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Holistic societal foresighting: the Czech experience

Introduction

The goal of this contribution is to share the theoretical and methodological knowledge and experience gathered during more than fifteen years of work of the Center for Social and Economic Strategies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague (CESES) on holistic societal foresights, visions and strategies of the Czech Republic's development in the contexts of globalization and European integration. The Center's mission has been to identify the country's key problems and, by doing so, to help find public policies that will help solve the problems identified and take advantage of development opportunities. Since it was established, the CESES has published (besides many other studies, articles and research reports) nine comprehensive publications in two foresighting cycles, which systematically identified the area of possible future choices and available policy, social and economic strategies. (Vize 2001, Průvodce 2002, Potůček et al. 2003, Potůček et al. 2005, Potůček 2008, Potůček, Musil & Mašková (eds.) 2008, Potůček – Mašková 2009, Frič – Veselý 2010, Potůček et al. 2011)

Societal foresighting is always an effort to grasp possible futures in consideration of the development of the whole. The pioneering works of the Club of Rome (Forrester, Meadows and Meadows, Laszlo, Dror and others) published gradually since the 1960s constituted the essential first impulses towards developing a theory and undertaking specific inquiries in the holistic study of the developmental dynamics of social entities. Henderson (2005), among other authors, conceives of the outlook of human civilization in a similarly holistic way.

Over the recent years, two special issues of Futures have been devoted to the topic. The first issue of March 2008 was edited by Richard Slaughter and offered (under the same title) a universal holistic concept of "Integral Futures". This concept was largely criticized in the other issue of March 2010 edited by Sohail Inayatullah and entitled, "Epistemological Pluralism in Futures Studies". It was argued that Integral Futures proponents were marginalizing alternative concepts of holism.

The present article responds to Jose M. Ramos's challenge publicized in the same issue of Futures, namely to open a "dynamic dialogue between diverse conceptions of holism which can at once honour the great diversity of approaches, while likewise continuing the journey of creating shared meaning and common understandings of the complex contents in which future inquiry works". (Ramos 2010: 115) The conception we chose was a bottom-up one, starting with a specific cognitive exercise (to identify conditioned possible futures of the Czech Republic) and concluding by applying and generalizing an approach we believe solves that exercise in relation to the whole under investigation and, at the same time, in a scientifically legitimate way. In this regard, our conception also fulfils the thesis of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) that any conceptual schema we devise is ultimately based on concrete experience.

The following text is divided into five sections. A criterial basis represents an important part of foresighting work (Section 1, Criteria). Another complicated foresighting exercise is to identify the theoretical basis of foresighting, to apply theories as generalized pieces of past experience and plausible assumptions about the contexts of social phenomena under examination; such theories are also reflected in thinking about possible futures (Section 2, Theories). Another important part of holistic social foresighting, which must be based on collaboration between members of different scientific disciplines, politics, public administration and civil society, is represented by the conceptualization of the subject (domain) of foresighting, which facilitates interdisciplinary cooperation and organizes the work and the cognitions of the entire team of investigators (Section 3, Conceptual Framework). It is equally important to propose and apply a corresponding set of methodological instruments (Section 4, Methods). In the conclusion, I propose for further debate some generalizations that arose from our approach to holistic societal foresighting (Section 5, Methodological Considerations).

1 Criteria

Societal foresighting cannot do without a value framework for its accounts of possible futures. Value frameworks clarify the criteria applied in foresighters' assessments of what was, what is and what might be good for the community referred to in their foresights. Thus, they necessarily enter the field of interests, choices, alternatives – and they are always better off doing so consciously, declaring their value framework and criterial basis openly.

However, the making and developing of criterial bases of foresighting work is one of the most difficult challenges of social foresighting. It is useful to tackle criterial bases as early as in the preparatory stage of foresighting – and subsequently, of course, at the time when experts present the results of their foresighting work to stakeholders (politicians, civil servants, other experts, journalists, interested public). What should judgments such that one society is better or more successful than another one be based on? Or how quickly is life in a society getting better (or stagnating or even getting worse), compared to the past? There are a great many answers to such questions.

Since the very inception of our institute, we at the CESES have been inspired by the works of multiple authors who brought attention to the boundaries of human civilization's unlimited development; the impossibility of depleting non-renewable resources of raw materials and energies, and of polluting the biosphere perpetually; the unsustainability of uncontrolled growth of differences in access to sources of wealth and wellbeing, both within individual societies and across the planet. We sought further inspiration for our endeavour in works developing systematic thinking about the quality of people's life. The second comparative survey of quality of life among the citizens of all European Union member states provides a comprehensive picture of both objective conditions and people's subjective evaluations of their living conditions (Second 2009). It compares income, standard of living, level of deprivation, overall life satisfaction, occupational status, the ways people distribute their time between work and family, housing and housing environment, health and healthcare, or the quality of public services such as social welfare,

education and public transportation. It also compares the levels of trust to other people or to political institutions or the levels of perceived tension between different social groups. The results of this survey (as well as many other surveys) can be directly applied when assessing the quality of life of people living in the participating countries, in international comparison.

