

PSSI PERSPECTIVES — 32

# ISTANBUL CONVENTION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: DEBATE DYNAMICS, KEY ACTORS, AND COMMUNICATION RECOMMENDATIONS

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## MAIN FINDINGS

- The Istanbul Convention, signed by the Czech Republic in 2016, has become the focal point of extensive debate in Czech society, reflecting broader political, social, and ideological context.
- Among the public, the issue revolves more around awareness and understanding rather than actual opposition or support for the content of the Convention.
- Advocates see the ratification of the Convention as an opportunity to improve assistance to victims of violence and as having significant importance in the fight against violence.
- Opponents argue that it has a negative impact on so-called “traditional values”. They do not agree with the concept of gender. Their arguments are often associated with political agendas and sometimes take on a conspiratorial dimension, framing the Convention as a means to undermine certain values.
- Opponents of the Convention acknowledge that gender-based violence is a problem, but they do not believe that the Convention addresses this issue or that it addresses it adequately. According to them, the Convention insufficiently tackles violence and has different goals than helping the victims of violence, or they generally do not consider it necessary for the Czech legal system.
- The discussion over the Istanbul Convention reflects a broader cultural and ideological conflict between the “liberal West” and “traditional values”. The Convention serves more as a symbol of this conflict rather than its content. It has been targeted by the disinformation scene and pro-Russian actors to incite a cultural war.
- Based on the analysis of the online debate on Facebook, negative connotations prevail in discussions about the Istanbul Convention. Actors who express opposing views concerning the Convention, such as Jindřich Rajchl, Tomio Okamura, and representatives of other opposition and non-parliamentary parties, garner the highest number of interactions.
- Among the leading critics of the Convention are conservative politicians, especially from the governing ODS and KDU-ČSL parties, as well as the opposition ANO and SPD. They argue that existing domestic law already provides sufficient protection against violence and that the Convention poses a threat to “traditional values.”
- The current Czech government is not united in its position on the convention and is not a leading actor communicating about it.
- The Church’s communication line is important, as it involves not only the Church itself but extends into the political realm. Conservative political parties, which traditionally (such as KDU-ČSL) or less traditionally (for example ANO) rely on Christian values as part of their ideology, often refer to these values, thus emphasizing the significance of the Church’s stance on the Convention.
- Non-governmental organizations strive to inform the public about the Convention’s purpose, while most of the Church institutions oppose ratification out of concern for preserving “traditional values”.
- According to non-governmental organizations, debunking disinformation is not necessarily the best approach because it is challenging, and, in general, convincing people who already believe in disinformation is difficult. Taking an independent path and communicating important information about the Istanbul Convention is more effective.
- The media coverage of violence against women and on the Istanbul Convention has evolved. Media outlets are better at communicating about these issues, are more willing to listen to criticism, and are more interested in addressing the problem.
- The public responds to these topics with fewer negative reactions when presented by men compared to when presented by women.

## COMMUNICATION RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Personal Stories Combined With Hard Data:** One effective communication strategy is the combination of personal stories of affected individuals, illustrating the impact of violence (such as low penalties for domestic violence) and the need for support, along with specific statistics and research demonstrating the extent of the problem in the Czech Republic (such as an insufficient number of shelters, etc.).
- **Focus on Solutions (Specific Problems) and Possibilities For Change:** It is also crucial to clearly identify and present shortcomings in the current system and the opportunities that ratification of the Istanbul Convention could bring. It is essential to highlight how the Convention can help address existing problems and bring positive changes, using stories of victims that illustrate system failures and the need for change.
- **Voice of Experts:** Involving experts who can provide in-depth insights into the Istanbul Convention and its impact is also an effective communication strategy. It could be beneficial to provide space for experts in traditional mainstream media and, considering the declining trust in mainstream media, even in more tabloid-style outlets.
- **Inspiration From Abroad:** A possible communication strategy is drawing inspiration from countries that have ratified the Convention. This may include citing specific examples where ratification has helped, and the negative scenarios predicted by opponents have yet to materialize or presenting possibilities for how these experiences could be applied in the Czech context.
- **Broader Aspects of the Seriousness of the Issue:** It is also necessary to highlight the cost of violence to society regarding lost productivity and increased costs for police work, the judiciary, and healthcare. It is crucial to emphasize that violence does not have only individual impact but also economic and social consequences. The goal is to understand that prevention is essential for reducing these costs.
- **Continuous Awareness Raising and Positive Campaigning:** Last but not least, when discussing violence and the Istanbul Convention it is essential to persist, keeping the topic alive, consistently open for discussion, and stay balanced without dominance by opponents. The goal is regular discourse and keeping the issue in the public consciousness. A positive campaign targeting people who may not know much about the topic, do not have a clear stance on it, and are still deciding whether to support the ratification of the Istanbul Convention is crucial in this regard.

