

One Crisis after Another? How Much Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Impacted Opinions on Welfare-state Priorities

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Abstract

With rising spending during the COVID-19 pandemic, the state has become involved in decision-making in areas where it has held back for years. In the case of housing the state's role has declined sharply since 1989, and the expectation that housing is the private responsibility of each individual and his or her family has strengthened over time as has the homeownership norm. Many measures introduced in the acute phase of the pandemic related in some way to housing and housing quality, such as efforts to ensure social distancing, reduce social contacts, etc. State interventions correspond to the normative assumption that, with some exceptions, the state should not get involved in housing. In this study, we examine the effects of three global crises – the financial crisis, housing affordability, and the pandemic – based on how citizens rank the priorities of the welfare state. Special attention is paid to housing support and how young people differ in evaluation of welfare state priorities. This means people who on the one hand largely make up the net payers in the welfare state and those who have been affected most by the current crisis in housing affordability. The changes in public opinion during the pandemic resemble a Mikado game, a game of pick-up sticks, with health care being deemed the highest priority set apart from the barely distinguishable cluster of other welfare state provisions.

Keywords

Housing, Covid-19 Pandemic, Welfare State, Public Opinion, Global Crisis, Young People

JEL Classification

H53, I38, Z18

Introduction

The past twelve to thirteen years are framed by two major global crises and each one re-tabled the question about how far and in what areas the state and state policies should intervene in the economic life and society. Both the global financial crisis and the recent COVID-19 pandemic¹ have directly affected the housing sector, an area from which the post-communist governments withdrew after 1989. Since then, homeownership has become the dominant housing tenure and norm in these countries (Lux, Sunega 2020). Using the example of the Czech Republic, this study shows how such crises in the past dozen years have been reflected in changes in the Czech population's attitudes towards the welfare state.

The global financial crisis (2008-2010) is considered to have been sparked by the collapse of the US sub-prime mortgage market, which then spread to the banking system and across the entire world (Hodson, Quanglia, 2009). The banks that before that had been reinvigorated by the Czech state proved to be relatively resilient (Černohorská, 2015). However, there was no way to spare the open economy from the economic impacts. The distinctive signs of the crisis were the significant decline in GDP at the start of 2009, followed by a shallow economic recession, and then a higher unemployment rate that lasted for some time (Linek & Petrůšek, 2020). The economic recession also had a cooling effect on real estate prices, but after several years of stagnation prices began rising again. Some experts refer to this trend as a 'global urban housing affordability crisis' (Wetzstein, 2017). Although global in nature, this is a much more selective crisis. It primarily impacts regional centres, which means large cities. The combination of a boom in real estate prices and rising rents has put new households trying to obtain housing in a particularly difficult situation.

The COVID-19 pandemic also has a global dimension. Despite all the efforts and targeted resources, at present we can still only partially see and estimate what its full impact will be (see e.g. Razavi et al., 2020 on the pandemic crisis's impact on social cohesion; Valensisi, 2020 in the case of the global rise in poverty). The pandemic brought the economic cycle to a halt all over the world, and this health crisis has been accompanied

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by a financial crisis that is larger in scale than the previous global financial crisis (Shehzad et al., 2020). In response to this, governments have introduced unprecedented measures to support the economy, and state budget expenditures have grown substantially. If the state's massive interventions into the economy in response to the last global financial crisis did not lead to fundamental changes in the economic system, then, according to Bergsen (2020), the current crisis could represent a turning point in the relationship between the state and the market (cf. Šulc, 2020). Regardless of whether or not such fundamental changes ultimately occur, there is no question that the current situation will affect the welfare state both in terms of its revenue and in terms of the distribution of necessary expenditures. But fundamental changes cannot be achieved without public support for the state's chosen policies, both on the side of the recipients of services and on the side of those who contribute to the functioning of the welfare state during a given stage in life.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the fabric of ties and responsibilities that exist between the state and society, and here society can be understood to mean the sum total of all households. At different times in the crisis the state announced measures that seemed to be saying to the public: shore yourselves up at home as though you were inside an impenetrable fortress from which you shall only venture out when absolutely necessary. The adopted measures and recommendations have transformed homes into children's classrooms, offices, and workspaces. In addition, they are also supposed to serve as music halls, theatres, restaurants, clubs, and venues for watching sports matches, hairdressing salons etc. In other words, many measures and the various forms of lockdown introduced by the state in the acute phase of the pandemic have related in some way to housing and housing quality, such as efforts to ensure social distancing and reduce social contacts.ⁱⁱ However, some of these 'fortresses' are in a dilapidated condition and do not provide as much safety as others. In other cases, occupants are unable to call their homes their own. Regardless of these differences, during the pandemic they have been supposed to serve not only as the securest of forts, protecting those inside, but, when necessary for health reasons, as a quarantine space, to protect those outside as well.

The main research question of this study is: *How do global crises affect public opinion on the prioritisation of welfare state public spending?* As well as this more general question, we also want to know whether public opinion has opened up to the view that housing is not just the private concern of individuals and those close to them, and whether there is a growing conviction that support for housing should rank among the priority policies of the welfare state. The way to find an answer is by comparing the effects that the three global crises in the past two decades have had on the public's attitudes towards welfare-state priorities in the Czech Republic.

