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Czech postcommunist trouble with participatory governance. Toward an analysis of the cultural agency of policy discourses

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ABSTRACT

The article uses the postcommunist context to rethink the argumentative arena of current participatory governance. While citizen empowerment is a crucial component of participatory governance, it has not received much attention in either the policy or the research of the CEE region. Comparing two Czech prominent public controversies, the analysis reveals a mediating rejection of citizen empowerment because it is seen as being fundamentally opposed to modernization. Modernization is a powerful narrative justifying the postcommunist transformation as a supreme policy goal, being used as an argument for the technocratic style of governing. The analysis thus suggests that attention to cultural contingency of participatory governance is needed, and it proposes analysis of the cultural agency of policy discourses.

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Introduction

Citizen empowerment is a crucial device in participatory governance (Bevir and Rhodes 2016; Dryzek 2001; Fischer 2012; Fung 2006; Hajer 2009). While policy studies show the indisputable value of citizen empowerment for public participation (Barnes 2008; Hunter 2015; Newman et al. 2004) and for democratic policy processes (Dodge 2015; Dryzek 2001; Ercan, Hendriks, and Boswell 2015; Fischer 2009b; Fung 2007; Healey 2015), its postcommunist shape in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been only minimally addressed. Some analyses focused on state authorities' top-down activities toward public engagement (see, e.g. Fortin 2010; Fung and Gilman 2015; Roberts 2009), and others discussed engagement's impact on the overall political culture of the region (Kopecky and Mudde 2003b; Loewenberg, Mishler, and Sanborn 2010; Rose 2009; Howard 2003). Participatory governance literature then focused on Western liberal democracies principally (Fischer 2009b; Fung and Wright 2003; Geissel 2009; Healey 2015; Lovan, Murray, and Shaffer 2017).

Adding the analysis of a postcommunist state to the empirical literature on participatory governance, the article argues for attending more to the *cultural contingency of*

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participatory governance. While participatory governance has acquired an important place in meanings and discourses (Bevir and Rhodes 2015; Fischer 2009b; Hajer 2003; Yanow 2009), it has rather downplayed the cultural agency of discourses. At the same time, while studies of the postcommunist context all agree that “culture” has been important in the process of democracy consolidation (Fishman 2017; Dufek and Holzer 2016; Clark 2016) these works have not proffered an analysis of the effects of culture on the postcommunist transformation and the related policy discourses.

The article aims at furthering the understanding of the postcommunist rejection of participatory governance for the current argumentative arena of the approach. By comparing two distinct policy fields that have been marked recently by prominent public controversies in the Czech Republic, and by mirroring them in the postcommunist context, the article highlights that discursive practices are negotiated, and that we need to pay more attention to the cultural agency of these negotiations. Despite their differences in both policy areas, both cases result in anti-participatory discourses, in which established experts and government officials use the argument of “modernization” to challenge activists, justifying technocratic governance practices as a logical and necessary value for “postcommunist transformation” (Rose 2009). Citizen empowerment is then labelled as a disturbing and ineffective element to Czech governance, which in fact limits the emulation of commonly known citizen empowerment models in the region. The analysis thus mobilizes the *Strong Program in Cultural Sociology* to show analytic paths that explain participatory governance through interactions of discourses with “culture,” a term that refers to a specific sociopolitical dynamic of sharing values and beliefs (Alexander and Smith 1993; Alexander 2006).

Since 2003, Brno city officials and activists have argued over the location of the city’s central railway station. While the local government wants to move the station to a new location, activists argue that this is neither technically necessary nor responsible because of the related environmental burden. Over the course of this protracted conflict, the issue of whether citizens are entitled to participate in urban planning decisions gained more traction and importance than the actual discussion of pros and cons (Durnová 2015; Durnova 2013). In a similar vein, the Czech Midwife Association (CMA), supported by the Czech League of Human Rights, has argued with health care professionals and politicians since 2002 over the legal framework for home births. Since Czech professional midwifery licenses cover only prenatal and postnatal care but not perinatal care, home birth practices fall into a grey zone that makes a midwife’s assistance at home births practically illegal. Czech medical experts support this, arguing that home births jeopardize infant safety and go against modern medical standards (see also the analysis of Czech medical practices in Šmídová, Šlesingerová, and Slepícková 2015); but the CMA and the Czech League of Human Rights counter argue that a mother’s emotional security must be respected. As with the Brno urban conflict, the question of who has the right to decide has become more central to the discussion than the actual merits of each position.

