

# More Than Skepticism: Climate Change Discourses through an Economic Perspective in Czech Newspapers

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ABSTRACT	<p>Central and East European states are believed to endorse climate skepticism in both their public discourse and their population attitudes. In this paper we focus on the climate change discourse from an economic perspective in Czechia and show that the situation is more complex than expected. Specifically, the paper analyses Czech mainstream (<i>Ekonom, MF Dnes</i>) and alternative media (<i>Deník Referendum</i>) and concludes that the discursive strands of (1) adaptation and (2) climate change as an opportunity for business are prevalent in the media mainstream. In contrast, the strand of (3) mitigation appears more in the alternative media. We apply the concept of (de)politicization to analytically capture an important aspect contributing to the differentiation of these strands. The analyzed sample suggests that the Czech economic discourse on climate change is neither dominated by skepticism nor polarized along the axis of climate denial versus climate alarmism. Here lies our contribution: our findings challenge the expectation of the dominance of climate skepticism and denialism and position Czechia closer to the discursive landscape of established democracies, where media contribute to the pluralistic nature of the climate change debate.</p>
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## INTRODUCTION

The increased presence of environmental issues, but mostly climate change, has recently become visible in contemporary politics around the world (GRASSO – GIUGNI 2022; FISHER ET AL. 2022). According to some diagnoses, the issue of climate change has fueled the already present conflicts between the more liberal and the more nationalist political forces (E.G. HOOGHE – MARKS 2018; OTTENI – WEISSKIRCHER 2022; ROBERTS 2022). Climate change-related issues have become important for both environmentally minded and anti-environmentally oriented actors, leading to the politicization (and potential polarization) of the issue in some West European countries. They are defined by the presence of politically differentiated discourses on climate change (STEVENSON – DRYZEK 2012; FISHER ET AL. 2022; SVOZIL ET AL. 2025).

In contrast to the West European situation, the literature on Central and East European (CEE) countries points out the skeptical position as the point of a potentially depoliticizing convergence of climate change discourses. Given the prevalence of climate skepticism in Czechia (E.G. ČERMÁK – PATOČKOVÁ 2020; OCELÍK 2022; HRUBEŠ – CÍSAŘ 2024), which is reflected also in quantitative data (E.G. CCPI 2023), we may expect a similar type of convergence here. Therefore, the country forms an ideal case for a study of a media discourse on climate change in relation to the problem of its (de)politicization. This paper is a contribution to the analyses of climate change discourses with an emphasis on (de)politicization as a useful analytical tool.

More generally, this paper extends the field of climate change discourse analysis focused on Central and Eastern Europe. Although there have been several contributions mapping the media coverage of climate change in various contexts (E.G. CARVALHO 2007; BILLETT 2010; DOULTON – BROWN 2009; DIRIKX – GELDERS 2010; KUNELIUS ET AL. 2016; PAINTER 2013; FISHER ET AL. 2022; SVOZIL ET AL. 2025), the scholarship focuses mostly on Western Europe (SCHÄFER – SCHLICHTING 2014: 149; PEARCE ET AL. 2015: 615). Very few analyses of this sort focus on CEE countries, for a similar argument (SEE ALSO OCELÍK 2022), which, however, form a particularly interesting research subject due to their heavy industry dependency and their long history of pro-industrial discourses – on Poland (SEE MARCINKIEWICZ – TOSUN 2015; KUNDZEWICZ ET AL. 2017), specifically on the coverage of coal mining in Czechia (LEHOTSKÝ ET AL. 2019), on Czech climate skepticism (OCELÍK 2022; ČERMÁK ET AL. 2023), some information on such subjects is also included (BRULLE ET AL. 2024).

An important difference between the countries of Western Europe and CEE has been detected on the level of discourse/policy preferences. While Fisher et al. (2022) find evidence of politicization of the issue of climate change in West European countries on the level of political attitudes and support for political parties, they do not find a clear pattern of this in CEE. Regarding climate change discourses in CEE, the present research has pointed out their depoliticization, specifically their convergence across different political camps “*in their rejection of a more ambitious climate policy*” (MARCINKIEWICZ – TOSUN 2015: 15), or in other words, their convergence on the position of climate skepticism variously defined (VIDOMUS 2013, 2018; KUNDZEWICZ ET AL. 2017; BRULLE ET AL. 2024).

In the present paper we focus on Czech media as a particularly important case among the states in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly paying attention to economic issues in several selected Czech newspapers (see below) due to the importance of the economic framing of climate change-related problems and arguments in the country (SEE, E.G., LEHOTSKÝ ET AL. 2019; OCELÍK 2022; HRUBEŠ – CÍSAŘ 2024). There are three commonly discussed reasons for the prevalence of economic frames in Czechia. First, it is partly because there are general differences between CEE and Western Europe due to the late capitalist transformation in CEE, which began only after 1989 (STARK – BRUSZT 1998). Second, the discursive importance of the economy in the Czech case is underscored by the fact that from the beginning of the modern era, the Czech lands have been characterized by their concentration of energy-intensive industrial production. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Czech lands accounted for more than 2% of all global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (they emit less than 0.25% today). Their per capita CO<sub>2</sub> emissions peaked in 1978 at 18.39 tonnes, and in the twenty-first century, they have oscillated between 12.5 and 8.72 tonnes (RITCHIE – ROSER 2025; HRUBEŠ – CÍSAŘ 2024). As a result, Czechia belongs among the countries with the highest per capita pollution production in Europe. It is a country heavily dependent on and displaying preferences for fossil fuel energy, similarly to other CEE countries such as Poland (OTTO – GUGUSHVILI 2020; BRULLE ET AL. 2024). And the third reason is that the skeptical position has been articulated by the political elite in an early phase of and in direct relation to the transformation of the economy (VIDOMUS 2013, 2018; HRUBEŠ – CÍSAŘ 2024).

We intend to understand how economic issues relate to the debate on climate change in Czechia. In other words, we focus on the discourse at the intersection of the climate change articulation and the existing economic perspectives on environmental issues. Our research questions are thus: How is the entanglement of climate change and economic frames articulated in Czech media discourses? Do the Czech discourses copy the variety of discourses visible in West European countries? Or does the Czech climate change discourse converge on a common skeptical position, as suggested by previous research on some CEE countries?