This article is organised as follows. First of all, in the literature review the structure of the welfare state redistributions are briefly described. It refers to the work of authors who study these expenditures in a comparative perspective too. Next, trends and changes in public attitudes towards the welfare state are explained. It is possible to compare some attitudes using international studies (see Linek & Petrůšek, 2020), but in this article the focus is on a longer time frame in one country, the Czech Republic. It describes the trends in housing policy and the effects of these policies and the public's critical perspective on the state's policies in this area. The chief method used in the analysis here is a study of the trends in public opinion. The data sources and indicators used are set out in the methodological section. The results of the analysis point to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic being considerably stronger than those of the global financial crisis and the urban housing affordability crisis. The discussion mentions the limitations of the study, and the conclusion highlights the need for further research in the area of basic and applied research, as well as analysing the available statistics that will be provided by the upcoming census.

Literature Review

The welfare state redistributes revenues among groups of the population and provides them with security against the risks attached to the labour market and different stages of the life cycle (Rehm, 2016). For example, young childless couples, individuals or 'empty-nesters' are usually those who contribute to the state through taxes more than they receive through various forms of support. On the other hand, there are households of pensioners and there are the unemployed, who at the given time receive more than they pay.

According to data from the *European System of Integrated Social Protection Statistics*, a large part of the public budget of countries in Europe is usually made up of family benefits and most of the resources in redistributive social programmes go to health care and old-age pensions. Expenditures on housing and expenditures to overcome social exclusion are among the smallest state-budget expenditures. A comparable level of welfare-state expenditures is in the area of support for unemployment, which, however, varies with fluctuations in the economic cycle. (Večerník & Mysíková, 2018).ⁱⁱⁱ

Research on trends and changes in the public's attitudes towards the welfare state in the Czech Republic (Linek & Petrůšek, 2020)^{iv} has confirmed that almost the entire population supports universal social services, such as pensions and health care. Most respondents state, however, that the government should also 'provide decent housing for those who can't afford it'. Support for this decent housing, nevertheless, declined over time to 60% of respondents in 2016. It thus approached the level of support for the least popular area of welfare state support,

which is the ‘provision of a decent standard of living for the unemployed’, for which repeatedly less than half of respondents have expressed support for (Linek & Petrúšek, 2020). Attitudes towards the responsibility of the state for social housing, support for the unemployed, and support for providing ‘a job for everyone who wants one’ are influenced by the socio-economic status of respondents, regardless of whether status is measured on the basis of education, income, or the means by which a person earns their income. In other words, it is primarily those strata of the population who are most at risk in these areas who call on the government to assume responsibility for them. More general attitudes towards the redistribution of wealth, the principle on which the welfare state is based, are similar. According to regression model results, the relationship between a person’s position in the social structure and their attitude towards redistribution has grown weaker over time. In other words, status characteristics are increasingly less helpful for predicting attitudes. However, what can be clearly demonstrated is that support for redistribution correlates positively with economic development as captured by the unemployment rate (Linek & Petrúšek, 2020).^v

In order to understand attitudes towards housing policy, however, it is necessary to look deep into the past. While homeownership became the supra-dominant form of housing tenure in all Central and Eastern European countries, social housing proved to be unsustainable and ineffective. Most of the post-socialist countries used the giveaway privatisation of public housing as a shock absorber (Lux & Sunega, 2020). In those countries in which privatisation decisions were devolved to the local level (Latvia, Poland and the Czech Republic^{vi}) the state had retained the right of rent controls (Hegedüs & Tosics, 1998). This form of rent regulation represented the distribution of a hidden economic subsidy provided by governments to prevent the worst effects of wage differentials, which increased during the economic transformation after 1989 (Lux & Sunega, 2020). Lux, Sunega and Katrňák (2013) showed that for a certain period of time inequalities in housing were more weakly connected to social stratification than what the classic social stratification literature would predict. But neither privatisation nor rent regulation could continue for ever. The efforts to maintain social and political stability were moreover not without their undesirable effects. One such effect is the marginal share of rental housing that exists and the other is the growing housing affordability problem for poorer citizens, who are unable to buy a standard housing unit in market conditions (Lux, Sunega & Katrňák, 2013). Both effects are visible in other Central European countries, too (Lux & Sunega, 2020). With a predominance of owner-occupied housing, the opinion that won out among the public was that ‘housing is the private affair of every citizen and family’. While in 2001, 44% of respondents agreed with this statement, by 2013 the figure had risen to 60% (*Housing Attitude Survey*, Lux, Samec & Gibas, 2015).^{vii} The large majority (83%) agreed with the statement ‘living in your own home is *always* better than being a tenant, but not everyone can afford their own home’ (Lux et al. 2017).