The present article begins by reviewing the scholarly works on postcommunist context that illustrate a lack of participatory governance in the CEE region (Cisař 2017b; Cisař and Vráblíková 2010; Bolzendahl and Coffé 2013) and that predominantly blame the rigidity of postcommunist institutions for this lack of effectiveness (Červenka 2009; Mansfeldová and Kroupa 2005). Through the analysis of two distinct policy fields, the analysis arrives at an alternative explanation. By identifying the conflict of citizen empowerment with what is

labelled in the country's public discourse as “modernization,” the article suggests both that modernization is part of the postcommunist culture that marginalizes citizen empowerment in favour of a technocratic discourse and that citizen empowerment fails unless it addresses the postcommunist culture front and centre. The contribution concludes by making subsequent propositions to the current argumentative arena of participatory governance, such as the need to analyse the *cultural contingency of participatory governance*.

Citizen empowerment in the postcommunist context: a futile effort?

“Get rid of green activists and stop trusting them. They ravaged and still ravage here!”¹—these were the words of the Czech president Miloš Zeman at the opening of new section of highway in late 2016. Environmental protests attended the construction of this highway. The president's proclamation made waves throughout the activist community, because the environmental concerns raised severe safety hazards, and it was in fact their initial disregard by the construction experts that slowed the construction, not the protests (a portion of the highway collapsed and had to be rebuilt). Moreover, the president's remarks are emblematic of his repeated use of terms that dehumanize activists and frame them as “*creatures to be enclosed and observed only in camps*.”² While such verbal clashes between government officials and activists might not be new, and are not necessarily limited to the postcommunist era, the strong language together with the absence of a public critique of such language from other governing elites warrants further analysis.

To begin with, the lower levels of public participation in postcommunist countries have a side effect on the public discourse on activism and citizen empowerment. In comparison to the EU-15 countries, the level of public participation in the Czech Republic is low (ESS 2014), which makes it easier to label the activists as “extreme” or, as suggested in the following analysis, as “antimodern,” which is consistent with the negligible voter support of political parties that support activism in the country (CVVM 2017). These figures are unsurprising, as the troublesome relationship between political elites and their civic challengers has been analysed as symptomatic of the postcommunist era (see, e.g. Kopecký and Mudde 2003a; Kopecky and Barnfield 1999; Dvořáková 2008; Havel 1990). Some scholars attribute the weak role of Czech civil society to the importance of market reforms in postcommunist development (Jahn and Kuitto 2011; Ekiert and Kubik 2014) and the related dominance of economic arguments in the country's public policy discourse (Císař 2017a) supporting the strong economic agenda of Václav Klaus, the first Czech prime minister and president of the country from 2003 to 2013 (see e.g. in Nosál 2000). Other scholars identify the historical rigidity of Czech institutional structures (Červenka 2009; Dvorakova 2014) as an element hindering citizen empowerment practices, mirroring observations in other postcommunist democracies (Borzell and Buzogany 2010; Sissenich 2010; Rose 2009). Císař explains that many Czech citizen empowerment practices, which are currently seen as conflictual, were developed in direct contrast to what characterized the period before 1989 (see also the discussion in: Müller and Skovajsa 2009). As a consequence, the focus has been on “anti-regime movements” that did not necessarily empower citizens (Císař 2017b). This engendered a conceptual confusion about what citizen activism stands for and a lack of understanding that its agenda is not only anticommunist but, more importantly, eventually generates a strong social agenda.