In order to engage with these questions, we inductively analyze a set of selected Czech media and later discuss the connection between climate change, the economy and their interpretation. The analysis presented in this paper fits into a subfield of discourse analyses focused on the media communication of climate change, for metaanalyses (SEE WANG – HUAN 2025; PEARCE ET AL. 2015). When using economy-related frames, these analyses focus on the role of (not only) the neoliberal economic discourse in the climate change reporting (CARVALHO 2007; KOTYKO 2012; NERLICH 2012).

Our main goal is to engage in an inductive categorization of discursive strands within the Czech media's economic climate change discourse in the broadest sense. Our findings suggest that there are several discursive strands present in the media under study (we differentiate the “adaptation discourse”, the “mitigation discourse”, “the opportunity for business discourse”, and the “skeptical discourse”), and we apply the concept of (de) politicization to analytically capture an important aspect that contributes to the differentiation of these strands. Our results show that the situation of Czechia does not follow the East-West divide but rather mirrors the situation identified in the established democracies.

The article is organized in the following way: the first section offers a conceptual framework using the issue of (de)politicization of climate change as a theoretical anchor for our subsequent analysis. The second section specifies the case selection, providing contextual information on the analyzed country case, and then distinguishes between mainstream and alternative media to subsequently present our methodology, including the specification of the newspapers covered in our analysis. Further, the paper presents the results of the analysis of the discourses at the

intersection of economic and climate change issues, and it concludes with a discussion of them in its last part, interpreting the results in the context of the extant literature.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: (DE)POLITICIZATION

The concept of depoliticization is not new to political science (SEE, E.G., RANCIÈRE 1999; CROUCH 2004). Traditionally, it represents climate change as a consensual issue that is not based on a public conflict, but is dealt with through top-down technocratic management of the issue (PEPERMANS – MAESELE 2014; SWYNGEDOUW 2011). However, the concept of (de)politicization can be used differently as its context changes. The original critique of depoliticization of environmental issues through technocratic management refers to (mostly leftist) challenges to depoliticization. These criticize the depoliticized climate change discourses which acknowledge the issue, but do not deal sufficiently with its political-economic roots. The voices of these critiques were not strong enough to bring the climate change issue higher on the agenda and for some time this issue was dealt with through state and international bureaucracy.

As bureaucracy increasingly addressed ecological issues, the populist right began to politicize the matter, integrating it into its broader strategy of challenging the post-political nature of democratic systems (CROUCH 2004). This perspective on (de)politicization explores the “populist moment” in climate change politics (MARQUARDT – LEDERER 2022), which is often associated with right-wing populism (FIORINO 2022; BOECHER ET AL. 2022). Depoliticization – understood as an attempt to suppress conflicting issues (SEE WILSON – SWYNGEDOUW 2014) – thus can lead to a (“leftist”) critique that the given issue is excluded from politics and should be included in it because that would be democratic and the related policy measure would be much more substantial due to the gravity of the issue (i.e., its political-economic and systemic gravity). However, it can also lead to a (“rightist”) critique that the issue is excluded from politics and should be included in it because that would be democratic, but the related policy measure should be minimized, as the problem is not serious and the proposed solutions, inter alia, harm our competitiveness.

The concept of (de)politicization is also split in terms of the position of climate denial. On the one hand, climate skepticism could be understood as an extreme manifestation of the depoliticizing approach as one side of the (potential) conflict explicitly tries to turn climate change into a non-issue. On the other hand, especially epistemic skepticism (CAPSTICK – PIDGEON 2014; MIKEŠOVÁ 2023) could be understood as a political fight in the scientific field and thereby as a politicizing strategy. As climate change becomes a political issue during the populist moment, conservative actors such as the leader of Reform UK Nigel Farage demand more moderate mitigation strategies. In this context epistemic skepticism<sup>1</sup> becomes a fringe position, the discourse of delay becomes the new denialism (E.G. SHUE 2023; LAMB ET AL. 2020), and response skepticism<sup>1</sup> gains prominence (CAPSTICK – PIDGEON 2014).

A recent Czech analysis distinguishes between climate fatalism and administrative-expert rationality (ČADA 2023), both of which could be perceived as forms of climate change depoliticization. On the one hand there is a resignation about engaging the issue, which is similar to response skepticism, and the other option is a non-political technocratic engagement of it. Our analysis offers similar results in relation to the climate change discourse.

Depoliticization is here conceptualized as an attempt to suppress conflicting issues by closing down debates through technocratization and ignorance (SEE MARQUARDT – LEDERER 2022: 738; WILSON – SWYNGEDOUW 2014). On the one hand the debate can be closed off by accepting climate change as a matter of fact instead of a matter of concern (LATOUR 2004); on the other hand, the root causes may remain unaddressed despite an attempt to offer a solution, and thereby the underlying political conflict is ignored (MARQUARDT – LEDERER 2022). Still, our aim is not to apply a conceptualization of depoliticization in a strict manner. The (de)politicization duality is suitable as a background for an inductive analysis that we conduct. The aim of this paper is not to distinguish between politicizing and depoliticizing discourses of climate change, but to conduct an inductive analysis out of which particular discourse strands emerge (the “adaptation discourse”, the “mitigation discourse” and “the opportunity for business discourse”) and employ the concept of (de)politicization as a suitable tool to capture an important element that contributes to the differentiation of these strands. Our categorization better reflects the data than other possible forms of categorization such

as the division of the main ideological responses to climate change into “neoliberal technocentrism” and “radical ecocentrism” as two ends of the decision-making spectrum (BAILEY – WILSON 2009), while keeping the (de)politicization concept as a useful analytical tool.

## CASE SELECTION, DATA CREATION, AND THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

As specified in the introduction, the extant literature on CEE countries points out the skeptical position as the point of a potentially depoliticizing convergence of climate change discourses in the region. Based on the available findings, we consider Czechia to be a promising candidate for “the most-likely case” (GEORGE – BENNETT 2005: 121–123). “The most likely case” refers to a case that should conform to the available literature-based expectation, in our case to the climate change skeptical position of CEE countries. Given the well-documented history of the prevalence of climate skepticism in Czechia (E.G. VIDOMUS 2013, 2018; ČERMÁK – PATOČKOVÁ 2020; HRUBEŠ – CÍSAŘ 2024), which is reflected also by the available quantitative indicators (E.G. CCPI 2023), one may expect a similar type of prevalent skeptical position in the present case too.