## INTRODUCTION

The Istanbul Convention has become one of the most discussed international treaties in the Czech environment. While for some, it represents a pathway to strengthen the rights of victims of violence and a significant step towards zero tolerance for violence, for others, it is a source of concern regarding the potential threat to “traditional values.” This analysis delves into the dynamics and key actors shaping the discourse around the Istanbul Convention in the Czech Republic. Semi-structured interviews conducted with the government’s Human Rights Commissioner, a representative from the media (Respekt), a representative from a non-governmental organization (Czech Women’s Lobby), and last but not least, a legal expert were important for research and overall analysis. The analysis was also based on research using OSINT tools. Official government websites, ministries, and press releases related to the Istanbul Convention were explored. Analytical social media tools such as CrowdTangle were used to monitor discussions around the Istanbul Convention on platforms like Facebook. Additionally, websites, publications, and statements of non-governmental organizations involved in women’s rights and the Istanbul Convention in the Czech Republic were analyzed. Finally, Google Advanced Search was utilized using a keyword query<sup>1</sup>.

The Istanbul Convention has become one of the most discussed international agreements in the public sphere. Although the Czech Republic, as a member of the Council of Europe, participated in shaping the text of the Istanbul Convention, there was little discussion about it on the domestic ground. The Convention was not widely talked about in the Czech Republic, not even during its finalization in 2010-2011.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the agreement was [signed](#) under the government of Bohuslav Sobotka, composed of the Social Democracy (ČSSD), ANO, and Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU-ČSL) parties. However, there was again little mention of the Convention afterward. When the migration wave started in 2015 and 2016, followed by disinformation related to the term “gender” in 2017 and 2018, and finally, the interest of the Church in the form of the critical [speech](#) about the Convention by Monsignor Piřha, the Convention became an important agenda for the Christian conservative and nationally conservative political spectrum. According to the expert interviews, a significant amount of disinformation and attacks on gender and women’s rights aimed to open this issue, but in a completely different understanding, at the public level, and to discredit the adoption of the Convention. Passages from the Convention were deliberately taken out of context to scare the public and halt the signing and, later, the Convention’s ratification. Disinformation flourished, especially when issues related to abortion and registered partnerships were being discussed. The Convention thus became the subject of interest primarily as part of efforts by disinformation networks and pro-Russian actors to incite a cultural war, a struggle between the “liberal West” and “traditional values.” It was primarily those who opposed the Convention that expressed their views on it. However, in many cases, ideology prevails over the actual content of the Convention in the Czech context, with ideological opponents often lacking arguments and being unable to explain why ideology matters so much to them.