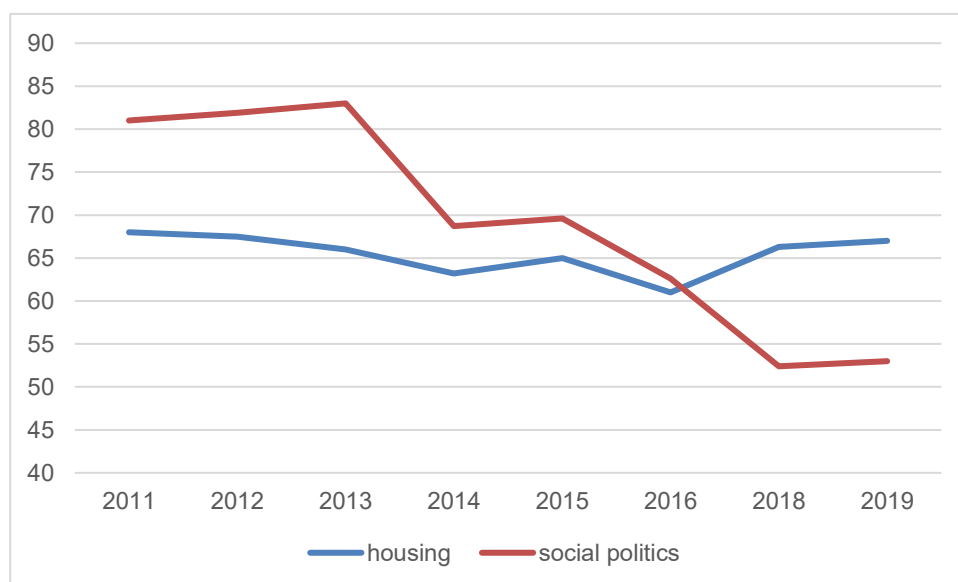


Fig. 1. Negative views on housing policy and the state’s social policy in general (2011-2019).

Source: Tuček (2020), Public Opinion Research Center (PORC)^{viii}, proportion of answers ‘very bad’ and ‘rather bad’.

Public opinion polls have long shown that the Czech state, according to its citizens, does not provide enough support for housing, but at the same time they believe that housing is not an issue that should be the primary focus of its social policy.^{ix} After the centre-right government that was in office around the turn of the first decade of the 21st century was replaced by governments in which the Social Democratic Party participated, the level of public satisfaction with social policy began to rise. However, even the generous policy of these governments did not alter the majority opinion of citizens that housing does not receive adequate support. Figure 1 shows that the share of people who believe that the level of support for housing is ‘rather bad’ or ‘very bad’ is stable. Conversely, the share of negative views on social policy on the whole has decreased over time. Other long-term research has shown that after fifteen years, in 2018 the public again viewed new housing as the least accessible

of the seven areas that the welfare state is concerned with (Tuček, 2019).

Methods

The main method used here is an analysis of opinion trends, which in the context of the changing situation in society repeatedly captured in public opinion surveys. It looks specifically at the trend in the Czech public's attitudes towards different areas that the welfare state is concerned with. This was captured in a periodical survey carried out by the Public Opinion Research Centrum (PORC) in 2010, 2012, 2016, and 2018 (see Tuček 2018).^x Because of the COVID-19 pandemic in the autumn of 2020, the Public Opinion Research Centre interrupted the work of conducting its periodical survey with its own interviewer network.^{xi} However, for the purpose of this study and with the support of Czech Science Foundation data for 2020 were collected by the FOCUS agency at the end of 2020. In all these cases the surveys work with quota samples ranging in size from 1017 to 1053 respondents. The surveys cover the period between 2010 and 2020 at two-year intervals, except for the year 2014 (indicated in figure 2 by the red columns). Respondents were given the following specific task: 'Sort the following areas of social policy according to you how important are to be financed from the state budget.' The list of funding priorities evaluated included the following:

- pensions, old-age security
- sickness and accident benefits
- physical and mental disability assistance
- health care
- family benefits (child benefits, parental allowance)
- unemployment benefits, unemployment security
- guaranteed minimum income, emergency social assistance
- employment policy – assistance obtaining employment after losing a job
- housing support
- support for education and training

The priorities that respondents ranked are very similar to the areas of welfare state expenditures. The item of 'housing support', which is important for this analysis, is not specified further; there is no indication as to whether the priority should be 'social housing' or housing for those who cannot obtain housing on their own.^{xii} A span of ten years is not a very long period of time in which to assess long-term changes in support for the state's social policy priorities. Nevertheless, even this length of time can shed a light on how attitudes that are relatively stable over time vary according to changes in the situational context (cf. Linek, Petrúšek, 2020). By asking respondents to rank policies on a scale of 1, the most important, to 10, the least, it is possible to capture even the smallest changes in one or two priorities. A higher evaluation of the importance of one area receiving financial support must be reflected in a lower evaluation of one or more other areas. This sensitivity to change is well-suited to detecting a period effect, which in this case are the effects of the economic recession, the crisis in urban housing affordability, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