The first Prime Minister of the independent Czech Republic (1992–1998) and its second president (2003–2013) Václav Klaus has been an active critic of environmentalism and a climate skeptic since the very beginning of the 1990s. He directly linked the issue of climate change to the economy by stressing the supposed danger of the adaptation and mitigation measures to what he understands as the virtues of the free market (Reisigl – Wodak 2009). Despite his waning fame and the general rise of the new denialism through the delay discourse (E.G. SHUE 2023), the presence of such a strong skeptical figure from the early years of the environmental debate makes Czechia a special case worth particular attention (SEE ALSO OCELÍK 2022; PRUSHANKIN 2023). In addition, during the past several years Czechia was a dissenting voice in the European environmental policy, deemphasizing the importance of climate change. The former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš at first refused and only later, after some concessions, agreed to sign the agreement on carbon neutrality in the EU. Also the current center-right government and its Prime Minister Petr Fiala keep up this lukewarm position towards any more ambitious mitigation measure (SEE, E.G., HRUBEŠ – CÍSAŘ 2024).

Climate change enters the media landscape as a divisive issue and creates an expectation of a division between ideologically differentiated media. The division of the media into a mainstream and an alternative offers an analytical tool that may be useful for selecting substantially different media outlets. An alternative can be defined in various ways and at various levels, including a differentiation in terms of producers, content, organizational structures or a systemic position (RAUCH 2016: 757). The crucial elements of differentiation in our case are producers and content, and these differences lead to an expectation of different representations of climate change and economic issues in the mainstream and the alternative. We complement the two variables with that of organizational structures, but only as an auxiliary element of differentiation due to its dubious methodological value. We do not apply the mainstream/alternative dichotomy as a universal one, but as a useful one, as it is based on the selected elements for the Czech case.

Alternative media have been traditionally associated with writers and editors with an alternative, most often non-professional background (HOLT ET AL. 2019: 863). This background, especially in the case of the editors, can include a history of environmental activism. Alternative media can also function as critical media in terms of content (FUCHS 2010). The everyday reading of the selected media for our analysis revealed clear differences in terms of their general content. This created an expectation of a difference in the two media's climate-economic discourses.

Finally, media ownership offers a potential aid in differentiating between the mainstream and the alternative, specifically for Czechia (SEE HÁJEK – CARPENTIER 2015). However, given the fact that there are media that are mainstream in terms of their content but with a non-corporate organizational structure, and there are also opposite cases, this factor can only be partially helpful in estimating the mainstream/alternative difference. Media owned by politicians, oligarchs or corporations may produce substantially different content than media owned by activists or media supported predominantly by their readers rather than financed (partially) through advertisement, but need not do so. Our aim is not to use the mainstream/alternative difference as an analytical framework that would enable us to produce analytical results regarding the differentiation between a mainstream and an alternative in general, but merely to use it as a tool which



makes it easier for us to choose media outlets that we expect to produce different discourses.

Since the aim of this paper is to focus on the intersection between economic and climate change discourses in Czechia, both mainstream (right and centrist) and alternative (left) media were selected for analysis. In the sample we included as the representatives of the mainstream media the non-tabloid, common populist daily *MF Dnes* (*MF Today*) and the weekly specialized publication *Ekonom* (*The Economist*). The alternative right is not included in the sample in order to focus the analysis on the part of the media landscape that has the potential to cast doubt on the dominant results from the existing literature and to engage in the debate with this literature (see the discussion section).

*MF Dnes*, established in 1990, is, since 2016, the second largest Czech newspaper (after a tabloid). During the data collection period, the paper was owned by Mafra a.s., which was part of the Agrofert Group – a company held in trust by former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. It is now owned by the Kaprain Group, which has close ties to the PPF Group, the owner of the Nova Group, a TV broadcaster with the second-largest market share. The political orientation of *MF Dnes* is centrist and its circulation in the time period under analysis was around 111 thousand copies daily (MEDIAGURU 2019).

The journal *Ekonom* specializes in economic and business issues since 1991. It is published by Economia, a publisher owned by the controversial Czech entrepreneur Zdeněk Bakala, who was accused of dubious business activities. The circulation of the weekly was almost 10 thousand copies in the period under analysis (MEDIAN AND STEM/MARK 2020).

Both *Ekonom* and *MF Dnes* match the main features of mainstream media (as opposed to alternative media) identified above. They both employ professional journalists rather than authors with a non-professional background. In terms of ownership, they are ([in]directly) owned by oligarchs, but it should be mentioned that whereas *MF Dnes* was acquired by an entrepreneur who was about to become a politician and who interfered with the running of his media, *Ekonom* is owned by an entrepreneur who does not have this kind of history. This is an important distinction within the mainstream but it need not have an impact on the economic climate

change discourse. More importantly, in terms of content, the more centrist approach of *MFDnes* and the more neoliberal perspective of *Ekonom* could influence the climate change discourses these two media produce.

Alternative media are represented in the study by *Deník Referendum* (*Daily Referendum*), which is published online since 2009. The Daily has more than 14,000 followers on Facebook (there is no better indicator available).<sup>2</sup> Regarding its content, this newspaper is considered to be left leaning. The access to it is free and the paper is supported by a foundation to which readers can contribute. Its editor-in-chief Jakub Patočka is a former environmental activist. Unlike *MFDnes* and *Ekonom*, *Deník Referendum* matches the basic features of an alternative medium.

These three media are not representative of the whole media landscape in Czechia, but in themselves represent relevant ideological strands in the Czech public discourse and therefore their inclusion offers a sufficiently broad view of the Czech economic climate change discourses.

Methodologically, the case study is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (FAIRCLOUGH 2003; WODAK – MEYER 2009; REISIGL – WODAK 2009) and its application to the study of environmental politics (HAJER – VERSTEEG 2005; HAJER 2002; STEVENSON – DRYZEK 2012). Hajer and Versteeg (2005: 175) define discourse as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and political phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices.” The approach of Critical Discourse Analysis focuses on analyzing texts as elements of social processes and emphasizes their ideological effects. The analysis should go beyond the level of the text itself and study the broader social context. We therefore include in our analysis not only the selected data corpus, but also a description of the specificity of Czechia as a part of the Central and Eastern Europe region as well as the specific positions of the particular media in it.