This conceptual confusion leads us away from having to explain Czech obstacles to participatory governance as some closed economic necessity or historical rigidity resulting from the postcommunist transformation, and allows us to approach postcommunism as an active cultural-cum-discursive agency. The status of civil society in Czech postcommunist politics is thereby central to this agency because reacts to both economic and historical contexts. Civil society has been praised for having a crucial role in democratization before 1989, and it was celebrated as the key democratic force by the most prominent actor of the revolution, Václav Havel (Havel 1990). However, its concrete articulation in postcommunist politics became fragile because it was considered more a project of elites (civil society has never been a large scale phenomenon in the country: Dvořáková 2008) and because it developed in opposition to “politics” (Kopecky and Barnfield 1999; Kopecký and Mudde 2003b), which consequently excluded political parties from addressing civil society in their agenda and therefore from becoming legitimate defenders of the knowledge it produce. Such knowledge-based legitimacy becomes the contested arena, as I demonstrate through both cases. The failure of citizen empowerment strategies to be translated into meaningful participatory governance practices uncovers citizen empowerment in the country as particular sources of knowledge that are at odds with a “modernization narrative” because they hinder the fluency of postcommunist politics.

The Western democracies that exemplify these movements have also endured protracted conflicts, and increases in public participation and citizen empowerment did not appear overnight (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Fischer 2009a). In Western democracies, both policy areas addressed in the present analysis have long been understood to be within the purview of technical or scientific experts. For that reason, recent scholarship on governance and democracy conceptualizes citizen empowerment as an important source of knowledge-based legitimacy in the governance process (Boswell and Corbett 2017; Dodge 2015; Durnova, Fischer, and Zittoun 2016; Griggs and Howarth 2004), at the same time strengthening the role of discursive agency for politics and focusing, in particular, on how activism uses lay or citizen knowledge to challenge professional elites’ traditional power (Braun et al. 2010; Feindt and Oels 2005; Griggs and Howarth 2004, 2017). While participatory governance scholars have observed the increasing role of civil society as the organizing framework for participatory governance (Fung 2007; Newman 2012; Bevir and Rhodes 2010; Lovan, Murray, and Shaffer 2017), the interpretive agenda has emphasized that civil society’s challenge to traditional hierarchies and governance procedures must be addressed by focusing on how the legitimacy of knowledge is sustained in governance (Fischer 2013; Zittoun 2014; Turnbull 2011).

However, analysing why professional elites’ power might still have cultural ascendancy in some regions and policy areas has not been accorded much attention in the interpretive agenda. Although some works argue that culture must be accorded importance when conceptualizing participatory governance (Fischer 2009a) and that particular cultural, social, and historical backgrounds must be taken into account (Feindt and Weiland 2018), the concrete operation of cultural agency in discursive practices has not yet been analysed. Social and cultural analyses of participation can be particularly thought provoking when doing this, as they bring an analytic sensitivity to concrete contexts in which practices of citizen empowerment are carried out (Clarke, Hoggett, and Thompson 2006; Blakeley and Evans 2009; Newman 2012; Sullivan, Skelcher, and Sullivan 2002). Blakeley and Evans suggest, for example, that the cultural explanation of participation should be

privileged (Blakeley and Evans 2009, 29) because it can show that participation is not always desirable for those who are encouraged to participate. In social movement scholarship, James Jasper suggests examining the cultural and social dimensions of citizen empowerment (Jasper 2011). Also, Barnes takes note of the values underpinning participation because they create powerful collective identities (Barnes 2008).

This is not to say, however, that culture (and in our case postcommunism) is the sole explanatory vector of citizen empowerment strategies and the impact those strategies have on governance. As the Strong Program in Cultural Sociology reminds us (Alexander 2006), cultural codes both enable and constrain discourse; while they provide a moral justification for political action, they are also public resources that actors call for or that they contest. The following analysis, henceforth taking into account the cultural contingency of participatory governance, focuses on the way citizen empowerment strategies fail to justify their arguments within the cultural context of postcommunism. Postcommunism appears as a cultural agency that has sustained the imperative of economic transformation as a part of the Czech public discourse and that identifies which arguments or practices are used for or against the legitimacy of particular policies.