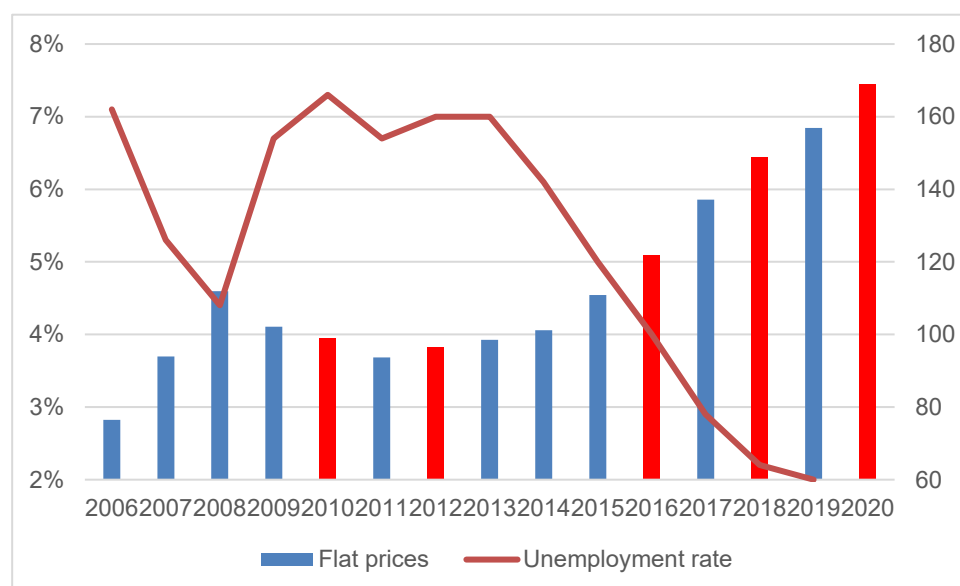


Fig. 2. Development of housing price index and the general unemployment rate

Source: Czech Statistical Office. Unemployment data from the Labour Force Survey; Housing Offer Price Indices (4th quartile; mean₂₀₁₀ = 100)^{xiii}

The three critical periods whose impacts are examined here are represented by the following indicators. The unemployment rate and especially its return to a level of around seven percent in 2009-2013 is an indicator of the duration and the intensity of the economic depression that followed from the global financial crisis. The manifestations of the urban housing affordability crisis in the Czech Republic are indicated by the trend in the housing price index based on data from the Czech Statistical Office. The reference year is 2010 (100 in Figure 2). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic should manifest themselves in the year 2020.

We can see in the figure the inversive character of the effects of the two earlier crises. With the economic revival in the first decade of the new millennium, housing prices rose until they peaked in 2008. During the economic crisis they decreased and then stagnated for several years. A new rise in prices connected with the urban housing affordability crisis was accompanied by a declining unemployment rate, indicating growth in the economy. Despite the limited number of years of measurements, there is a very strong negative correlation between these two indicators. The Pearson correlation coefficient for 14 cases (2006-2019) equals -0.93. One of the main analytical questions is how much the effects of the two earlier crises have overlapped with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As well as the trends over time, the analysis also looked at the differences in the evaluation of priorities by three age cohorts, defined roughly to correspond to three different stages in the life cycle: 1) early adulthood, ending at the point at which people form their own household and often also their own nuclear family (up to age 35); 2) the main period of economic activity (ages 35 to 65); and 3) the period in life as a senior citizen, associated with retirement from work (over the age of 65).

Results

The trend in the evaluations of ten welfare-state policy areas between 2010 and 2020 is summed up in Figure 3.^{xiv} The rankings of individual items and the changes in the evaluations over time present a range of findings. The ranking of priorities was clearest and the gaps between them were the most distinct in the survey conducted in 2010 and partly also in 2016. All three period effects influenced the opinions of respondents through local expressions of the crises, and this influence manifested itself in the years 2012, 2018, and 2020.