We have qualitatively analyzed the main frames of and perspectives on climate change in three different media, the implicit assumptions and ideologies behind the texts, the actors and identities related to the analysed discourses and their discursive strategies. For the analysis, a data corpus was constructed based on a search for the key words “klim” (climate, climate change) and “glob” (global warming) in three periods of time: the second

quarter of the year 2017, the first quarter of 2018 and the third quarter of the year 2019. The corpus was selected from all the articles on the *Deník Referendum* website and from the print versions of *MF Dnes* and *Ekonom*. The periods were chosen with the intent not to include any particular climate event and at the same time to have a sufficient amount of material for the analysis. The texts were filtered by adopting an economic perspective and relatedly searching for key words such as “economy,” “price,” “finances,” “capital,” “investment,” “business,” “work,” “subsidy,” “consumption,” “market,” “profit,” etc. The aim was to include all the possible economic issues that could be related to climate change. The resulting corpus of data consisted of 437 texts (see Table 1).

The texts were repeatedly read and coded in the initial phases of the analysis, and codes were created for specific aspects of climate change in the economic context. The analysis is a combination of deductive and inductive coding processes, and an abductive movement between theory and data (WODAK – MEYER 2009). The initial codes were deducted from theory and research questions, while new categories were created inductively when looking for patterns in the data during the coding phase (TAYLOR 2001) (see Table 2). Then the aspects and dimensions of the new categories were examined in a comparison between the alternative and mainstream media, but also with a larger social context and events outside the selected corpus.

TABLE 1: THE NUMBERS OF ANALYZED TEXTS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

	II/2017	I/2018	III/2019	Total
MF Dnes	41	56	118	215
Ekonom	4	0	11	15
Deník Referendum	52	32	123	207
Total	97	88	252	437

Source: Authors.

TABLE 2: CODEBOOK

Deductive codes (discourse analysis)	actors, attributions, arguments
Deductive codes (theory, research questions)	climate change, economy, work, costs and prices, economic growth, subsidy, taxes
Inductive codes (data)	52
	fossil industry, coal mines, nuclear power, energy investments, renewable sources of energy, low-carbon economy, adaptation, mitigation, state politics, opportunity for business, industry, climate deniers, mass media criticism, corporations

Source: Authors.

AT THE INTERSECTION OF ECONOMY AND CLIMATE CHANGE: AN ANALYSIS

We have found significant differences between the discourses of the selected mainstream and alternative media in terms of content, vocabulary, approaches to climate change, and their focus on specific issues and actors. We are aware that these are not opposite extremes and the differentiation into mainstream and alternative categories is problematic, as indicated by the academic discussion on this topic (E.G. RAUCH 2016). First, we focus on a general comparison analyzing the main themes, the actors, the normative positions and the language used by the selected media and then we analyze the main discourses that we found.

THE COMPARISON OF THE MAINSTREAM AND THE ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

There are important differences between the alternative *Deník Referendum* and the mainstream *MF Dnes* and *Ekonom* regarding the content, represented actors, vocabulary, focus and positions towards climate change. Overall, whereas *Deník Referendum* writes about climate issues in great detail, the mainstream media offered only scattered mentions of the topic, especially in the years 2017 and 2018. There is a lack of a systematic approach to the issue in the mainstream. In *Ekonom*, the issue of climate change is almost absent, especially in 2017 and 2018; the issue starts emerging in this newspaper in 2019 (11 texts), which we interpret as an instance of mainstream media taking note of climate change after the very hot summer in Central Europe in 2018, global climate protests and the beginning of a related public debate in the Czech media. In *MF Dnes*

one can read about “drought” rather than about climate change itself, as drought has become a tangible, apparent problem afflicting many Czech households, villages and companies. The discursive effect of putting the emphasis on drought is the exclusion of the term “climate change,” which is connected to the need to reduce emissions.<sup>3</sup> The issue of the energy industry itself, which is central for the alternative press, is almost totally absent in the context of climate change in the mainstream media.

The social actors represented in *Deník Referendum* included environmental activist organizations and individual climate activists who publish their views there as well as climate scientists and other academic sources accepted as authorities. Among the other actors that appear in the alternative discourses are critically evaluated state officials. The state is represented as failing regarding the issue of coal energy in the Czech context because it supposedly sides with the coal barons and industrial interests. By contrast *MFDnes* gives space to both the climate skeptic Václav Klaus, who labels his opponents as “alarmists,” and his critics. The newspaper informs about climate protests but not from the point of view of the protesters, who are described as “radical”.

*Deník Referendum* is critical toward the power of corporations, the growth of inequalities, economic growth, capitalism and neoliberalism in general. The main conflict in this daily is between the economy and the environment. In particular, the paper criticizes “the coal barons”, the Czech coal plant owners and the industrial lobby. The main climate-related themes in *Deník Referendum* included local climate activism, which was directed mostly against coal mines and coal power plants, and global actors such as the *Fridays for Future* movement, especially during the large, transnationally organized demonstrations such as the one in 2019. The texts discuss concrete solutions to climate change. For instance, they suggest that the Czech society should transform into a low carbon economy and use renewable sources of energy. Their main focus is on mitigation measures and reducing carbon emissions.

As will be explained below in detail, *MFDnes* focuses almost exclusively on adaptation and ignores mitigation activities. In *Ekonom*, climate change is framed only in the sense that the weather is getting warmer, which might even be positive in Czechia; a warmer climate is described as

advantageous for companies that can make money on the new situation that the climate change is bringing – for example, an Arctic without ice and new business travels. Overall, climate change is framed as an opportunity for business companies and corporations in *Ekonom*.

The vocabulary of the alternative discourse is full of strong expressions. When it deals with natural contexts of climate change, its vocabulary is more neutral, but when it comes to its social and economic consequences, the newspaper uses terms such as “a crisis”, “a catastrophe”, or “a way to hell”. On the other hand, the mainstream media use a rather soothing, calming language assuring us that Czechia will survive the climate change. They avoid using economic terms such as “capitalism,” “inequalities,” “neo-liberalism” and others in relation to climate change, while these notions are present in the alternative press.