In 2023, the government [approved](#) continuing the Convention’s ratification process. In January 2024, the ratification of the Convention was discussed in the Senate, but it fell short of two votes for adoption. According to a interviewed human rights expert, this also reflects the partial success of efforts and attempts to explain to politicians (not only) what the Convention is, what it contains and does not contain, and why the Czech Republic should ratify it. Dialogues with those working with victims of violence were also helpful. While in the Chamber of Deputies, the ratification of the Convention is strongly supported by

<sup>1</sup> “istanbulská úmluva” OR “istanbulské úmluvy” OR “istanbulské úmluvě” OR “istanbulskou úmluvou” OR “istanbulskou úmluvu”

<sup>2</sup> An interesting fact, according to journalist Silvie Lauder, is that in the years 2010-2011, Daniela Kovářová served as the Minister of Justice, and she is now a strong opponent of the Istanbul Convention.

politicians, especially from the Mayors and Independents (STAN), TOP 09, and the Pirates parties, it faces opposition from opposition parties (especially Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), but also ANO), conservatives, and churches. The largest of the current government parties, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), has mixed views. Thus, the Czech Republic is among the six countries that signed the Istanbul Convention but have yet to ratify it.<sup>3</sup>

## PUBLIC SENTIMENT REGARDING THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

Although a portion of the public perceives the Istanbul Convention as a tool to address the growing sensitivity to gender-based violence and sexual violence, there is also a significant group that relies on disinformation and questions the need for this Convention. Interestingly, even opponents of the Convention recognize that gender-based violence is a problem, but they do not believe that the Convention would adequately address or solve this issue. It is crucial to realize that the public debate about the Istanbul Convention often goes beyond the content of the Convention itself and becomes a symbol of broader social and political tension and ideological and cultural conflict, including issues related to gender, LGBTI rights, and “traditional family values”. Similar tensions and conflicts accompany most key political events, such as the presidential elections 2023 (when the current President Petr Pavel expressed support for the Convention during the campaign), and international political situations, such as the war between Russia and Ukraine.

The [survey](#) conducted by the STEM agency in March 2024 showed that despite the majority of the population not having a complete understanding of the content of the Istanbul Convention (37% are unfamiliar with the term, 32% know the term but are unsure of its meaning), most are in favor of its implementation (38% rather yes, 36% definitely yes). Although initially, more men knew what the term “Istanbul Convention” meant; primarily women tended to support the Convention after obtaining information. This fact suggests that it is more a matter of awareness and understanding rather than genuine opposition or support for the content of the Convention. According to the survey, political preferences of supporters and opponents also reflect the voting in the Senate. Voters of parties such as the Pirates and STAN are more positive towards the Convention, while voters of ANO, SPD, and ČSSD (SOCDEM) are more skeptical or opposed to the Convention. The position of the governing ODS voters is unclear from this survey, but based on the mixed opinions of party representatives, a similar dynamic can be expected among their voters. This political dynamic reflects the depth of societal divisions, which relate not only to the content of the Convention but also to the political attitudes and values of the population.

## MAIN ACTORS IN COMMUNICATION CONCERNING THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

### Political Actors

The current Czech government is not to be found among the main actors communicating about the Convention, which, according to journalist Silvie Lauder, ultimately contributed to its non-ratification in January. Although the government sent the Convention for ratification to the Senate, it could have made a more noticeable effort for its approval, as government parties have differing views on the Convention. Another problem, according to an interview with a human rights expert, is the need for more active communication from some members of the government, especially the Minister of Justice and the Prime Minister. Among the main critics of the Convention are conservative politicians (especially from the governing ODS and KDU-ČSL and the opposition ANO and SPD), who argue that existing Czech law provides sufficient pro-

<sup>3</sup> Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia.

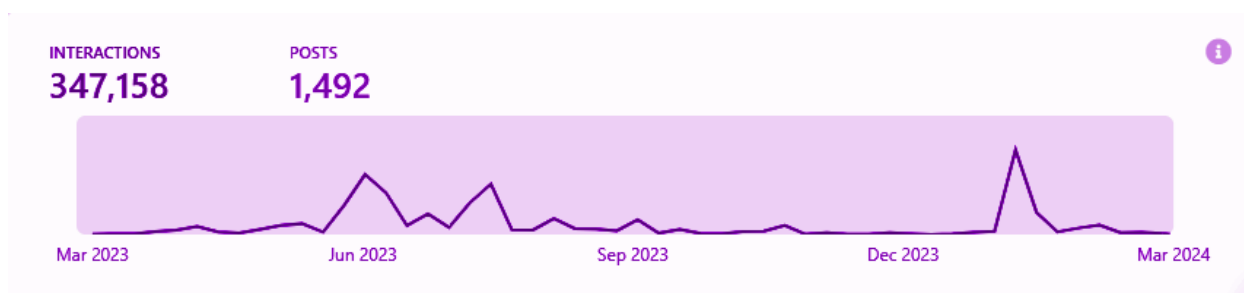
tection against violence and that the Convention threatens “traditional values.” Additionally, some male politicians [argue](#) that the Convention discriminates against men. In July 2023, there was even an [initiative](#) in the Senate that strongly opposed the adoption of the Convention (including senators from STAN).