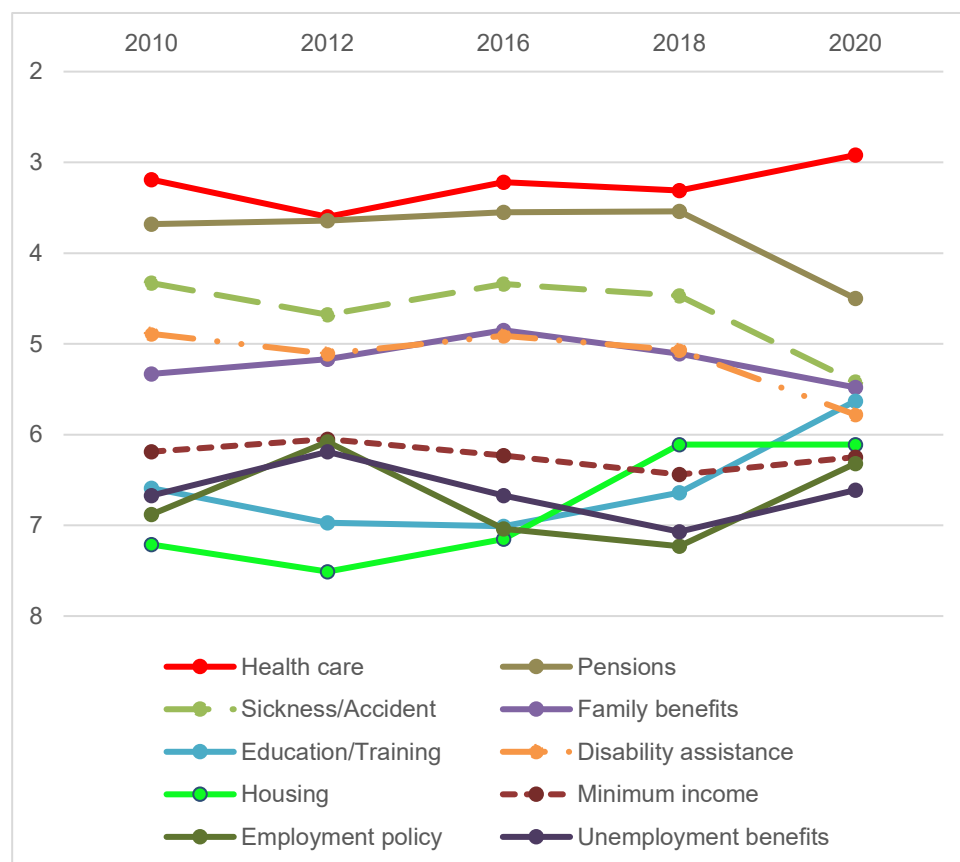


Fig. 3. Priorities of different welfare state policies (2010-2020)

Source: Tuček (2018), Public Opinion Research Center (PORC), Our Society; FOCUS Agency (2020), mean rating.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not yet reversed the rise in housing prices and did not in 2020 yet have any pronounced effect on the unemployment rate. However, it has had the biggest impact so far on how citizens evaluate the state's priority social policies. The pandemic has been largely responsible for making the right side of Figure 3 look like a game of Mikado. At the end of the first year of the pandemic, with the exception of the

priorities clearly deemed more important, the evaluation of other policy areas became unusually even. Eight out of the ten items form two clusters, the edges of which border on the statistical significance of the differences in averages.^{xv}

Between 2018 and 2020 there were statistically significant shifts in the average evaluation in the case of eight items. The exceptions to this were *housing support* and the *subsistence minimum*. The highest ranking of all to date went to *health care*. Two out of every five respondents ranked health care first, and it at worst ranked in second place among 60% of respondents. Despite the significant decline in the evaluation of *pensions*, it held on to its position in second place overall, as items in the wider centre of the figure were also ranked lower than in previous surveys.^{xvi} *Providing sickness and disability benefits* always had been in third place since 2010. Nine months of a pandemic managed to push this item into a cluster of similarly ranked items: *family benefits* and *assistance in the case of physical and mental disabilities*. The foursome is completed by *support for education and training*, which saw the biggest rise in rankings of all.

The shifts in views are not too surprising when we consider how the pandemic has impacted the lives and households of the Czech population. Unlike the pandemic, the consequences of the global financial crisis and urban housing affordability crisis did not visibly influence people's evaluations and ranking of *health care* and *pensions*. Their biggest influence was on the ranking of priorities on the lower end of the scale. The economic depression caused by the global financial crisis was in the Czech Republic accompanied by a period of higher unemployment that lasted several years. It is thus no surprise that in 2012 there was a slight rise in the ranking of the priority of *funding an active employment policy* and *unemployment benefits*. This priority and a *guaranteed minimum income* together formed a cluster of items with a very similar average evaluation, though they broke apart again as the economic crisis waned. A similar development occurred again in 2020 and it can be understood as the reaction of respondents to many workplaces being repeatedly closed during lockdown, which in both an immediate and long-term perspective has put jobs at risk, especially in the sectors of retail and services.

In 2018 there was an unusually large jump in *support for housing* compared to the previous surveys as it leapt from the bottom into sixth place in ranking (see Tuček, 2018). In the biggest cities the problem of worsening housing affordability became an important issue in the pre-election campaign and in political party negotiations after the local elections in 2018 (Ryšavý, Sedláková, 2021). The average ranking of *housing support* remained unchanged in 2020. Shifts in the importance of health care, education, and employment thus occurred at the expense of other items.