Data and methodology

The analysis compares and extends two case studies of citizen engagement activities in public controversies: one on urban planning in the city of Brno (Durnova 2013; Durnová 2015) and one on home births in the Czech Republic (Durnova, Formánková, and Hejzlarová 2016). While the original case studies identified how a group of actors forms around particular pros and cons, in both fields they found an important focus on the conflicts between activist/alternative/lay knowledge and the “modernization” of the country. Thus, the present analysis attends, on the one hand, to arguments used to support or to reject citizen empowerment as a tool of governance and, on the other hand, to the relationship of these arguments to the “modernization” discourse of the country. The comparison allows us to see the dynamic between the modernization discourse and citizen empowerment as making it more complicated to emulate commonly known participatory governance models.

In the first case study, the first set of data was collected between 2009 and 2014 and encompasses expert interviews, focus groups, media coverage (2003–2014), and all relevant policy documents from both the local government and NGOs. These data sets were actualized in the course of new developments in the controversy between 2014 and 2016 through a review of the local press.³ In the second case study, the data were collected between 2014 and 2016 as a pilot project for a larger qualitative survey of parents, midwives, and doctors; it includes media coverage since 2002 as well as all relevant policy documents from that period from the main stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health, the Czech Medical Association, the Czech Midwifery Association, and the most prominent non-profits⁴ and Facebook groups.⁵

The comparison goes beyond the context of the policy field (e.g. the persistent professional territorialism found in health care controversies and the overwhelmingly “technical” approach to urban planning) in order to focus on the specific dynamic of citizen empowerment in the postcommunist context. This dynamic has been further contextualized by literature reviews and media coverage to scrutinize the link between citizen

empowerment and democracy in the region, and by participatory observation in a set of expert meetings and public discussions held on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Visegrad 4 Group in 2016 and 2017, during which the Czech postcommunist transformation and its influences on civil society were reflected upon. Alternatively, the development of both policy fields is reflected in the survey data on the country's public opinion trends on citizen engagement, trust in public institutions, and trust in governments (CVVM 2016, 2017). These data suggest growing support within the Czech electorate for the party ANO. This new party defines itself as centrist and is labelled as antipolitical (Gregor and Macková 2014). It focuses its political agenda on effective governance and modernization (Císař and Štětka 2017). Although these data are not the core of the present analysis, they were crucial for identifying the general development of the country's political discourse.

Who is the expert?

Home birth

While the number of Czech home births is within the European average of approximately 1 percent of the total number of births in the country (Home births 2010), the issue has become a key controversy in Czech health policy discourse since 2009.

At the outset, Czech legislation does not regulate the assistance of midwives in childbirth because it does not clearly distinguish between the expertise and related responsibilities of midwives and obstetricians at the moment of birth.⁶ Due to this ambiguity in the law, most women intending to give birth at home with the assistance of a midwife do not reveal this to either the health care system or to their obstetricians.

Home births became media relevant when, on 23 July 2009, the prominent Czech midwife Ivana Königsmarková assisted a home childbirth, after which the new-born needed to be hospitalized. The infant had severe brain damage and died twenty months later. Königsmarková was subjected to media insults and later received a suspended jail sentence of two years, a five-year suspension from midwifery practice, and a 2.7 million CZK fine payable to the national insurance agency to cover the care of the child during its twenty months of life. On 28 August 2013, the Constitutional Court of the Czech Republic overturned the conviction, sending the case back to the initial court in Prague in order to re-examine the circumstances of the child's death. On 29 January 2014, that court concurred with the Constitutional Court in overturning the conviction and penalties because it found no evidence that Königsmarková contributed to the child's death. The attorney general appealed, but the Prague court sustained the reversal later that year, and the attorney appealed to the Supreme Court. In December 2014, Ivana Königsmarková was finally acquitted of all charges.

Königsmarková's story marks a particular moment in which citizen empowerment became relevant because she became the symbol of both the bravery of those who choose home birth and the legally ambiguous conditions under which home births are performed. At the same time, her story was presented by the established experts as exemplifying why home births threaten child security and why mothers who choose home birth are "irresponsible." Her trial escalated both the media's and politicians' interest in the topic of home births.⁷

On the activists' side, the events supporting Königsmarková have merged into a number of public initiatives arguing for the mother's right to choose the place where she will give birth and consequently for the inclusion of mothers' voices in the policy debate. Such initiatives included campaigns by established NGOs such as the Czech League of Human Rights, demonstrations of women activists fighting for a clearer legal framework for home births, festivals such as the Week of Respect for Birth, informal support groups of women interested in home births (such as How Can We Do It Differently, jakjinak.cz), and Facebook activist groups (Home birth Facebook group - 'Porod v domácím prostředí').

