence of democracy’ and the ‘threat to its disruption’. Historical narratives thus stabilise the value boundaries of political space while simultaneously contributing to its polarisation, as they generate a binary structure of legitimacy and delegitimacy that extends beyond the framework of ordinary programme-based competition.

6. Conclusions and discussion

6.1 Discussion of results in the context of theoretical frameworks

The findings of the analysis of televised pre-election debates preceding the 2025 elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic clearly demonstrate that historical narratives constitute a key element of political communication and are strategically instrumentalised to achieve political objectives. The results confirm the theoretical assumptions of memory politics and collective memory (Müller, 2002; Olick, 2007; Assmann, 1995), which conceptualise the past not as a neutral reference point but as a dynamic arena of political contestation. Political actors actively construct and reinterpret history in order to legitimise their own positions and delegitimise their opponents, thereby transforming the past into a 'normative benchmark of legitimacy' rather than merely a historical reference.

The predominance of references to the communist regime, the Second World War, the Velvet Revolution, and national crises such as the Soviet occupation of 1968 underscores the specific features of the post-communist context (Blacker, Etkind & Fedor, 2013; Kubik & Mole, 2025; Zelinsky, 2025). In societies still grappling with the traumatic legacy of totalitarian regimes and the process of democratic transformation, memory politics becomes particularly fertile ground for populist discourses. Warnings against a 'return to totalitarianism' or 'new communism' are not merely rhetorical devices, but powerful emotional appeals that resonate with collective memory and enduring societal traumas. These strategies align with Manucci's (2019) argument that collective memory—and the associated 'stigma' of the past—constitutes a key 'opportunity structure' for populism, shaping both its reach and its societal resonance.

The application of framing theory (Entman, 1993) reveals that historical narratives function as powerful cognitive and affective frames that simplify complex political realities. When political actors construct parallels between past events and contemporary issues (e.g., relations with the EU, migration, or the state of democracy), they selectively emphasise particular aspects, thereby shaping public perception and embedding moral evaluations within political communication. This 'weaponisation of the past' (Couperus, Tortola & Rensmann, 2023) is particularly evident among populist and far-right actors, who present themselves as 'memory entrepreneurs' (Dilling & Krawatzek, 2024) and utilise history to reinforce collective identity and criticise 'elites'. The identified dichotomisation of 'us' versus 'them' corresponds directly with populist discourse, in which opponents are associated with historical 'mistakes' or 'betrayals', while the in-group is heroised as the defender of national values.

The identified functions of historical narratives—delegitimation of opponents, mobilisation of supporters, legitimisation of one's own position, and

the activation of moral and emotional appeals—operate in a mutually reinforcing manner. Fear of repeating historical mistakes, pride in national achievements, and indignation over past injustices become instruments that circumvent purely rational argumentation and directly engage voter preferences. This confirms that emotions are not peripheral but integral to the framing process and are strategically mobilised to strengthen political support (Entman, 1993). The Czech political arena in 2025 thus reflects a broader European trend in which historical narratives are increasingly employed to intensify value-based polarisation and structure political conflict.

6.2 Conclusion, implications, and limitations of the study

The analysis of televised pre-election debates preceding the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections demonstrates that historical narratives constitute a systematic and strategically deployed element of political communication rather than an incidental rhetorical device. Four discursive mechanisms were identified through which political actors mobilised the past: analogical comparison, warnings against repeating historical mistakes, heroisation of democratic turning points, and ironic or relativising reinterpretations.

Contrary to what a focus on post-communist memory politics alone might suggest, the empirical findings reveal two parallel clusters of historical reference of comparable frequency: totalitarian and authoritarian experience, including the communist regime, and the Second World War. Together, these two repertoires accounted for nearly half of all identified units, suggesting that Czech political actors draw on the full breadth of twentieth-century traumatic memory rather than exclusively on post-1989 experience.