While the alternative media are critical towards the corporations and the state, the mainstream media not only do not take a stand on climate change explicitly, but they do not inform about climate change consistently or thoroughly. A major difference between alternative and mainstream media lies in their focus on human action in relation to climate change; the former emphasizes and discusses mitigation strategies, while the latter focuses only on adaptation measures. The mainstream depoliticizes the issue as we cannot find conflictual positions, an open struggle or much criticism there, and both the climate skeptic and the climate alarmist voices are marginal in its reporting. Avoiding the issue of mitigation measures, this framing might be a discursive strategy for dealing with the issue by media owned indirectly by the prime minister’s corporation. In the next section the main economic discourses related to climate change will be analyzed in detail.

## DISCOURSES RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE

There are various ways in which climate change is represented and framed in the Czech media. The discourses can be distinguished in relation to the media organizations: mainstream versus alternative press, as indicated above. Furthermore, the discourses can be categorized as topic-related (REISIGL – WODAK 2009) according to the main issues represented, which in this case are the societal responses to climate change. The first

discourse found in the data is related to adapting to natural threats and disasters brought about by climate change and its economic consequences. The second discourse focuses on reducing carbon emissions and its costs. The third discourse sees climate change as an opportunity for business. There is also a fourth discourse, which is much more sparsely presented – the climate denial discourse. In the next section we will present these topic-related discourses in detail:

## 1. THE ADAPTATION DISCOURSE

The adaptation discourse is predominant in the mainstream *MF Dnes*, which used to be indirectly owned by the former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. It draws a picture of climate change as a new problem to which society has to adapt. The discursive strategy of this media source is to label and present climate change in the local Czech context only as a problem of “drought”, which might lead to avoiding more complex explanations of the global situation and the need for a broad systematic change.

The newspaper shows that the problem is taken seriously by ministries and regional and municipal administrations, and gives examples of how it is dealt with. Mostly, it is stories about cities’ adaptations to drought, torrential rains and floods, and building more resilient infrastructure. State ministries and municipalities invest in technological solutions such as rainwater harvesting, green roofs, planting trees and drought-resilient plants in cities, building ponds and water pipelines for localities threatened by drought, mowing grass less frequently, revitalization of wetlands, building anti-erosion barriers and so on in order to “relieve the overheated cities” and keep water in the landscape. The cities and municipalities cooperate with universities that conduct practice-oriented research and open new study programs addressing the new situation. The Ministry of Agriculture and most of the cities already have their plans for adaptation measures. The newspaper frames these activities in a depoliticized (i.e., nonconflictual) way as expensive but real solutions that are already in progress, and in its view, there is no need to question them. Citizens have to accept that the changed situation demands more public spending and higher investment into adaptation measures, even though it is going to cost billions of Czech crowns. This approach is also defended by the fact that the state receives large sums of money for climate change adaptation,



for instance, in the form of subsidies from the European Union: *“Currently, the state invests roughly twice as much in the restoration and planting of new alleys from its budget as it did in 2013, although only a part of it is earmarked for alleys around roads. A considerable amount of money also comes from European funds for the restoration of alleys – at the moment, projects worth CZK 80 million have been approved. Another 143 million should follow”* (MF DNES 5/2/2018: 3).<sup>4</sup>

The mainstream weekly *Ekonom*, in its few mentions of climate change, which resemble the situation in the British media in the early 2000s (GAVIN 2009), also positively evaluates the way the problem of drought is being dealt with because there are many governmental programs for keeping water in agricultural land, and new waterworks reservoirs are being planned. Climate change is understood by global economic leaders as the biggest risk that business will face, but Czechia will try to be a leader in new technologies. This discourse thus calms the readers by stating that even though globally climate change is a problem, locally we will be able to deal with it. The depoliticization here takes the form of ignorance of climate change as a global problem that requires a global political solution and also as an issue to be dealt with through technocratic means.

Sometimes climate change is even presented positively and a warmer climate is described as advantageous for agriculture businesses, for instance in cultivating grape vines. In an interview with a successful Moravian winemaker, he says: *“Due to climate changes, the grapes ripen better, which results in higher alcohol content in the wine. When I was buying old vineyards in 2003 and 2004, I used to give a price of around CZK 120,000 per hectare. These were all old vines to be grubbed up, while the estimated price of new vines is now around a million (CZK)”* (EKONOM 25/7/2019: 18). The depoliticization here is similar to the one based on epistemic skepticism. As climate change becomes advantageous to business, it disappears as a problem just as climate change ceases to be a problem if it does not exist.

Adopting a mixed position in relation to adaptation, *Deník Referendum* argues that there are already some adaptation measures realized in cities, such as planting trees, but moves to the mitigation discourse and claims that to prevent more drastic changes, Czechia has to adopt less visible and less politically acceptable measures – such as reducing carbon emissions. The easiest way to do this is to get energy from renewables (DR 21/8/2019).



This daily also claims that to keep water in the land, it must be done not only in ponds but in area-wide landscape adaptations. Furthermore, it makes a more radical argument which is never employed in the mainstream media, namely that the industrial agriculture that massively dries the landscape must stop to keep the agricultural land porous and fertile. The alternative press's discursive strategy is to critically point out the inadequacy and superficiality of current government solutions and highlight the profound systemic changes that need to be made.

In sum, the depoliticizing adaptation discourse is employed primarily by the mainstream newspaper *MF Dnes*, which hails the ongoing adaptation measures. *Ekonom* occasionally adopts a similar position, and the alternative media goes beyond this perspective into the mitigation discourse.

## 2. THE MITIGATION DISCOURSE

The focus on adaptation measures overshadows the very few mentions of mitigation of climate change in the mainstream media. The debate on carbon emissions is muted to a minimal level. With only one exception, the corporate press mentions mitigation only when discussing other countries. Investing into renewable sources of energy is happening somewhere else, for instance in China. *Ekonom* judges the Green New Deal in the USA negatively since it sees it as very expensive. *MF Dnes* notes the public debates in Germany on electro mobility, a change of diet, taxing meat and a ban on interstate flights with an ironical stance on reducing personal consumption in the name of climate: *"Germans, lovers of fried bratwurst and wide-cut schnitzels, may have to get used to a more modest diet. Instead of juicy steaks they might have a vegetable pancake, instead of pork belly a vegetarian hamburger? It's what saving the climate demands"* (MF Dnes 12/8/2019: title page) Such framing is based on an implicit assumption that highlights the absurd actions resulting from the exaggerated debate. This framing includes reassuring the readership that these actions are happening elsewhere and that our country will not resort to anything so bizarre. The depoliticization here is again spatial as Czechia is excluded from the debate.