On the government's side, stakeholders increased their concern over the legitimacy of the demand for home birth in the policy debate; the birthing process was recurrently promulgated as a medical expert issue. In 2013, for example, the Czech minister of health care, Leoš Heger, established a work group on home births and midwives' authorization but then almost immediately disbanded the group because "midwives felt offended." The midwives countered that they first and foremost needed to be treated with respect by the doctors. The Work Group for Respectful Practices in Birthing established within the Czech Governmental Council for Equality of Men and Women in 2015 to promote dialogue between both groups so far has not introduced alternative sources of knowledge into the debate. It had neither legislative nor executive power; it could at best only formulate recommendations.

The dynamic of the conflict together with a heated media debate identify how home birth proponents understand themselves as a citizen empowerment movement. The core of the conflict over home birth is represented by the question of who is competent (the expert) to decide on birth practices both in medical and in legal terms. The analysis shows how the rejection of the home birth side by the experts and in the larger public discourse relates to a wider clash between citizen empowerment and modernization and how this is supported by the postcommunist context.

Zuzana Candigliota, an attorney specializing in cases of harm during childbirth, forwarded the widely shared argument among activists that directly links a mother's "right to choose" with "the expression of free will" (Liga Lidských Práv 2015). Such arguments echo the manifold stories presented on online forums and Facebook groups. Women complain of being treated with "a lack of respect." They criticize their attending obstetricians for not allowing them to give birth in the position they want to or for telling them that they are bad mothers if they give birth without medications. The Czech Midwifery Association supports the individual needs of mothers. The association points out that, in its members' professional experience, women are more likely to give birth without complications when "their psychological state of mind is respected." A mother's right to choose is then an empowered requirement because it builds on the local knowledge that each and every mother is able to develop "naturally" during pregnancy.

Critics of the choice for home birth counter that there is a considerable burden on the safety of both mother and child in home birth, and they call for women to be "humble" and "grateful" for the safety measures provided in modern medical facilities (Rozhlas 09/2014). Criticism of home birth practices cites modern medical achievements, occasionally enumerating cases where babies were safely born precisely because they were born in the hospital and where, without immediate medical intervention, the birth would have failed. For example, the leading obstetrician and 2014 candidate in local elections,

Bohuslav Svoboda, repeatedly cited the low perinatal mortality rate in the country (Rozhlas 09/2014); his use of the mortality statistics represents the crucial argument in this critique. The notion of safety is supported through more regular medical screenings during pregnancy than the European average and the use of pain relievers during labour as well as other medications and invasive techniques supporting labour. These techniques are seen as necessary to the safety of both mother and child, and even if medical experts occasionally publicly acknowledge that there are risks and secondary effects to be taken into account when medications are taken, for them the “efficiency” that contributes to the “safety” is paramount (Rozhlas 09/2014).

In the media discourse then, home birth is predominantly portrayed as irresponsible and a lifestyle choice, practiced by so-called organic-mothers, a term encompassing a range of practices usually, but not necessarily, accompanying home birth. These practices include the use of homeopathic, Bach-blossom remedies, placenta cocktails (mixing a coin-size part of the placenta with fruits that mothers are supposed to drink after they have given birth), elimination communication (diaper-free methods for new-borns), as well as anti-vaccination behaviour. Although not all home birthing mothers share these practices, lumping them all into the context of home birth not only frames home birth as a choice counter to medical expertise, but it also implicitly frames it as a regression from modernity, as a “stone-age” practice and a dangerous threat to the lives of both mothers and babies (MF DNES 07/2014).