The concept of "quality of life" is primarily associated with the living conditions of contemporaries, while the concept of "sustainability" cannot, in the domain of science, be associated with the fate of mortal individuals; instead, it is reflected on the life horizons of future generations. These days, few people are still in doubt about the fact that our way of life is lived at their expense. It is associated with the future and the living conditions of the entire humanity. Here we can generally build on the normative assumption that quality of life at present should not be achieved at the expense of future generations' quality of life. Such an assumption can be expressed in the maxim that there is no quality of life without sustainability and there is no sustainability of life without its quality...

The quality and sustainability of life is also associated with a new emerging concept in the field of security, namely human security. It is a way of seeking the kind of security "as though people mattered". All varieties of the concept of human security agree on the principle that the primary goal consists in the protection of people and their human and civil rights.

Thus, we have decided to specify the criterion of quality and sustainability of life in four basic dimensions: economic, social, environmental and security. In this respect, we also speak of the pillars supporting quality and sustainability of life. The different links and interdependencies between them are important from the perspective of foresighting and strategic thinking as well.

Figure 1: The criterion of quality and sustainability of life and its dimensions

Relying on this distinction between four pillars of quality and sustainability of life, our further analyses and foresights were based on the following assumptions:

There can be (and often is) an apparent conflict between immediate utilities and long-

term effects in the different dimensions of quality and sustainability of life. We are in a much better position to define and characterize immediate quality of life, compared to its long-term sustainability.

The different dimensions may be configured in complementary, reinforcing, but often also importantly competing relationships. There are different interests in each society in terms of which dimensions are preferred by which actors.

The strength and importance of these four dimensions vary between countries, regions and social groups, as well as over time.

2 Theories

In order to study the possible avenues of the future development of any national community, one must undertake a vast cognitive exercise. This cannot be solved without an adequate theoretical framework. Theories provide the bases for all subsequent pondering and for the selection and interpretation of relevant information, perspectives and worldviews. Although they are not always emphasized or even reflected by some foresighters, they enter the learning process as assumptions organizing it, making it efficient and facilitating the identification of relevant relationships.

A high number of theories try to explain what goes on in society. They compete with one another, agree on some aspects, complement one another in other aspects, or contradict one another in yet other aspects. The researcher's choice of theories as the basis of his/her analysis or foresight is to a high extent a matter of subjective opinion. Foresighting is destined to create an environment facilitating the cooperation between different social (or even other than social) sciences and, if possible, a complementary, synergic application of different theories. The set of theories which were considered in our case comprised, among others, the logics and dynamics of the origin, development and fall of civilizations (Toynbee 1976); theories of globalization and Europeanization (Wallerstein 1974; 1979; 1980, Boyer and Drache 1996, Rovná 2008); theories of governance (Perri 6 1997, Salamon 2002), including theories of elites, theories of leadership, theories of democracy (Touraine

1988), and theories of strategic governance (Dror 2001, Potůček et al. 2009); the regulatory power of the state, market, and civic sector (Lindblom 1977, Potůček 1999); open society and modernization processes (Popper 1945, Lash 1994); the transformative role of science, technology and innovation (Müller 2008).

3 Conceptual Framework

The above analyses make it clear that comprehensive social foresighting presents an extremely difficult exercise. We have decided to tackle it in a way that both respects all relevant development contexts, whenever possible, and makes the entire subject matter more transparent and our conclusions more comprehensible. Our priority was to interpret empirical evidence through the lens of available theoretical frameworks. We also focused on emerging key problems Czech society is or will be facing over the following years and decades, and on its developmental conflicts, threats and opportunities. We had identified those in one of our first publications. (Průvodce 2002)

One of the ways of "maintaining" the foresight's theoretical and criterial framework both mentally and organisationally was to propose a conceptual framework which helps us formulate the main relationships concisely. A conceptual framework, as defined by Ostrom (2005), helped us divide a complex structure to individual elements, links and related operations without losing sight of the overall context. In our case, such a conceptual framework is represented by the model of the basic contexts of Czech society's development and modernization in a global context, which was formulated following numerous team discussions (see Figure 2).