The exception is the only critical voice in the mainstream media, which is represented in the Opinion section of *MF Dnes* by a former minister of environment and university professor, Bedřich Moldan, who

supported the student climate protests in 2019: “*Global climate change is much worse than we thought. And the Czech Republic is absolutely unprepared for it. It is not enough to build pools and ponds in the landscape; we have to push to reduce carbon emissions*” (MF Dnes 1/8/2019). He wants the Czech society to focus on the fundamental causes of climate change and mitigation measures against it. According to him, the Czech public is lulled into a false sense of security by the enumeration of actions such as the ponds, but such actions are absolutely marginal. Such criticism may have been allowed in a centrist medium because he is an exceptional voice with great political and academic authority and because he does not represent a leftist viewpoint. On the contrary he is a member of the center-right political party TOP 09.

A focus on the reduction of carbon emissions and its various aspects is the principal approach of the alternative media, represented by *Deník Referendum*. Its authors urge the readers to pay attention to the root of the problem, which in the Czech Republic is coal. Coal mining and coal power plants are interpreted by them as the biggest Czech issue related to climate change as “*the Czech Republic belongs among the worst polluters of the climate in Europe*” (DR 5/9/2019). From this perspective, any prolongation of the operation of coal mines is interpreted as illegal because coal mining contradicts the Paris Agreement, which the Czech Republic signed. Overall, *Deník Referendum* sees the continued support for coal as a “state failure.” In the context of the current climate crisis, its contributors consider the further expansion of coal mining as scandalous and understand the state activities as ways of protecting the profits of coal barons.

This particular framing of climate change mitigation might be related to the fact that most authors writing about climate change in *Deník Referendum* are activists of the grassroots social movement We Are the Limits, who protest against the expansion of coalmines and privatization of coal power plants. Furthermore, voices of other environmental organizations such as Greenpeace, the Rainbow Movement (the Czech chapter of Friends of the Earth), and the Green Party as well as the grassroots groups Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion are given space in this medium. The political, i.e., conflictual, nature of the coal issue among various social actors thus becomes accentuated in *Deník Referendum*.

The mitigation discourse in the daily includes further criticism of the former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, who, together with the representatives of Poland and Hungary, refused to sign the agreement on EU carbon neutrality in June 2019. His reasons were presented as economic (the costs of such action were considered too high), and also as related to the Czech Republic's technological unpreparedness for carbon neutrality and the low proportion of emissions from Europe on the global scale. Babiš's argument against fighting climate change is based on an anti-EU discourse in which he promises the Czech people that *"our citizens cannot lose jobs because of European actions to combat climate change that are more strict and ambitious than those for the rest of the world"* (MF Dnes 27/9/2019). Opposing this stance, the Czech environmentalists assume that *"there will be no jobs on a dead planet"* (DR 15/8/2019).

Overall, the dominance of the mitigation discourse in the alternative left media is the opposite of what one can read in the mainstream media, where Czechia is perceived as being threatened by climate change but adapting to it well at the same time. Unlike in the alternative, there is also no mention of Czechia being a cause of pollution in the mainstream media. The alternative, on the other hand, politicizes the issue of coal mining, gives space to actors critical of the government and criticizes the policies of the state as well as its rhetoric. At the same time, the two main opposing discourses of adaptation and mitigation coexist next to each other and do not directly engage with each other; therefore, they do not contribute to any dynamics of polarization.

### 3. THE OPPORTUNITY FOR BUSINESS DISCOURSE

The climate change as an opportunity for business discourse is most often present in the specialist magazine *Ekonom* in the year 2019. This discourse is compatible with both of the above-mentioned discourses – those of adaptation and mitigation. Following the depoliticizing win-win formula, which excludes conflict, the economic journalists present new technologies for combating drought (e.g. green roofs, vertical gardens or harvesting water) and mitigation activities, such as producing electro mobiles, rechargeable systems or solar panels, as great opportunities for business. Even though climate change is seen as a risk and will probably bring financial losses due to natural disasters and increased temperatures,

it can be easily framed as a commercial opportunity. According to *Ekonom* climate change is literally a hot trend, big changes in the energy sector are approaching and for Czechia it is important not to stay behind: “*The climate change phenomenon changes global business*” (*Ekonom* 12/9/2019).

Companies worldwide expect their customers to be more sensitive to the carbon footprint of products. There is also a rising pressure of investors on businesses to behave responsibly and sustainably and reduce emissions. It is especially the investment in green technologies that is interesting, but other sectors can also profit from global warming. *Ekonom* suggests, for instance, that pharmaceutical firms can make more profits from selling medicines for new illnesses caused by a warmer climate.

Sometimes the business opportunity discourse is used also in the alternative media; for instance *Deník Referendum* quotes an environmental expert who is also a right-wing politician, M. Kučera: “*The Climate Agreement is a great opportunity for business too. Investment in climate protection brings opportunities for sectors with a high added value*” (DR 5/6/2017). The interests of the business sector seem compatible with the alternative media’s critical discourses because the arguments on investing into renewables and new job opportunities support their emphasis on mitigation measures.

Besides demanding the end of the subsidizing of the fossil industry from public money, the environmentalists in the alternative media source discuss various aspects of the transition to renewable sources of energy in the Czech Republic. They think that the Paris Agreement is economically favorable and that there will be new jobs created in the renewable energy sector. Still, within the framework of this discourse they consider the idea of a need to keep the coal industry going in order to sustain employment to be a myth. Furthermore, the daily criticizes the Czech government for not adopting the business opportunity discourse at least in the sphere of supporting investments into solar and wind energy.

The alternative press perceives the skepticism of the Czech public toward solar energy to be a consequence of the recent solar business affair, as the solar energy sector, in the past (2009–2010), included huge state subsidies that damaged the idea of renewables in the country. Furthermore, a minor economic argument about inequalities regarding renewables is

brought into the debate by some environmentalists from the Rainbow Movement quoted in *Deník Referendum*, who warn that renewables should not be available only for rich people and should not divide the society.