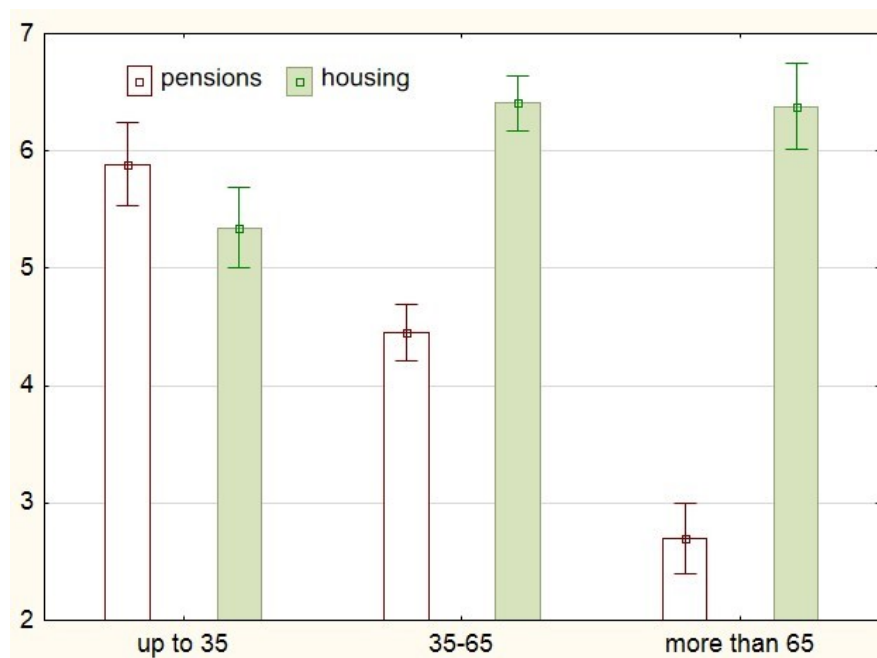


Fig. 4. Means ranking of the priority assigned to *pensions* and *housing support* by age cohorts in 2020 (99% confidence intervals)

Sources: FOCUS Agency (2020), author calculation.

In an analysis of the set of questions relating to the welfare state, Linek and Petrušek (2020) classed *health care* and *funding pensions* among the universal priorities of the welfare state because of the nature and the repeatedly high public support for these areas. Evidence of this support is the overall position of these two items in the ranking of priorities. However, according to mentioned authors, a large part of the effect of age is caused by the important life transition from the stage of economic activity into the stage of economic inactivity. The ranking of priorities appears in a different light when we look at it in relation to three age groups separately: for

those aged 18-35, aged 36-65, and the senior segment of the population.^{xvii}

The differences between age groups in the prioritisation of *funding for pensions* are consistently found to be highly statistically significant (See Figure 4 for the year 2020). The middle age group ranks its importance on average one position lower than the oldest population does, and the youngest respondents rank it two positions – and sometimes even more – lower than the oldest group does.^{xviii} But for some minor exceptions, we do not see differences like this in the case of *health care*. Other differences can be found for items that Linek and Petrúšek (2020) class as selective services of the welfare state. The oldest generation usually places less importance on *unemployment benefits* and *employment policy* – the area of the welfare state that focuses on the part of the population that is expected to be engaged in economic activity. Stable and more pronounced differences can be observed in *support for housing*, which is significantly more often prioritised by the youngest age group (Figure 4).^{xix}

The differences are found also with respect to the level and direction of the correlations between the rankings of priorities. In particular, *assistance for the physically and mentally disabled* and to a lesser degree also *old-age security* correlate negatively with *support for housing*^{xx} and – again to a lesser degree – with *support for employment policy*.^{xxi} There is a relatively larger negative correlation between *support for education and training* and *support for unemployment* also.^{xxii} In the majority of cases the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 ‘erased’ some of the strength of these ties.^{xxiii}

Finally, looking briefly at the less than one-quarter of respondents who in December 2020 ranked *support for housing* among the three main priorities of the welfare state, we find that this involved 35% of respondents in the youngest age group, 19% of those in the middle age group, and 16% of respondents in the group of people aged 65 and over. What is surprising is that in the youngest age group this ranking was assigned both by respondents who were not yet homeowners and by their more fortunate peers who were already living in their own home. While trying to explain this difference, however, we run up against the constraints on making generalisations from the findings based on the given number of respondents.

Discussion

In this discussion section we will contrast the limitations of the analysis with its results. The sources of the data do not enable an international comparison. The effects of extraordinary periods on the ranking of welfare-state priorities can thus only be demonstrated within the frame a single nation-state. Questions on assessing the scope of the welfare state also time from time appear in international studies like the ISSP, but given the limited frequency with which the particular block of questions in this survey is repeated they are not able to capture period effects very well (Linek & Petrúšek, 2020). By contrast, using a research instrument that asks respondents to rank the priorities for funding within the frame of the state’s social policy proved to be well-suited to examining the effects of three global crises on these priorities.

The results from the comparison of the effects of the mentioned crises appear to be persuasive. The pandemic has affected the opinions and attitudes of people in much more complex ways and to a greater extent than the economic recession following the global financial crisis and the more narrowly focused crisis in urban housing affordability. Not surprisingly, there has been an increase in the emphasis on the provision of *health care* and *support for training and education*. Items that saw their importance as priorities rise during the economic recession also rose in importance. *Support for an active employment policy* and *unemployment security* grew in importance as the situation in the labour market deteriorated, but without the characteristics that usually accompany this (in the form of a rising unemployment rate). The higher average ranking of these items had to be offset by a decrease in the priority assigned to other areas. The decreases mainly affected *old-age security*, *sickness and accident benefits* and *physical and mental disability assistance*. These are items that in the past mimicked the ranking of the importance assigned to *health care*, albeit at a statistically significant level behind health care itself. The majority of items moved towards a much more equal average ranking. All in all they drew closer to the ranking assigned to services that are primarily used by economically inactive members of the population that are aimed at people outside productive age.