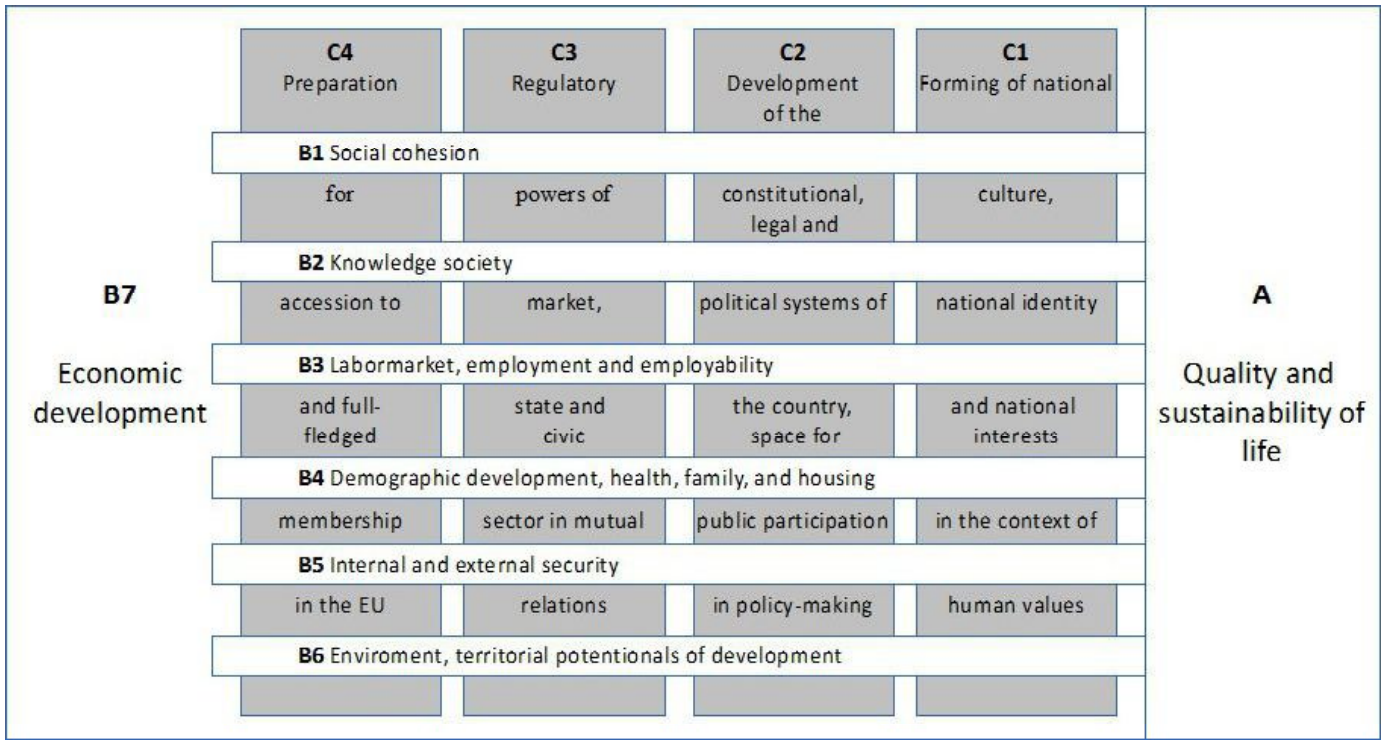


Figure 2: Model of the development of the Czech society and its modernization in the global context

Key:

A – Criteria block

B – Developmental potentials

C – Formative regulators

This model attempts to cogently represent basic relationships that shape the development of the country. (Frič, Potůček 2004) It has the following structural elements: the criteria block, a set of developmental potentials (seven were identified) and a set of formative regulators (four were identified). It displays two structured general relationships (*relation C → B*, or formative regulators → developmental potentials, and *relation B → A*, i.e. developmental potentials → quality and sustainability of life). These relations were identified as the crucial developmental interdependences of the Czech Republic within the next few decades that require focused elaboration in further analytical and foresighting efforts. (Frič, Potůček 2004)

3.1 Developmental potentials

We also assume that the quality and sustainability of life is significantly impacted by seven developmental potentials of the country (blocks B1–B7 – Developmental

potentials). We take the developmental potentials for the key areas generating (renewing, administrating, cultivating) the resources of the country’s development. We found theoretical support for our selection of the seven developmental potentials in numerous studies on the problems and modernization paths of contemporary societies and civilization in general. Contemporary societies are threatened by the erosion of social cohesion – that hardly definable bonding glue allowing individuals to work together, find their place in society and satisfy their need for social intercourse and inclusion. We deem it undeniable that welfare state will play an important role in maintaining and promoting social cohesion. (*Cf.: Element B1 of our model*)

Developmental trends in the modern global society cause knowledge to stand out as the main productive factor. Education, research and development, and informatics (summarily described as “the knowledge society”) thus come to the fore as one of the crucial developmental potentials of the country. (*Cf.: Element B2 of our model*)

As evidenced by numerous studies, work continues to be the critical source of existential security, self-expression and social status in contemporary societies. (*Cf.: Element B3 of our model*)