A further finding of theoretical significance is that the same historical repertoire was mobilised across the political spectrum, yet with structurally opposed functions. While governing coalition actors deployed historical references defensively to legitimise the democratic order, populist and right-wing conservative actors strategically inverted these frames, directing them against democratic institutions themselves. This asymmetry illuminates a deeper dynamic of contemporary Czech political communication, in which the past functions not merely as a shared cultural resource but as a contested terrain of meaning.

These findings enrich the theoretical framework of memory politics and political communication by illustrating in detail the micro-level of discursive practice in the context of pre-election debates. While much of the existing literature focuses on institutional aspects of memory or its long-term role in identity formation, this study emphasises the tactical and operational use of history in short-term, high-intensity political competition.

The implications of these findings for Czech democracy are considerable. The increasing instrumentalisation of history for moral polarisation and the delegitimisation of opponents may, in the long term, undermine trust in democratic institutions and weaken rational political debate. Political competition may thus shift from programme-based discussion toward a struggle over the interpretation of the past, in which emotional framing plays a prominent role. This trend contributes to deepening value divisions and complicates the search for compromise solutions to societal problems.

In this regard, it is instructive to compare the present findings with Novotný's (2016) analysis of the 2013 presidential campaign, in which historical narratives centred on Czech-German relations exerted only a limited influence on electoral outcomes. The considerably more pronounced mobilising and polarising functions of historical narratives identified in the 2025 parliamentary campaign may thus reflect a broader transformation of the Czech political climate, one in which memory politics has become an increasingly central, rather than peripheral, instrument of electoral competition.

This study nevertheless has several limitations. First, it is limited to the analysis of televised pre-election debates and therefore does not provide a comprehensive picture of political communication, which also unfolds in other media environments (online platforms, social media, campaign rallies). Second, the focus on a single electoral campaign does not allow for the examination of long-term developments or comparisons with other electoral periods. Moreover, the interpretative nature of discourse analysis means that the findings rely on the researcher's interpretation, even though the analysis is supported by a systematic coding framework.

Based on these limitations, several avenues for future research can be proposed. First, comparative studies could extend the analysis to other electoral campaigns in the Czech Republic (e.g., presidential elections) or to other post-communist countries (e.g., Slovakia, Poland), in order to identify long-term trends and regional specificities in the use of historical narratives.

Second, a multimedial approach incorporating additional media formats (such as social media, print media, and visual materials) could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diffusion of historical narratives.

Finally, although this study is qualitative, a complementary quantitative analysis of the frequency and contextual distribution of historical references across a broader corpus could help validate and generalise some of the findings.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insight into the dynamics of political communication in the Czech Republic and highlights the critical role that the past plays in contemporary electoral competition.

References:

