

## *Divided National Identity and COVID-19: How China Has Become a Symbol of Major Political Cleavage in the Czech Republic\**

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### *Abstract*

The COVID-19 pandemic has been discussed as strengthening nationalist as opposed to globalist forces around the world. While this may be the case in some countries, in others we can observe an increasing political polarization between the “globalists” and “nationalists” rather than a unification against an “outside enemy.” The article presents a case study of the Czech Republic, which has long had a turbulent

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relationship with China. We show how the coronavirus pandemic has escalated the polarization of Czech politics, in which China has become a symbol of the major political fault line. We argue, first, that the vastly different attitudes of Czech officials vis-à-vis China are not the result of their changing opinions in time. Instead, the electoral reshufflings elevate politicians with significantly different views of China. Second, we argue that although the political division may today appear to be symbolized by its approach toward the Communist legacy, the division actually goes to the 19th-century debate about the Czech national identity. Eventually, we end up with a discussion on how the image of China in a faraway country is being formed to a large extent following the domestic political dynamics rather than being driven by the significantly more powerful China.

In August 2020, just as the second wave of COVID-19 seemed to be growing stronger, the Czech Senate president (i.e., speaker of the Upper House of the Czech parliament) Miloš Vystrčil, who is constitutionally the second highest Czech representative after the president, paid an official visit to Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> This was important as it was the highest-ranking European official visiting the island in over 40 years, and naturally it has attracted much attention—in Taiwan as well as beyond. China responded with threats of retaliations,<sup>2</sup> while various European leaders expressed solidarity with the Czech Republic.<sup>3</sup> Vystrčil's visit to Taiwan even partly overshadowed the official visit of China's minister of foreign affairs Wang Yi, who toured Europe during the same time in what was his first overseas trip since COVID-19 emerged. Instead of stabilizing relations with Europe, Wang ended up often being on the defensive, including due to the Taiwan's visit.<sup>4</sup> Vystrčil's visit also accelerated international media and pundit discussion on what seemed like a "U-turn" in Czech foreign policy: just recently, the Czech president Miloš Zeman tried to position his country as China's most trusted partner in Europe and now the country's official goes on an unprecedented visit to Taiwan. This article offers an explanation of this dynamic development of Czech attitudes toward China (and Taiwan) and it shows what role the COVID-19 pandemic has played so far.

Two different conceptions have been competing for dominance in contemporary Czech domestic political debate since its "national revival" in the 19th century—the one of the "great Czech nation" and the one of the "little Czech nation."<sup>5</sup> As Stefan Auer argued, certain historical events