The reproduction of human population is a natural base from which other potentials evolve. Living conditions, in particular the various

relationships between population groups, their health situation, their ability to bear and rear children and to enjoy decent housing, all this enters into the game as a set of important parameters that indicate the attained quality of life. (Cf.: *Element B4 of our model*)

The provision of security – either inside the country or perceived as prevention of outside threats – could be characterized as a condition necessary for survival whereby provisions of internal and external security are becoming ever closer bedfellows. (Cf.: *Element B5 of our model*)

The situation and development of the environment are important factors that have a critical impact on the quality and sustainability of life in the long-term perspective. (Cf.: *Element B6 of our model*)

We class economic development as one of the crucial developmental potentials inasmuch as it – similarly to blood circulation in the human body – generates and distributes resources needed for the renewal and transformation of society and its individual component parts. (Cf.: *Element B7 of our model*)

3.2 Formative regulators

Furthermore we singled out four regulators that are formative for the developmental potentials. These formative regulators represent the areas of societal life that influence developmental potentials by setting or mediating specific conditions of individual as well as institutional actors' behaviour within all seven development potentials. As we approached the classification of formative regulators we were perfectly aware of the unprecedented historic situation of our country at the start of the 21st century – its first steps as an independent political entity since 1993 as well as its cultural, civilizational and geographic closeness to Europe.

In the first instance, this situation inevitably poses the critical questions of why we are, what we are, what we want and do not want to be, what holds us together – briefly put, questions about the importance, character and role of national identity within the context of human values. (Cf.: *Element C1 of our model*)

In the second instance, we are called upon to intensively preoccupy ourselves with

preparations for accession to and full-fledged membership in the European Union. The issue here is to develop capacities and institutions that would seize the maximum of opportunities (and avoid potential losses) ensuing from our EU membership as well as to make use of the EU's institutional culture to bridge the civilization gap between our country and the more advanced nations of Europe – notably by developing public administration, by building the institutional framework of market relations etc. and by coping more effectively with the adverse impacts of economic globalization. (Cf.: *Element C4 of our model*)

This has to do with yet another assumption: that one of the most critical tasks in the field of regulating conditions of activity in various walks of society's life is to promote the regulatory impacts of the market, the state and the civic sector – and more particularly to harmonize the interactions of these regulators and thus to enhance the resultant synergic effect. Their socially pathological interferences may prevail otherwise – namely corruption. (Lindblom 1977, Potůček 1999) (Cf.: *Element C3 of our model*)

One of the bottlenecks of our past development that inhibited the needed social and economic transformations took the form of numerous deficits of the country's constitutional, legal and political systems and the nature of communication in the public space. Cultivation of this system may yet give a powerful impetus to a more efficient governance of the country at all levels, including the central level. (Cf.: *Element C2 of our model*)

A simple example of interpretation of model relationships:

The logic of constructing and applying the model can be illustrated on the example of developmental potential B3 (labour market, employment and employability). This, combined with the nature and conditions of labour and the structure of employment and unemployment, undoubtedly affects quality of life (block A). Its development is increasingly tied to the developmental potential of knowledge society (B2). It is affected by the market, the state and the civic sector (formative regulator C3) but also, increasingly, by the country's functioning in the EU (formative regulator C4).

The model proposed encompasses hundreds of such developmental relationships, some simpler and others more complex. One of its important functions lies in the fact that it organizes those relationships into a framework that helps us find the most relevant ones and apply them in formulating hypotheses about threats to and opportunities for the country's development, and about its possible futures.

It was our main orientation not only for writing comprehensive reports, such as Potůček et al. (2005), but also, for instance, for structuring the strategic challenges identified for the purposes of setting R&D priorities for the Czech Republic ("Key Threats to and Opportunities for the Development of the Czech Republic until 2025", Klíčová 2011), plus writing alternative scenarios of its potential futures. (Potůček et al. 2003, Frič et al. 2004, Frič – Veselý 2010)

4 Methodology

The methodology of our foresighting effort relied on an application of problem-oriented participative foresighting (Gál – Frič 1987). Compared to a systems-analytical approach which aims to describe the subject matter as comprehensively as possible, this approach has the advantage of covering selectively just those of its aspects that are relevant for solving the problems of people and of the society as a whole, rather than trying to cover all aspects.

The term "problem" tends to be understood as a gap between a current state and a desirable state. Thus, to some extent, a problem can be perceived as something harmful; on the other hand, it can also be perceived as a beneficial impulse for the mobilization of social actors. This is because every problem definition is associated (at least implicitly) with a solution which goes beyond the current state, towards the future. Moreover, any proposed ways of solving problems give us an idea both about a desirable future and about the process towards achieving it. In this way, the problem-oriented participative approach fulfils the basic conditions of foresighting: it aspires to uncover the priorities of its subject as well as the ways towards realizing those priorities.