- Assmann, J. (1995). *Collective memory and cultural identity*. New German Critique, 65, 125–133.
- Assmann, J. (2010). Communicative and cultural memory. In A. Erll & A. Nünning (Eds.), *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (pp. 109–118). De Gruyter.
- Blacker, U., Etkind, A., & Fedor, J. (2013). *Memory and theory in Eastern Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boym, S. (2001). *The future of nostalgia*. Basic Books.
- CNN Prima News. (2025a, October 1). *VOLBY 2025: Superduel Andreje Babiše a Petra Fialy* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0SiNjsOo_U
- CNN Prima News. (2025b, September 11). *Předvolební speciál 360° – Bezpečnost* (R. Králíček, J. Černochová, J. Rajchl, P. Letocha) [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmN_jovqtLO
- CNN Prima News. (2025c, September 11). *Předvolební speciál 360° – Bezpečnost* (V. Votápek, L. Zaorálek, R. Vesecká, R. Šlachta) [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiAuF9fsUdM>
- CNN Prima News. (2025d, September 16). *Velká předvolební debata lídrů kandidátek ve Středočeském kraji* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13Y27fgBXo4>
- CNN Prima News. (2025e, September 17). *ZUPERDEBATA mladých politiků: Diskutovali Činčila, Knedlhans či Gregor. Jak řešit krizi bydlení?* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7xheCRGYkk>
- CNN Prima News. (2025f, September 18). *Předvolební speciál 360° – Green Deal* (B. Peštová, M. Kupka, R. Fiala, L. Vlček) [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tE-8L4yUc19w>
- CNN Prima News. (2025g, September 18). *Předvolební speciál 360° – Green Deal* (V. Vislous, N. Bartůšek, P. Macinka, L. Luzar) [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biMfxJJBMQI>
- CNN Prima News. (2025h, September 2). *Velká předvolební debata lídrů kandidátek v Jihomoravském kraji* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-mU3L9pX44Q>
- CNN Prima News. (2025i, September 23). *Sledujte předvolební debatu lídrů v Praze: Jaký je jejich pohled na bezpečnost a bytovou krizi?* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnVUsWqFbGE>
- CNN Prima News. (2025j, September 25). *Předvolební speciál 360° – Sociální témata* (A. Juchelka, M. Jurečka, M. Šichtařová, P. P. Vaňková) [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwjJLw2nAKg>
- CNN Prima News. (2025k, September 25). *Předvolební speciál 360° – Sociální témata* (O. Richterová, J. Maláčová, B. Šťastný, J. Zimola) [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjtjbsQmpak>
- CNN Prima News. (2025l, September 26). *Superdebata lídrů stran: Kdo má nejlepší program pro budoucnost?* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <http://youtube.com/watch?v=IRInwOkr98c>
- CNN Prima News. (2025m, September 29). *Sledujte velkou předvolební debatu s Hřibem, Maláčovou a Macinkou* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvH-8fXscj8g>
- CNN Prima News. (2025n, September 3). *Předvolební debata České zájmy v Evropě na klíčová témata pro volby do Poslanecké sněmovny* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUCznJ4gDrs>
- CNN Prima News. (2025o, September 30). *Sledujte velkou předvolební debatu s Rakušanem a Okamura* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <http://youtube.com/watch?v=qilkVMBCdV0>
- CNN Prima News. (2025p, September 4). *Předvolební speciál 360° – Ekonomika* (A. Schillerová, J. Skopeček, M. Ševčík, L. Sedmíhradská) [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Muh7oawJ7Gk>
- CNN Prima News. (2025q, September 4). *Předvolební speciál 360° – Ekonomika* (L. Dušek, J. Bobošíková, V. Pikora, P. Vokřál) [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFMQqK5NDLY>
- CNN Prima News. (2025r, September 8). *Sledujte předvolební debatu lídrů v Moravskoslezském kraji: Jak zajistit lepší platy?* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OZMFXOismw

- Couperus, S., Rensmann, L., & Tortola, P. D. (2023). Historical legacies and the political mobilization of national nostalgia: Understanding populism's relationship to the past. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 31(2), 253–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2207480>
- Couperus, S., Tortola, P. D., & Rensmann, L. (2023). Memory politics of the far right in Europe. *European Politics and Society*, 24(4), 435–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2022.2058757>
- Czech Television. (2025a, October 1). *Předvolební debata Obrana a bezpečnost* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590930/>
- Czech Television. (2025b, October 2). *Předvolební debata Ekonomika* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033591001/>
- Czech Television. (2025c, September 10). *Předvolební debata Průmysl a podnikání* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590909/>
- Czech Television. (2025d, September 11). *Předvolební debata Vzdělání a školství* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590910/>
- Czech Television. (2025e, September 12). *Předvolební debata Vztahy EU a sousedními zeměmi* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590911/>
- Czech Television. (2025f, September 15). *DUEL ČT Tomio Okamura (SPD) a Kateřina Konečná (Stačilo!)* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033600914/>
- Czech Television. (2025g, September 17). *Předvolební debata Sociální věci* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590916/>
- Czech Television. (2025h, September 18). *Předvolební debata Justice* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590917/>
- Czech Television. (2025i, September 19). *Předvolební debata Životní prostředí a zemědělství* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590918/>
- Czech Television. (2025j, September 22). *DUEL ČTVít Rakušan (STAN) a Zdeněk Hřib (Piráti)* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033600921/>
- Czech Television. (2025k, September 24). *Předvolební debata Společnost a výzvy* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590923/>
- Czech Television. (2025l, September 25). *Předvolební debata Digitalizace státu* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590924/>
- Czech Television. (2025m, September 26). *Předvolební debata Zahraniční politika* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590925/>
- Czech Television. (2025n, September 28). *Superdebata* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033390001/>
- Czech Television. (2025o, September 3). *Předvolební debata Doprava* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590902/>
- Czech Television. (2025p, September 30). *DUEL ČT Karel Havlíček (ANO) a Martin Kupka (SPOLU)* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033600929/>
- Czech Television. (2025q, September 4). *Předvolební debata Bydlení* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590903/>
- Czech Television. (2025r, September 5). *Předvolební debata Zdravotnictví* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033590904/>
- Czech Television. (2025s, September 8). *DUEL ČT Petr Macinka (Motoristé) a Robert Šlachta (Přísaha)* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/17113857060-volby-2025/225411033600907/>
- Dilling, M., & Krawatzek, F. (2024). The populist radical right as memory entrepreneur? The prominence, sentiment, and interpretations of history in the German parliament. *British Journal of Political Science*, 54, 1296–1317. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123424000346>