The opportunity for business discourse on climate change that is dominant in the mainstream journal *Ekonom* shows that the business sector is willing to change and redirect its investments in line with the examples of the world's leading corporations such as Ikea or Unilever, which have already incorporated climate change in their business plans and declared a transition to renewables. From the alternative media's perspective, it is the government and the coal industry which obstruct the business opportunities related to investing into renewable energy sources. There is thus an element of commonality between the mainstream and the alternative media regarding the role of business in dealing with climate change, which points to a risk of depoliticization. The promise of the market to solve the problem of climate change can unite opposing forces.

#### 4. THE DISCOURSE OF CLIMATE DENIAL AND SKEPTICISM

While climate denial and skepticism were typical of Czech political elites in the past, they have recently become a rather marginal discourse in both alternative and mainstream media. Czechia is infamously known for its former president, the right-wing conservative economist Václav Klaus, whose climate-skepticism used to be very influential locally. In May 2017 he published a book titled *Shall We Be Destroyed by the Climate or by Our Fighting the Climate?* He argued that climate change measures contradict human freedom and the free-market economy, while the climate itself is in a good condition; and he expressed his regret that the “*doctrine of climate alarmism*” is winning considerably in the political sphere (MF Dnes 31/5/2017). Even though Klaus personally has been a rather marginal voice in the 2017–2019 period, it is still possible to find other climate-skeptic voices in the mainstream media. Even though it can be found only in its opinion section, *MF Dnes* makes it possible for the potentially most depoliticizing discourse – the denial discourse – to be presented on its pages.

To give an example of this discourse, a member of Parliament and an economic expert of the Civic Democratic Party replied as follows to a debate on climate between the Green Party and the Bank Council of the

Czech National Bank: *“Let’s not fool ourselves that capitalism is the enemy of the environment. It was the centrally controlled economies that were far more environmentally hostile. We see it at every turn in our country today, that thirty years after the fall of communism, or the replacement of central planning by the market, our environment is in an infinitely better state. Development, wealth, [and] new, greener technologies have been brought about by the market and capitalism, not by planning and regulation, which is the universal response of green activists to everything”* (MF Dnes 13/7/2019: 13).

The impact of capitalism and the free market on the climate is a matter of dispute between climate skeptics and green activists. The journalists in Deník Referendum oppose the climate skeptics – both global and local. They criticize actors who deny the existence of climate change in the USA by saying they are a part of lobbyist groups defending unlimited free trade and connected to the fossil industry, for instance the Heartland Institute that is sponsored by oil companies, such as Exxon Mobil and the Koch family: *“The fossil fuel industry, which knew about the climate threat long before the general public, took over this network, linked it to free-market think tanks like the infamous Heartland Institute, and used its billions of dollars to build a vast propaganda apparatus that prevents effective greenhouse gas reductions to this day”* (DR 21/9/2019).

Also, locally, they oppose a politician in the Coal Commission whom they label as a “climate denier”, who supports the breaking of the limits of coal mining, and tried to postpone the Parliament negotiations on the Paris Climate Agreement indefinitely; the environmentalists are afraid that he will block decisions about leaving fossil fuels: *“The approval of MP Zahradník, who spreads lies about climate change, denies scientific facts and promotes pollution, is a slap in the face not only to environmental organizations. It is a move against anyone who is serious about the debate”* (DR 5/9/2019).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Czech political context offers a unique opportunity to assess the intersection of several key elements of the current climate change politics. On the one hand, Czechia is “one of the most skeptical countries in Europe” (ČERMÁK – PATOČKOVÁ 2020: 591). At the same time, Czechia seemed to be, together with the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, an aspiring

student of the West trying to catch up with and return to Europe as a liberal democracy (STARK – BRUSZT 1998). However, this image all but collapsed after its entry into the EU, as new political conflicts became much more open, resulting in the differentiation of political attitudes across various social groups in general (VACHUDOVA 2020), and towards environmental issues and climate change in particular (CVVM 2019; OTTO – GUGUSHVILI 2020; ŽUK 2022). We have decided to analyze this potentially changing situation in relation to climate change and the economy on the level of publicly articulated media discourses. The aim of this article has been to analyze the climate change discourses in the selected Czech media and see their positions within the current political context, which is largely regarded as tending towards a rather skeptical position on the level of the political elites as well as on that of the general population (see also above).

Importantly, we have found out that the sample we analyzed is neither monopolized by the skeptical discourse nor polarized on an axis of climate denial versus climate alarmism. The voices of climate deniers, even though strong in the past, are becoming marginal and slowly fading away from the mainstream. In this respect, Czechia may differ from some other countries in the region such as Poland, which are defined by “*the consistent presence of different forms of scepticism in parts of the media*” (KUNDZEWICZ ET AL. 2017: 12). However, more recent research on Poland points towards a variability similar to the Czech situation (SZULECKI ET AL. 2024).

Climate change is framed differently in different types of Czech media. Whereas the alternative leftist media offer a detailed coverage of the climate change issue together with their critical view of capitalist and neoliberal sources of climate change, and an open critique of the state energy policy, the mainstream media rather avoid any thorough discussion of “global warming”. This situation somewhat echoes the one in Great Britain in the early 2000s, when the leftist mainstream there was predominantly engaged in reporting about emissions trading (GAVIN 2009), but without shaking the main capitalist structures (CARVALHO 2007).

There is a significant difference between newspapers regarding the framing of the issue. Whereas the mainstream media focus on the adaptation measures or understand the climate crisis as an opportunity for business again, thus echoing the British media (KOTAYKO 2012), the alternative



left stresses the importance of mitigation. The discourse of adaptation is also represented by the media source owned by the former Czech prime minister during the period under scrutiny. This fact is crucial in understanding the interpretation of climate change by the mainstream press. Although the global problem of climate change is not denied anymore, it is, to an extent, still depoliticized by the mainstream; in particular, the attention of the media audience is turned to government activities in the form of shallow adaptation measures without any explanation of the need to protect the climate for the future, which would mean reducing carbon emissions significantly. The results of our analysis echo Čada's (2023: 506) argument that the discursive frames in the mainstream media *"do not challenge the current political-economic regime."*

The mainstream media do not deny climate change as such, but they deny any discussion of mitigation measures and avoid discussions and arguments criticizing the state energy policy. This approach differs from the more straightforward responsive skepticism found in the work of climate scientist Jan Pretel and partly also in that of geologist Václav Cílek (MIKEŠOVÁ 2023: 548). However, according to the available research, this type of reporting might be one of the reasons for the demonstrated skepticism regarding effective political responses to climate change even on the individual level among parts of the population, for a general argument (SEE CARMICHAEL – BRULLE 2017), on Czechia (SEE ČERMÁK – PATOČKOVÁ 2020; OCELÍK 2022; HRUBEŠ – CÍSAŘ 2024). Future research should focus on the "new denialism" discourse (LAMB ET AL. 2020; SHUE 2023; BRULLE ET AL. 2024) that may be currently replacing the old one. Especially the *"push of non-transformative solutions"* (LAMB ET AL. 2020: 2) connects the mainstream media with this particular discourse. Another type of research should engage with the politicization agenda (MARQUARDT – LEDERER 2022), as the "populist moment" in the climate change discourse may have been more pronounced in the Czech mainstream media in more recent years.