However, problem-oriented participative foresighting also assumes active participation

by the actors who name the problems and may even try to find the ways to solving them. It is clear that social problems will be defined differently by politicians, officials, members of various interest groups or scientists. Therefore, problem identification will ideally follow from open discussions between all stakeholders.

Over the past years, we have realized two relatively closed methodological cycles. The following discussion will be divided in accordance with them, referring to the respective publications prepared in the course of each cycle.

4.1 Foresighting cycle one (2000–2005): From empirical evidence to theory

As the first foresighting outcomes were expected very soon after the establishment of the CESES, we had no choice but to found foresighting cycle one (realized between 2000 and 2005) primarily on systematic empirical analysis of Czech society's problems and ways of solving them – without critically underestimating the development of theoretical framework "in the field".

Based on a series of team discussions, we decided to divide this activity into several successive phases.

Table 1: Foresighting procedure, cycle one

Phase	Content (what was used/applied)
Understanding	Theories
Conceptualization	Conceptual framework - model
Problem identification	Priority Issues
Problem solution	Strategic Concepts
Key societal innovations	Strategic Moves
Conditioned futures	Scenario Writing

Now I will discuss the different phases in more detail. While the first two phases were rather academic in nature and have been outlined above, the remaining four focused on the collection and interpretation of empirical evidence.

4.1.1 Problem identification: priority issues

The conceptual scheme defined the area for identifying the Czech Republic's key problems. By means of a dialogue between stakeholders, we identified them, organized them by importance, and determined priority issues. In order to keep the situation under control (in terms of the number of problems/issues selected or the level of abstraction they were defined at), it was necessary to restrict the selection of problems/issues by precise criteria embedded in their definition. We defined priority issues as gaps between existing and desirable states of some conditions in the society's life whose solution facilitates the solution of other problems/issues as well. I must emphasize that the identification of priority issues was subject to an open and democratic discussion. For that reason, we deployed a wide array of about 300 experts who formulated problems/issues in a two-round expert foresighting survey. A total of 77 priority issues were identified.

Example priority issue: "Weakening position of the family and children vis-à-vis the demands and conditions of economically active family members' labour market activity"

4.1.2 Problem solution: strategic concepts

Just like the identification of priority issues, ideas about the ways towards solving them required a more precise definition. Rather than as a single act, we understood the solution of priority issues as a process, a sequence of steps towards a goal that are specific in their nature and sequence. We respected the fact that several solution strategies may be elaborated for each priority issue. We realized that individual strategies for solving priority issues are interdependent. We understood the field of priority issues identified as a system of multiple relationships where the existence and ways of solving one problem affect the sustenance and possible solution of other problems. Every problem creates conditions for the "life" of other problems, and at the same time, its existence and solution are determined by the existence and solution of related problems. Solutions to individual problems may facilitate or exclude one another. Therefore, it was important to keep solution

strategies open beyond the boundaries of the individual parts of our conceptual model. In order to take into consideration, at least to some extent, the field of interaction between the processes of solving priority issues, we decided to elaborate strategic concepts as relatively complex action priorities, i.e. priorities of what needs to be done in order to solve an entire set of priority issues simultaneously. In a sense, we tried to synthesize the field of priority issues. In order to identify them, we used another round of expert foresighting survey, namely round three. A total of 30 strategic concepts were identified.

Example strategic concept: "Launching an effective fight against corruption"

4.1.3 Key societal innovations: strategic moves

Finally, we were able to proceed to evaluating the mutual relationships between individual strategic concepts. In this way, we outlined the sum of societal intentions and strategic priorities on the background of set criteria. We named them "strategic moves". They were consistent strategies of influencing the future intentionally. They were meant to encourage thinking and discussions about the country's holistic future orientation, possibly resulting in the adoption and implementation of strategic policy decisions. Strategic moves were defined as structured processes of social innovations and their consequences that go substantially beyond the ordinary operation of government and society, cause qualitative changes of conditions or ways of life in the country, and require long-term concentration of resources and willpower for achieving desirable changes. They represented the next level of abstraction, after priority issues and strategic concepts. In them, we attempted to formulate the available opportunities for the pursuit of long-term priorities of a higher order than priorities existing in normal governance practice. A total of 5 strategic moves were identified.

Example strategic move: "Cultivating knowledge into a key production factor"

4.1.4 Conditioned futures: scenario writing

The outcomes of all previous phases contributed to the reservoir of information gathered to such a level that we were able to proceed to formulating narratives about

alternative conditioned futures (writing scenarios). We formulated foresighting scenarios as fictitious stories about possible futures presenting comprehensive and, even in their extreme versions, plausible developmental hypotheses. We wanted to stimulate thinking and demonstrate that the future is unknown and open; a lot depends on us, our decisions, our competences, the goals we set and the avenues we take towards achieving them. At the same time, such scenarios were thoroughly grounded in social facts, connecting them in a plausible interpretative framework. None of the scenarios was – or could be – the right one, describing an idealized notion of the country’s desirable development. All of them illustrated possible alternative ways of the Czech Republic’s travelling to its future that are perhaps extreme in some aspects but nonetheless thinkable. Three scenarios and four “wildcards” were formulated in our first publication (Vize 2001). Three other scenarios were proposed by Potůček et al. (2003). Frič et al. (2004) applied the original method of “reactive scenarios” in studying the development of our country’s relation to the European Union.