The fact that the media perpetuates the notion that home births are antimodernist (as do medical authorities, who are then supported by government officials) is important for understanding the role of citizen empowerment around this issue. This portrayal generates mistrust that can be found in dedicated Facebook groups and discussion forums, and it is embedded in a larger, and more important, narrative of medical hypocrisy that turns the focus not on women but on a quick, technically governable and efficient birth. This narrative tends to centre on the highly disputed medical practice of Kristeller’s Expression, which refers to a situation in which medical staff manually push as hard as they can on the uterus with the intention of facilitating vaginal birth. Rejected by WHO (WHO 2015), Kristeller’s Expression is practiced in Czech maternity hospitals but is not documented in the respective medical files (Šenkeříková 2015). Practices such as this make home birth the unequivocal choice for its promoters, challenging the established elite by reclaiming not only the right for self-determination of mothers but also the right for correctives to medical knowledge.

This is not the place to reflect on the contested nature of medical knowledge as it relates to some of the practices cited above that might in fact problematize the use of the “modernist” narrative by the home birth opponents. The analytical focus here lies on the way the home birth promoters endeavour to legitimize the discussion of the contested nature of medical knowledge and present themselves as a citizen empowerment movement, inviting mothers to go against what is in the promoters’ view a uniform, narrow-minded, medical practice. In the dominant public discourse, the home birth movement is however framed as a non-modern posture by medical experts, government officials, and by the media. Not only is the home birth posture a “dangerous choice” because it automatically exposes the new-born to the risk of death, but it is also a choice that is “behind the times.” Remarkable in this respect is the statement of the former health care minister, Svatopluk Němeček, when negotiations between obstetricians and midwives resumed. In his explanation, the

minister highlights both the marginality of activists and the fact that activism hinders efficiency:

We have a good system indeed. [...] The problem is that some mothers - and some midwives - want to have greater competence. OK. Let's make the discussion happen. However, the health and safety of the child and mother come first. So if we do not come to a conclusion that the [new] system will be better, then we should not change anything. (CT 5/2014; emphasis added)

Here, not only is the empowerment explicitly referred to as a “problem” to the expertise issue, but also as something potentially hindering effectivity (“that the [new] system will be better”). Furthermore, birth legislation is treated in his statement as an ultimatum so as not to allow for correctives and inclusion in at least some parts of the legislation (“We should not change anything”). We provide insight from a very different policy field to further illustrate this clash between “modernization” and citizen empowerment.

Urban planning

The controversy around relocating the Brno railway station divides the community into those who want a railway station at a new location outside the city centre and those who want the station rebuilt at its current location. The idea to move the main railway station in Brno to a new location approximately 800 m south of the centre dates to the beginning of the twentieth century. The recent urban controversy remerged in 2003 with the unilateral decision by the mayor's office to move the railway station. This decision was the catalyst for experts, environmental activists, and civic associations to coalesce into a group calling itself Railway Station in the Center (RCS). This civic initiative argued that modernization of the railway station is possible in its current location and that the relocation project is therefore unnecessary. They started protests, which led to a local referendum in 2004. Although a clear majority (85.78 percent) of voters were against moving the station, only 24 percent of Brno citizens voted on the issue and the mayor was not legally bound to the referendum decision. With that, a virtual battle between supporters of the moving project and RSC members persisted from 2006 until 2009.

In December 2009, the Supreme Administrative Court, the nation's highest court for local government affairs, cancelled the current version of Brno's zoning plan, finding in favour of one of the activists' initiatives against the new railway station, thus forcing the mayor to terminate construction negotiations on the relocation project. In spring 2011, the new zoning plan of Brno was prepared. As activists around RSC worked on comments of the zoning plan, which the City Planning Office was legally bound to consider, concerns over citizen rights to shape urban planning became more important than the issue of the railway station. Some of the newly emerging citizen initiatives were not against the relocating project per se but objected to the way the City Planning Office did not allow alternative perspectives on the issue and advocated for a comparative expert study that would document both options accurately.

Following the spread of activist movements, the City Planning Office shifted its strategy throughout 2012 to mediation efforts. This was also related to the fact that state financing of the relocation project became increasingly uncertain. While the mediation efforts did not result in the public perception that citizen empowerment had become relevant, they

did prompt the organization of the independent comparative expert study, so that everybody could “move on.” This was articulated in July 2014 in a joint press conference of the City Planning Office and the RSC (One Man Brno Blog 2017).