The pandemic managed to overlap with the effect of the urban housing affordability crisis that manifested itself as a much higher ranking given in 2018 to the importance of *support for housing*. The issue of housing did not retreat into the background and almost one-quarter of respondents ranked it among the three most important priorities. Unsurprisingly, it was ranked this way most by the youngest age groups, which contain the welfare state’s main payers. The general way in which the item of *support for housing policy* was formulated proved to be an advantage. Rather than being associated with social status, which it would be if the question had been to rank *social housing*, it is in this case associated more with stages in the life cycle. Moreover, defining housing policy as concerned with ‘housing for those who are unable to obtain housing on their own’ is, in the midst of a housing affordability crisis, no longer such a narrow issue. That the meaning of homeownership has become somewhat ambiguous during the COVID-19 pandemic is evident from the fact that how young people ranked the importance of state support for housing was not determined by whether or not they owned the home or flat they

live in. For some of them, support for housing may be a path to fulfilling the homeownership norm. For others it is may be a way of becoming more independent from ambivalent intergenerational ties, which are not just about assistance and solidarity (cf. Souralová & Žáková, 2020).

Another and no less important limitation of the study is that the samples do not usually include socially excluded individuals (cf. Linek & Petrůšek, 2020). The approach used here thus cannot be a substitute for a detailed analysis of the intersecting interests and resulting choice of priorities of welfare-state policies. The group of extremely at-risk households as a result of the pandemic will include those who are not covered by the existing services of the welfare state or dealing with handicaps in the labour market, housing quality, health, access to online education for their children, and so forth.

Conclusion

This article analysed public opinion surveys. However, the formulation of policy implications is expected in the conclusion. Before the start of the second wave of the pandemic in the autumn of 2020 we were able to witness what it looks like when politicians let themselves be guided by public opinion polls and pre-election simulations when trying to 'solve a crisis'. The relationship between public opinion and policy is not one-sided or straightforward (cf. Kyselá, 2018). The policy recommendations will be similarly indirect or even metaphorical.

The study analysed 'soft data' from repeatedly fielded public opinion surveys. The first recommendation is aimed at a different type of data. The 2021 Population and Housing Census that is to be launched at the end of March can be expected to provide data that will be useful for mapping the places where the pandemic had the biggest impact. In connection with the analysis of that kind of information it is possible to assess the welfare-state policies that have been in place to now and propose modifications to them or their replacement for the post-pandemic period. This depends on the speed at which the data will be available and the quality and accessibility of the data.

In this study special attention was devoted to housing. The most recent state interventions in housing (e.g. a six-month credit moratorium on mortgage repayments; abolishing the real estate acquisition tax) are not in the form of a consistent policy. They reflect the normative assumption that, with some exceptions, the state should not get involved in housing. The state cannot use housing policy as a cushion to absorb the undesirable effects of the economic transformation to the extent that it did after 1989. The undesirable side effects of those policies are still being dealt with today (Lux & Sunega 2020). The first year of the pandemic coincided with the end of the ten-year term in which the *Housing Plan to the Year 2020* (KPMG, 2011) and the *Plan to Prevent and Resolve Homelessness in the Czech Republic to 2020* (Ministry of regional development, 2013) were in effect. In an election year it is impossible to expect miracles in the form of new legislation being adopted, such as the long-awaited legislation on social housing.^{xxiv} However, electoral parties seeking support from voters can provide an indication of the direction in which housing policy (among other things) should, in their view, proceed. The work of expert teams engaged in the task of putting together electoral programmes can then be translated into the preparation of new policy materials. The pandemic and its effects could have either a decelerating or an accelerating effect on this. It is impossible to rely so easily on past trends and patterns of development. The year 2020 could in many respects be a turning point.

The provision of welfare-state services and the targeting of these surveys can play a significant role in pre-election campaigns. Even the findings of this study can easily be abused in debates about who is or is not entitled to what. For example, the formerly undifferentiated nature of housing support lives on in the absence of any sustainable and effective social housing policy (Lux & Sunega 2020). The growing calls for housing support from the ranks of the young generation could introduce a new central tension point into the situation.

The pandemic has led to a surge in research, and not just in the fields of medicine and epidemiology. The results of such research often reach the public with some delay. Moreover, they are often not aimed at anyone outside a narrow circle of experts. An irreplaceable role is played by 'popularisers', who are able to 'translate' the results of research into the language of the lay public. Time will show which studies produced new findings and which were just part of the boom in such work. Yet it is important to invest in science and research – not just the natural sciences, medicine, and technology, but also the humanities and social sciences. Government can invest in applied research that is able to update and build on existing knowledge in response to a specific commission for information.^{xxv} We can look for some inspiration from calls not to practise exclusion against members of society, e.g. seniors, who have been impacted by the pandemic and correspondingly adapt the way we talk about these issues in the public sphere.^{xxvi} Support for practically oriented research should not be at the expense of basic research, which can devote space to subjects that have hitherto been on the margins of interest in this country and have been mentioned in connection with the pandemic crisis. One example could be the discussion of and research of a universal basic income (Mertl, 2020; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020).

The simile used here to describe the changes in how people rank the priorities for funding from the welfare state is a likening of them to a Mikado game, a game of pick-up sticks named for the highest-scoring stick. This stick can be used as a pick-up aid. The Mikado or high-scoring stick in the welfare state during the COVID-19

pandemic is the provision of health care. However, in the game the score is also based on points earned from less valuable sticks. What the players need is patience, the ability to look at the situation from different angles, and, sometimes, a willingness to take risks. How to translate this from metaphorical speech is up to everyone who enters the game.