- Edelman, M. (1988). *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. University of Chicago Press.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. Routledge.
- Havlík, V., & Kluknavská, A. (2022). The populist vs anti-populist divide in the time of pandemic: The 2021 Czech national election and its consequences for European politics. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13413>
- Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content analysis*. SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781>
- Kubik, J., & Mole, R. C. M. (2025). *The anatomy of right-wing populism: Dealing with transformational fatigue in Central and Eastern Europe*. London, UK: UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800086777>
- Manucci, L. (2019). *Populism and collective memory: Comparing fascist legacies in Western Europe*. Routledge.
- Masłowski, N. (2013). Politika pamäti: Medzi minulosťou a prítomnosťou. *Slovenská politologická revue*, 13(4), 274–288. Retrieved from https://sjps.fsvucm.sk/Articles/13_4_1.pdf
- Müller, J.-W. (Ed.). (2002). *Memory and power in post-war Europe: Studies in the presence of the past*. Cambridge University Press.
- Novotný, L. (2016). Czech–German relations and presidential elections 2013. *OZP – Austrian Journal of Political Science*, 44(4). <https://doi.org/10.15203/ozp.323.vol44iss4>
- Olick, J. K. (1999). Collective memory: The two cultures. *Sociological Theory*, 17(3), 333–348. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00083>
- Olick, J. K. (2007). *The sins of the fathers: Germany, memory, method*. University of Chicago Press.
- Olick, J. K. (2016). *The politics of regret: On collective memory and historical responsibility*. Routledge.
- Olick, J. K., & Robbins, J. (1998). Social memory studies: From “collective memory” to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 105–140.
- Sierp, A. (2025). The politics of memory: Between history, identity and conflict. *Government and Opposition*, 60(4), 1464–1483. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2025.10011>
- Skalová, I. (2026). *Coded Dataset: Historical Narratives in the 2025 Czech Parliamentary Election Campaign* [Dataset]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18650952>
- Somers, M. R. (1992). Narrativity, narrative identity, and social action: Rethinking English working-class formation. *Social Science History*, 16(4), 591–630. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171314>
- TV Nova. (2025a, October 2). *Babiš vs. Fiala* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2E7aWuSgqL0>
- TV Nova. (2025b, October 2). *Hřib, Konečná, Okamura, Rakušan a Turek v poslední televizní debatě* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKXBZIDY1Tc>
- TV Nova. (2025c, September 15). *Předvolební debata: Trh práce, důchody, sociální péče, zdravotnictví* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lixFTGWQKw>
- TV Nova. (2025d, September 17). *Předvolební debata: Ceny energií, průmysl, výstavba dálnic* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAPz-q_sNh8
- TV Nova. (2025e, September 19). *Předvolební debata: Armáda, bezpečnost, platy policistů a hasičů, zahraniční politika* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-T64wVutfl>
- TV Nova. (2025f, September 22). *Předvolební debata: Rozpočet na rok 2026, zavedení EET, slevy na potraviny* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-dNPrn-KUUU>
- TV Nova. (2025g, September 26). *Hlas Gen Z: Bydlení, vzdělávání a bezpečnost* [Television broadcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uZdOnUunMA>
- Zelinsky, D. (2025). Never again: Collective trauma and populism in Slovakia's debate about the US Defence Cooperation Agreement. *Memory Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980251379672>