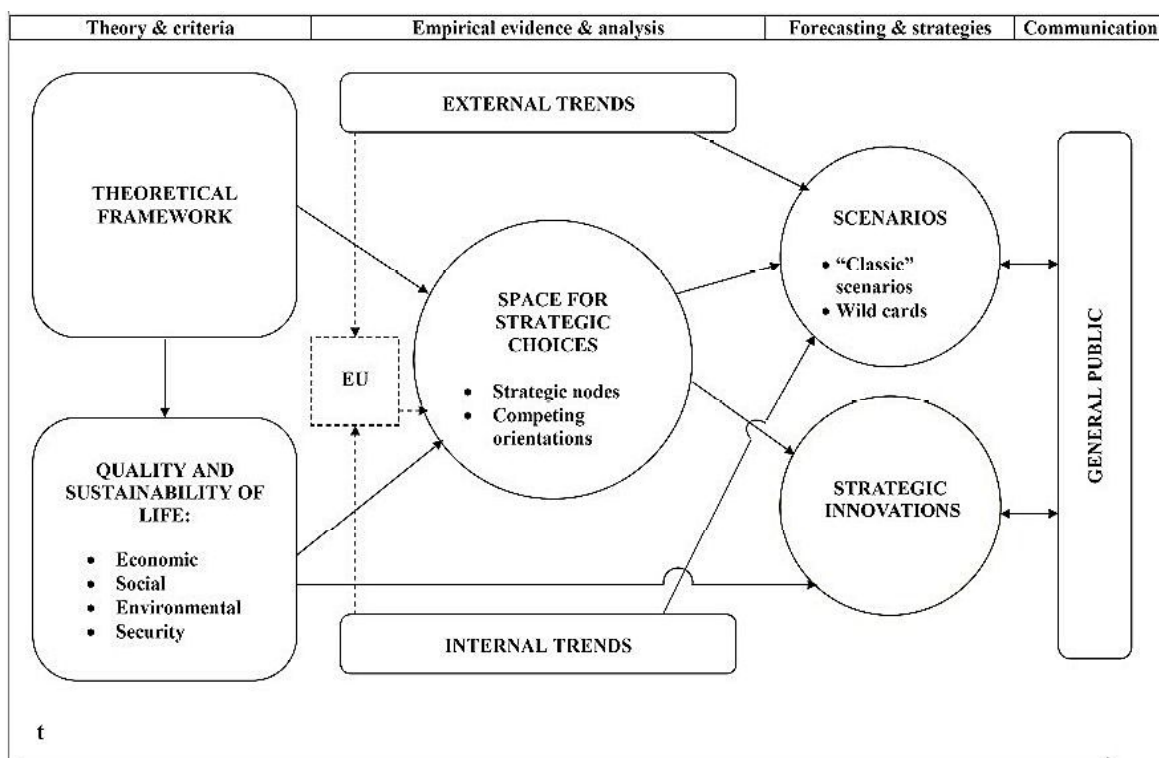
4.2 Foresighting cycle two (2006–2011): From theory to empirical evidence

We concluded foresighting cycle one by publishing the report “How Are We Standing

and What Next? A Strategic Audit of the Czech Republic” (Potůček et al. 2005). This brought us to believe that in cycle two we should first return to the theoretical framework of foresighting, then update evidence about key external and internal development trends, and subsequently update our methodological toolkit. For our methodological procedure, we set the following criteria: it should be structured enough to avoid unnecessary loss of empirical relationships and methodological linkages; but it should be flexible enough to help us respond to various stimuli and requirements “in the field”. As a result, we proposed a modular approach in order to further develop its individual elements without losing a holistic perspective, and respond flexibly to expected demand for specific analytical or foresighting outcomes for social practice, namely for different policy agendas at different levels of governance.

This figure only depicts the most important links between the approach’s individual elements. What follows is their brief description. Subsequently, we characterize the assumed contextual links of the procedure.

Figure 3: A modular approach to generating visions and strategies for the Czech Republic



The theoretical conceptual framework systematically formulates the theoretical background of the overall analytical and foresighting jobs and the resulting interpretative frameworks for the country's possible future development. The comprehensive publication by Potůček, Musil & Mašková (2008) constitutes the fundamental—though clearly not exclusive—source of evidence and inspiration here.