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ⁱ We shall thus leave aside the crises that tend to be referred to as 'European', such as the European debt crisis, the European migration crisis, etc.

ⁱⁱ It is no surprise that the connection between housing and the pandemic has received attention from international journals such as the *International Journal of Housing Policy* (see e.g. Rogers & Power, 2020; Power, Rogers & Kadi, 2020) and the *International Journal of Urban Sciences* (Galster & Lee, 2021).

ⁱⁱⁱ See also the study on the structure of government expenditures on social protection in EU Member States (Halásková, 2018).

^{iv} Linek and Petrušek (2020) analysed the results of three surveys conducted as part of the *International Social Survey Program* (ISSP) that focused on the role of government (1996, 2006, 2016). They were interested in the items: 'On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to provide -decent housing for those who can't afford it; - provision of a decent standard of living for the unemployed etc.' See more at <https://www.gesis.org/en/issp/home>.

^v The relationship is demonstrated on data from seven *European Social Surveys* (ESS) fielded in 2002-2016 (<https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>), and more precisely, on the basis of agreement or disagreement with the statement 'The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels'. The more frequent repetition of the ESS means it can more easily capture the effect of the period marked by the economic recession, etc.

^{vi} The transfer of (public) housing to the municipalities was the second-largest privatisation method after the large-scale privatisation programme in the Czech Republic (Turnovec, 2009). According to Sýkora (2003) this massive transfer included nearly one quarter of the country's dwelling stock. In the majority of municipalities in the Czech Republic rent regulations were lifted in 2010. In response to the economic crisis, however, rent regulations were extended and remained in effect in regional centres/cities and in some towns around Prague until 2012 (Hegedüs, Lux & Sunega, 2011).

^{vii} Also, the prevailing opinion among local politicians in early 1990s was that housing should be in private hands (Ryšavý & Šaradin, 2011). Nearly three decades later, the mayors of Czech municipalities and their counterparts in most other European countries largely agreed that 'the market is the best way to attend to housing needs' (Magnier et al. 2018).

^{viii} Question ES.40: 'In your opinion are the following areas adequately provided for in the Czech Republic?' *Housing and social policy in general* were selected from a wider list of items.

^{ix} Until the early 2000s the public rated the ability to access new housing very negatively (Večerník, 2009; Tuček, 2020).

^x The Public Opinion Research Centre (PORC) and Czech Social Science Data Archive where data files from these surveys are deposited are parts of Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences. See list of datasets at the end of the article.

^{xi} Two special surveys in November and December 2020 did not include the question on ranking the social policy priorities of the state.

^{xii} In this it differs from the questions analysed by Linek and Petrušek (2020).

- ^{xiii} Source of data on unemployment: <https://vdb.czso.cz/vdbvo2/faces/en/index.jsf?page=vystup-> (accessed 2021 January 26th). Source of data on housing offer price indices: https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/ceny_bytu (accessed 2021 January 26).
- ^{xiv} The confidence interval of these averages is in the range of +/- 0.5 in the case of 99% probability and in the range of +/- 0.3 degrees of evaluation in the case of 95% probability.
- ^{xv} This is also apparent in the paired correlations of the evaluations of individual items. The ranking of priorities itself leads to a predominance of negative correlations. Positive correlations are rare, and the strength of them is not greater than a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.25. These correlations can be found between *physical and mental disability assistance* on the one hand and *old-age security* and *sickness and accident benefits* on the other hand. It is also found to a lesser degree between the items *unemployment benefits* and *employment policy*.
- ^{xvi} In 2012 and 2018 *financial support for pensions* was ranked on the same level as *health care*. In 2020 it was ranked either first or second by 35% of respondents.
- ^{xvii} Linek and Petrušek (2020) refer work with age limits of 30 and 60, five years younger than the ones here.
- ^{xviii} The rankings of the item *physical and mental disability assistance* usually show statistically significance differences between the youngest and the oldest age groups.
- ^{xix} To a lesser degree this also applies to *training and education*.
- ^{xx} The Pearson correlation coefficients in different years and combinations range between -0.4 and -0.2.
- ^{xxi} The coefficients range between -0.3 and -0.16.
- ^{xxii} The coefficients range between -0.36 and -0.26.
- ^{xxiii} Conversely, there is a negative correlation between the priorities of *health care* and *support in unemployment* (-0.28).
- ^{xxiv} *Social Housing Plan for the Czech Republic 2015-2025* (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015) is entering the second half of the term in which it is to be in effect. What kind of progress has been made in implementing the document's objectives? How are the networks of engaged organisations and public offices set up? Are these competing, in a tug of war with each other, or is it possible to see areas of cooperation?
- ^{xxv} See, e.g., Prokop (2019) as an example of a critical discussion on social housing and its connection to the difficulties of children at school. .
- ^{xxvi} For example, Galway calls against exclusion and ageism during the COVID-19 pandemic *Combating exclusions and ageism for older people during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Four Key Messages* (Walsh 2020) and there is a related Czech call to stop ageism and age discrimination that can be found here <https://www.ageismus.cz/>.