Endnotes:

- 1 The full coded dataset (56 units of analysis, including verbatim quotations, coding variables, and source debate metadata) is available at Zenodo: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18650952>
- 2 Original Czech: *Nezlobte se, ale představa, že tady před genocidama, které tady byly v minulém století, že nás teď ka, které už teda samozřejmě podle Zdeňka Hřiba hrozí. Že nás před nima zachrání Piráti, tak to je super vtipné.*
- 3 Original Czech: *To říkalo dřív i politbyro ÚV KSČ a jestli to má přijít do školy, že to, co řekne vláda, tak je pravdivé. No tak to potěš pánbůh. To i já jsem v těch 80. letech vystupoval proti tomu, co říkala vláda a co říkala ÚV KSČ.*
- 4 Original Czech: *Budeme rozhodovat o tom, jestli budeme pokračovat cestou svobody, kvalitní demokracie, bezpečnosti, prosperity a nebo se vydáme někam na východ, jak nám to nabízí Andrej Babiš a jeho spojenci z řad extremistů a komunistů.*
- 5 Original Czech: *Tak dnes jsme viděli, proti čemu v těchto volbách stojíme a snad jsme dokázali, že pokud spolupracují demokraté, tak to umíme společně ustát. Že vyhrájeme jako v hokeji v tom roce 69 a nebo si tu demokracii nenecháme vzít a budeme ji tady mít jako v roce 89. Jenom se musíme nabudit k tomu jít volit, zmobilizovat.*
- 6 Original Czech: *Já bych počet státních svátků... nesnižoval a možná s jedním mementem od našeho východního souseda, tam se teď navrhuje, že 17. listopad by alespoň pro letošek neměl být tím státním svátkem, tak byl bych rád a určitě s tou naší demokratickou 101 se tohle nestane, aby 17. listopad státním svátkem zůstal.*
- 7 Original Czech: *Já jsem byl osobně přítomen tomu, když ta Oganasjová grupa s těmi dalšími ODSáky a dalšími, protože to je dokonce zastupitel v jedné obci, tak útočili v Příčovech na civilisty, kteří se tam sešli na setkání, kde přišli poslouchat určité přednášky. Takže toho jsem byl svědkem. A viděl jsem, jak ta policie zasahovala. Přijela pozdě, ale přece jenom zasáhla. Chtěl bych upozornit na velké nebezpečí. Takhle začaly fašistické bojůvky. Takhle začaly, takhle jak jsem to viděl, jak to probíhalo přímo v Příčovech, tak jsem to viděl na vlastní oči.* Oganesjan group refers to activists associated with Mikael Oganesjan, who disrupted a 'Patriotic Gathering' (Vlastenecké setkání) in Příčovy.
- 8 Original Czech: *Odehrává se tu takový skrytý zápas Česko x Rusko. My se Zdeňkem Hřibem teda hrajeme za Česko a stejně jako 69 v hokeji prostě vyhrájeme! ... Máme tady agresivní stát na východě. A my jako země musíme být připraveni. To je přeci o osudu našich dětí. A to, že jsme se zavázali jako vláda, jako tahle vláda, která teď vládne do roku 2030 dát 3 % právě do zbrojení je absolutně správně.*
- 9 Original Czech: *(...)aby bylo nově možné stavět ty velké čtvrti... jako za Bati celé nové čtvrti, konceptně a spolu ve spolupráci se soukromníky.*