At the same time, there are critical arguments based on mitigation and decarbonization that are presented in the alternative leftist media, which, to some extent, actively try to fight the depoliticization dynamics of the mainstream media. In line with some of the existing research, we have seen that *"politicization and depoliticization are dynamic processes, which always need to be investigated at the discursive level"* (PEPERMANS – MAESELE 2014:



228). As a result, we can conclude that by presenting critical views, the alternative media contribute to the pluralist nature of the ongoing debate on climate change in Czechia. Of course, their reach and possible influence are limited compared to those of the mainstream media. Still, although it was expected as the most likely outcome, we have not identified the skeptical position as the point of a depoliticizing convergence of climate discourses in the Czech media. This finding may have important implications for the future capacity of the state and/or other agencies to respond to the challenges brought about by climate change and its impact on the future economic development.

Furthermore, similarly to the case of the discourse on sustainable development (SEE BRAND 2010; REDCLIFT 2005), some feared that especially the climate change (adaptation) discourse could be transformed into a depoliticized notion excluding dissenting and critical voices (SEE PEPERMANS – MAESELE 2014). The result would be a transformation of the politics of climate change into a seemingly consensual management of climate change, which would create important obstacles for the formulation of alternative visions of economic development. Although we have identified such strategies in the mainstream media, several environmental perspectives which perceive the climate crisis as a serious problem, search for alternative ways of organizing economic production. At the same time, since it is not the very presence of discourses which matters for actual policymaking, but the influence they have in a particular society, the variability of discourses does not automatically secure a policy innovation (SEE ALSO BRULLE ET AL. 2024). As we have seen in our analysis, since the alternative views are concentrated in alternative leftist media, their actual influence, which is beyond the scope of the present article and remains for future research, is rather limited.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Response skepticism encompasses “doubts about the effectiveness of responding to climate change, and concern[s] the ability and willingness of social actors to respond to it” (Capstick – Pidgeon 2014: 393).
- 2 This number can be compared with those for *MFDnes* (285,000), *Ekonom* (16,000) and the comparable alternative leftist electronic *Daily Alarm* (39,000).
- 3 Čada (2023: 499) argues that although drought is presented as a result of climate change in the most widely read Czech media, “climate change is problematized in relation to drought only to a minimal extent, and its causes are not discussed” (see also Zandlová – Čada 2024).
- 4 The quoted texts’ bibliographical citations can be found in an appendix published on CJIR webpage.

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## APPENDIX

## CITED MEDIA ARTICLES

MF Dnes 31/5/2017	Václav Klaus: „Snad Trump odolá nátlaku“, 31. 05. 2017. <i>Mladá fronta Dnes</i> , strana: 10, rubrika: Názory.
MF Dnes 5/2/2018: 3	Radka Hrdinová: „Druhá řada stromů“, 05. 02. 2018. <i>Mladá fronta Dnes</i> , strana: 3, rubrika: Z domova.
MF Dnes 13/7/2019: 13	Jan Skopeček: „Zelený krásný zaostalý svět“, 13. 07. 2019. <i>Mladá fronta Dnes</i> , strana: 13, rubrika: Názory.
MF Dnes 1/8/2019	Bedřich Moldan: „Pomalé Česko a změna klimatu“, 01. 08. 2019. <i>Mladá fronta Dnes</i> .
MF Dnes 12/8/2019: title page	Jiří Sládek: „Pryč s masem! Němci zachraňují klima“, 12. 08. 2019. <i>Mladá fronta Dnes</i> , strana: 1, rubrika: Titulní strana.
MF Dnes 27/9/2019	František Strnad: „Babiš v OSN: Klima není vše“, 27. 09. 2019. <i>Mladá fronta Dnes</i> , strana: 1, rubrika: Titulní strana.
Ekonom 25/7/2019: 18	Jan Richter: „Miroslav VOLAŘÍK: Oteplování vínu svědčí, je silnější“, 25. 07. 2019. <i>Ekonom</i> , strana: 18.
Ekonom 12/9/2019	Lukáš Vincent: „Firmy začínají kalkulovat ztráty, které přinesou změny klimatu“, 12. 09. 2019. <i>Ekonom</i> , strana: 32, rubrika: Další témata – Klimatické změny.
DR 5/6/2017	(pd): „Čeští politici Pařížskou dohodu podporují, ve Sněmovně ale její ratifikace ještě potrvá“, 05. 06. 2017. <i>Deník Referendum</i> , Zpráva, rubrika: Domov.
DR 21/8/2019	Ondřej Rut: „Přechod na zelenou energii je v Praze 3 jen začátek“, 21. 8. 2019. <i>Deník Referendum</i> , Komentář, rubrika: Domov.
DR 15/8/2019	(josp): „Klimatické hnutí v Německu dále sílí. Zářijovou stávku podpořily i tamní odbory“, 15. 08. 2019. <i>Deník Referendum</i> , Zpráva, rubrika: Svět.
DR 5/9/2019	(jk): „Hlasy ANO vyslaly do Uhelné komise popírače změn klimatu Zahradníka z ODS“, 05. 09. 2019. <i>Deník Referendum</i> , Zpráva, rubrika: Domov.
DR 21/9/2019	Josef Patočka: „Na cestě do pekla: jak náš ekonomický systém přivedl svět do klimatické krize“, 21. 09. 2019. <i>Deník Referendum</i> , Esej, rubrika: Svět.