How can we understand the term **space for strategic choices** for the Czech society? Many of these choices are strongly determined by available resources, institutions, cultural traditions. We know, however, that there is always space for them to be affected by concrete decisions or activities that may influence the country's future orientation – *space for strategic choices*. There are two kinds of such decisions. *Decision nodes* represent sovereign decisions by government bodies (grossly simplified: vertical decision making). *Cleavages* represent the country's alternative overall orientations that are determined by the society's socio-cultural development. They are vectors of a myriad of individual decisions (grossly simplified: horizontal decision making). Of course, we do not assume the development to follow exclusively one of the possible decisions or one of the alternatives identified. An increasingly differentiated dynamic society is going to maintain, in one way or another, room for correcting past decisions or for coexistence of several alternatives. Therefore, the main question is which of those alternatives will eventually take over as an important determinant of its future development.

Example cleavage:

A selectively realistic (pragmatic) versus a supranational approach to European integration.

Example decision node:

Complying with the demands of key policy agendas (education, research, development and innovation, defence, security, health care, social services, culture, transportation and information infrastructure etc.)

External trends represent a comprehensive description of the development trends in human civilization as a whole, as well as more specific circumstances that are relevant, above all, to the Euro-Atlantic cultural area. The fact that the Czech Republic has minimum chances to influence these trends identified is a common

denominator to all of them. Therefore, we will treat external trends as independent variables.

Example external trend: "Global inequality as a global threat"

Internal trends characterize the development dynamic of key areas of the Czech Republic and its society. As we know, some of these trends can be better identified than others in a perspective of decades ahead. In their entirety, internal trends are an essential foundation for formulating ideas of possible futures that incorporate assumptions about factors active in societies' fate, i.e., actors, their interests, competencies, and ways they see the world and their places in it.

Example internal trend: "Political system and the institutional framework of governance – not a bed of roses for long-term strategic decisions"

Definition of the European Union's role in the Czech Republic's future development is complicated by the fact that the country already is an EU member. As such, it participates in the shaping of the EU's possible future and, at the same time, it is importantly affected by Europe's legal framework and decisions, which are apparently only somewhat under its control. However, we can be inspired by the growing fund of scholarly literature on this historically unique institutional body. We can try to synthesize the often incoherent, particular evidence about Europeanization processes and about interactions between member states and their institutions, Euroregions, EU bodies and the general public. The EU and the Czech Republic as part of it are located between external and internal trends. The EU's future orientation is going to significantly influence developments in our country. However, the Czech population and political representation will also have enough leeway for specific decisions that will significantly modify that influence – and in turn, influence developments in the Union to some extent.

The criterion of **quality and sustainability of life** and the method of **scenario writing** were already applied in foresighting cycle one. In foresighting cycle two, we applied the scenario writing method once again. We proposed for discussion nine new possible scenarios of the country's future, which characterized the country's different develop-

mental trajectories depending on the political orientation of its governments, on the competence of its ruling elites, on such preferences of its population that might be pushed through against the will of the centre, and ultimately on specific constellations of advocacy coalitions. (Frič – Veselý 2010)

Nine scenarios:

- *Elites facing a protracted crisis*
- *State on a see-saw*
- *Problem of creative society*
- *Exclusivity of good education*
- *Labour market reform: seeking balance in the time of crisis*
- *Splitting society*
- *Extremism starts*
- *Changing climate, changing society*
- *The Czech Republic diverts energy collapse*

We understand **strategic innovations** as changes in established ways of satisfying the country's and its population's existing needs (or finding ways of satisfying new needs) that are expected to positively affect quality and sustainability of life in decades ahead and reach across individual sectors, functional spheres or regions. These can either be top-down strategies or parts thereof that are initiated by central administration (e.g., pension system reform or new ways of addressing an existing agenda) or emerging strategies that are realized—at least initially—through little organized activities by people and institutions based on horizontal communication and collaboration networks. Imitating projects that were successful abroad while respecting the country's cultural specifics may be another form of strategic innovation.

Five strategic innovations have been proposed:

- *Introducing civil service for young people,*
- *Integrating support for tertiary education, R&D, and innovations,*
- *Supporting social economy,*
- *Schools and libraries as community centres in remote areas, and*
- *Full realization of the Czech Republic in the European Union.*

A **collaborating public** joins the process of generating visions and strategies by taking part in formulating scenarios and strategic innovations. Our institutional website, academic

events open to general public, and media presentations of outcomes were the primary means here.

Modular connections of the second foresighting cycle's elements

The outcomes of foresighting rely on the theoretical background and criteria of social development formulated, in line with available generalized knowledge of relevant scientific disciplines about the nature of contemporary societies and the criteria shaping socio-political decision making and practice. Such background and criteria help structure internal and external trends and, in particular, the identification of the space for strategic choices.

The space for strategic choices identified, as a quintessence of the theoretical background, is further applied in formulating strategic innovations and articulating alternative scenarios for the country's possible future development. It is in the scenario writing that we apply evidence on both internal and external development trends.