This represented a partial victory for the activists. Two months later, they gained political influence in the city’s local elections, winning the position of vice mayor as a direct consequence of their work. The activists were thus now in charge of the subsequent decision procedure. Yet, the course of events changed: another activist group formed, maintaining that citizen concerns should be involved in this conflict regardless of which political party is in charge of the expert study. Their view was that, while the RCS had taken charge of city business, this should not change the essence of the argument that citizens should be part of urban planning. Their efforts led to another referendum in autumn 2016, with their campaign focusing explicitly on the issue of citizen empowerment under the slogan “they want to silence us.” The result was the same as in 2004: a large majority of respondents were against relocation (85 percent), but since only 24 percent participated, the referendum was not legally binding for the city. Whereas the argument that referendums only hinder modernization was not new in 2016, its defenders were unexpectedly new. The previous activists, from the RCS group, by that time politicians in the city office, claimed that “another referendum is meaningless” and “ineffective” because the comparative experts study would serve to end the controversy.

While it still remains unclear whether public officials will finally turn to the results of both referendums when deciding on the project, the dynamic of this protracted issue reveals two particular aspects that enable us to explicate the relation of citizen empowerment to the country’s narrative of modernization. All city officials since 2003 have emphasized modernity in their statements concerning the new railway station. Becoming part of the big, modern world of high-speed transportation was the main argument used by the mayor in office until 2006 (Strategy for Brno 2006; Minutes 2006). The next mayor (although from the opposition party) subscribed to this as well by disagreeing with the activists – and stating that refurbishing the current railway station would make the city centre a “huge construction site” (Strategy for Brno 2009) and any “slowing down” of the relocation could be a major loss of opportunities and of the city’s prestige, as the vice mayor for transport emphasized in 2012 (Interview City Office 2012). After RCS activists were elected to city government positions, this narrative did not in fact disappear but was reformulated into a confidence that the comparative expert study would set the agenda and make the modernization happen, either way (Hospodářské noviny 09/2016).

Consequently, regardless of the actual political representation, activists groups have been continuously labelled as those who are “slowing the process down” (Interview City Office) or who “undermine the entire investment process” and make Brno public officials out to be “buffoons” (MFDnes 10/2016). The political developments from 2014 onward suggest that the argument of effectivity was not linked to a particular party or ideology but rather reflected the general way that the city officials understood governance and related technocratic practices.

Making citizen empowerment modern?

Should birthing mothers and city inhabitants be authentic knowledge sources to be listened to when policies are designed? With that dimension of both public controversies,

we shift away from the concrete policy evaluations to the way these policies are enacted with and through the acceptance of citizen empowerment as part of the policy-making process. The home birth controversy weighs the value of two knowledge sources: knowledge of medical experts located in technically equipped, modernized hospitals versus knowledge created through a respectful environment of listening to a mother's needs. In a similar vein, the Brno railway controversy balances between the understandings of urban planning as a site of smooth processing toward an effective system and as a site of respectful treatment of all elements involved.

Czech public officials have disregarded competing perspectives in both controversies and, by arguing for technocratic understanding of governing, have declined to create meaningful channels of participatory governance. What is more, activists are repeatedly presented as a threat to the country (Vláda 2/2017; DR 3/2017). At the same time, not only has this decline not produced in the public discourse a long-term protest arena reaching beyond these particular cases, but the decline finds in fact greater sustenance in the country's continuous public support of technocratic governments (Červenka 2009). Recent political developments in the Czech Republic even reinforce this emphasis on effectiveness and technocracy in the country. We see strong attachment to the technocratic style of governance in the recent support of the ANO party (CVVM 2016), which explicitly incorporates technocratic stylings in its image (Dufek and Holzer 2016; Gregor and Macková 2014).

The emulations of participatory governance practices hints at the larger, country-wide discourse of postcommunist transformation justifying the argument to "speed up," to value "efficiency" over discussion of competing perspectives. Although they deal with quite different issues, both controversies portray citizen empowerment movements as hindering modernization, not only by those who are in power but also by the wider audience. While market-oriented discourse was identified as a somewhat logical consequence of postcommunist discourse, enacted through the large support of pro-market political reforms during the 1990s, the recurring failure of citizen empowerment movements to gain a voice in the country's policy making suggests that more attention needs to be paid to how postcommunism has become a cultural-cum-discursive agency.