Scenarios and strategic innovation recommendations are the most suitable candidates for effective communication with the general public (citizens, civic sector organizations, the media, politicians, or officials), given their language and genre.

5 Conclusions – methodological considerations

What principal conclusions can be derived from existing experience of the Center for Social and Economic Strategies with applying a holistic approach to social foresighting?

5.1 It would be difficult to formulate clear predictions of what is going to happen

As Taleb (2007) emphasizes, the sum of things we know little or nothing about greatly exceeds the sum of what we can consider our verified knowledge. "The world is far, far more complicated than we think, which is not a problem, except when most of us don't know it" (ibid: 135). And he continues: „the gains in our ability to model (and predict) the world may be dwarfed by the increases in its complexity—implying a greater and greater role for the unpredicted" (ibid: 136). Nevertheless, he emphasizes the fact that,

time and again, we enjoy taking the wrong assumption that we know much more than we know in reality. The growing complexity of the world and the limited capacities of our knowledge commit us to count on random events we cannot mentally control.

There are forecasts whose realization is much more likely than other alternatives. Such high likelihood is typical of demographic foresights; also, economists often estimate the developmental dynamic of GDP and other economic variables. In both cases, mathematical models are applied, and in both cases, actual developments are often different because reality modifies the assumptions which were critical for the model simulation's validity. The success rate of demographic foresights depends not only on social, economic and cultural changes but also on migration in a world of porous borders. Among the distortive factors of economic foresights is the globalized world economy itself. In spite of that, institutional frameworks and human behaviour have shown relatively high stability. Their developments can be predicted by means of qualitative methods or a combination of qualitative and quantitative procedures.

However, one must bear in mind that developments tend to be turbulent and affected by processes we know little about. Even if we sense something about them, we do not have them under control. And we have even less control if we live in a small country in the heart of Europe, a mere island in the sea of an increasingly globalized world.

5.2 Pay close attention to the external context of the domain whose future we are studying

Clearly, accounts of the country's future would be strongly biased if we did not understand the processes of globalization in general and European integration in particular, given its growing dependence on EU and global developments.

5.3 Choose a conceptual interpretative framework which will organize the cognitive procedure and determine the formulation of useful accounts of the future

Social foresighting is sometimes perceived primarily as a methodological discipline which

focuses on organizing and applying the stock of theories, methods and evidence from different disciplines in a common framework. We know that no single scientific discipline can grasp all aspects of the subject matter. However, when disciplines have to collaborate, they are faced with divergent sets of concepts, perspectives, methods, and cognitive schools. Two extremes may occur under such circumstances. Either the cognitive process will fall apart to disparate activities by the different disciplines, without a common framework or common results, or the perspective of one single discipline will prevail (economics took this role from sociology several decades ago), at the expense of relevance and comprehensiveness, and with a high level of risk that our thinking about the future will come astray.

5.4 Apply a plurality of methods

Any non-trivial foresighting exercise requires a combination of methods. As a rule, the set of methods applied includes both quantitative and qualitative methods. Indeed, some of the more sophisticated forecasting methods (e.g., the Delphi method) have a combination of both built in. This, however, does not mean we can rely on them in any case. In foresighting, we tend to study a highly ambiguous terrain, and therefore, we may arrive at a robust account of the future by confronting and combining the results of different methods. The modular approach to formulating visions and strategies (see Figure 3) is an example of how we can "assemble" the procedure of making and applying foresights into a functional whole.

5.5 Always think in terms of possible alternatives

Accounts of the society's future cannot abstract from the fact that future states will result exclusively from the entire parallelogram of intentions and the resulting decisions and activities by millions of human beings and societal institutions. One must respect the fact that possible futures will be ultimately determined by the different actors' choices of specific intentions, solutions and resulting activities.

Foresighting outcomes are substantially more useful as tools for strategic decision making and more attractive for stakeholders if accounts of

future are formulated in the form of conditioned alternatives (narratives, scenarios).

5.6 Create conditions for participation of different stakeholders in the making and application of foresights

In the field studied by social sciences it would be misleading to think that even the best-equipped team of experts is able to grasp all details of the subject matter. We should do our best to gather and apply in social foresighting sufficient evidence from those who are going to shape the future under inquiry by their decisions and actions. Other conditions being equal, such an approach significantly increases their inclination to learn the evidence gathered in foresighting and use it for better orientation vis-à-vis the growing complexity of societal life and of the problems life brings.

According to our experience, a problem-oriented approach is most suitable for stimulating interest in foresighting production in all those who will have a part in shaping the future. This approach is also better comprehensible for the general public, as opposed to demanding theoretical constructions. Moreover, problem-oriented participative foresighting is useful for discussions about possible and desirable futures because it helps us confront and apply the different values important actors will pursue in the future.

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