Postcommunism gives impetus to the establishment of citizen empowerment movements, but it also limits their success in creating meaningful channels of participatory governance. Not only do the two conflicts discussed here seem to be difficult to overcome, but they destroy the general potential to engage in policy and put in danger the support of civil society in the country. The home birth activists threaten the system not only by endangering mothers and new-borns but by spreading mistrust of what is dominantly understood as the modern and effective medical system. The environmental activists threaten the prestige of the city because their efforts to stop the relocation project could harm the modern development of the city, as public officials would emphasize.

Two aspects of postcommunism – framed here as the cultural agency of policy discourses – become important for the argumentative arena of participatory governance. First, the operating dynamic of both cases is that technocratic understandings of expertise are dominant sources of knowledge in both policy discussions. Both cases speak to a certain blinding of the contested character of expert knowledge combined with a disregard for the sources of knowledge other than those that conform to technocratically understood expertise. This relates to the second dynamic, which offers legitimacy to the technocratic

view through the narrative of modernization. In their effort to highlight the role of alternative sources of knowledge in democratic discussions, all activists groups encounter difficulties because they are seen as “an unnecessary slowing down” of the system that, from the views of those in power, functions well.

Conclusion

In light of some recent works suggesting that empowerment’s impact on governance might be limited (Jacquet 2017; Sintomer and De Maillard 2007; Gustafson and Hertting 2016) and identifying skepticism toward participatory models (Boswell and Corbett 2015), the investigation of the postcommunist context in the Czech Republic teaches us two lessons in participatory governance. Both relate to the cultural contingency of participatory governance, understanding culture as an active agency of policy discourse. To understand the various forms of the recent renaissance of technocracy and the practices through which technocracy becomes sustained and legitimized (Turnbull 2011), cultural-cum-discursive agency needs to be analysed to unmask how particular knowledge, and knowledge sources, coproduce these forms and practices.

The practical lesson of the postcommunist context is to think about ways to reduce the growing skepticism toward participatory governance. To extract citizen empowerment strategies from the concrete policy context and to acknowledge that contesters make governance ineffective in the short-term perspective, and eventually make decisions slower, could offer a fresh argumentative arena. It would, for example, widen the analytical scope to investigate the emotional content of apathy and the way it is linked to values of democracy, whereby citizen empowerment is depicted as “antimodern,” whereas technocracy is “modern.”

There is also a conceptual lesson here. The rising importance of the modernization narrative speaks to the larger issue of the legitimacy of knowledge outsiders in any democracy. Under which conditions do we classify these outsiders as relevant, productive, and leading to a better future? Whose future is at stake in that classification, and which actors define it? These questions need to be unpacked in upcoming participatory governance scholarship, and the postcommunist context offers here a seminal and productive topography.

Notes

1. http://www.rozhlas.cz/zpravy/domaci/_zprava/zbavte-se-zelenych-aktivistu-a-prestante-jim-verit-radili-a-radi-zde-porad-vysvetlil-zeman-zdrzeni-stavby-dalnice-d8--1680325, 17. 2. last viewed 30 January 2017. Translation by the author.
2. http://brnensky.denik.cz/zpravy_region/online-zeman-v-kraji-den-prvni-bojkot-zastupitelu-i-setkavani-s-obcany-20170529.html, 29.5.2017, last viewed 30 May 2017. Translation by the author.
3. All interview partners have been anonymized; the relevant data sets are password protected and stored on an external device.
4. See the quoted data sources below for the full list of agencies addressed.
5. Working with data on home birth raises issues of privacy. I therefore scrupulously protect the confidentiality of the posters in the home birth Facebook groups and use them as background information only.
6. Decree No. 55/2011 Coll. Activities of health workers and other professionals (Vyhláška o činnosti zdravotnických pracovníků a jiných odborných pracovníků).

7. Since 2009, the number of media stories has at least doubled and may have increased by a factor of seven compared with the period before 2009. The concern was also caused by the then ongoing baby boom, which peaked in 2008 and 2009.

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Notes on contributor

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