Generally speaking, political opponents of the Convention primarily have issues with the [term](#) “gender,” labeling it as ideological. According to them, the Convention inadequately addresses violence and has different goals, or they generally do not [consider](#) it necessary for the Czech legal system. Among the most visible opponents of the Convention is Senator Zdeněk Hraba, who is active on social media platforms such as Facebook. In his view, the fight against violence against women, children, and vulnerable individuals [needs](#) to be intensified, but the Convention mixes ideological concepts into its text.

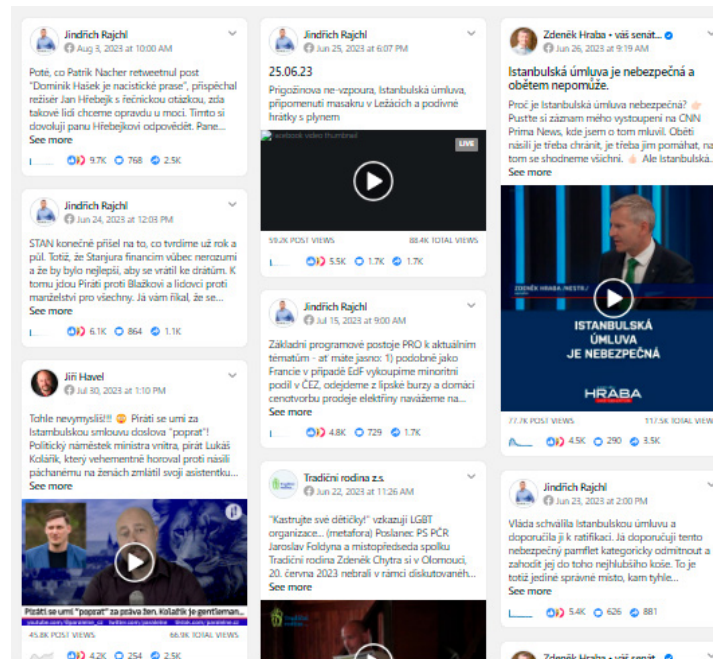
On the other hand, supporters, including the government’s Human Rights Commissioner Klára Šimáčková Laurenčíková, [state](#) that the Convention aims to prevent violence and provide victims and their children with adequate assistance, protection, and support. They argue that there are shortcomings in providing this assistance in many respects in the Czech Republic. According to some politicians, ratifying the Convention would mean better assistance to victims of violence, including legal and psychological support and medical services, which are considered key aspects in combating violence against women. Some supporters also argue that there are economic reasons for ratifying the Convention. They argue that adopting the Convention could lead to improvements in the protection of victims of domestic violence and thus reduce the costs associated with the treatment and rehabilitation of victims.

Some politicians also emphasize the symbolic significance of ratifying the Convention, which would show that the Czech Republic takes the fight against domestic violence and violence against women seriously. Among the prominent political supporters of the Convention are representatives of the Pirates, STAN, as well as TOP 09, and some senators from ODS or KDU-ČSL. Minister of the Interior V. Rakušan, Minister for European Affairs M. Dvořák, Minister of Foreign Affairs J. Lipavský, and also the President of the Czech Republic, P. Pavel, are calling for ratification of the Convention.

Negative connotations prevail when it comes to the **online debate about the Istanbul Convention on social media**, especially on Facebook. The graph below shows that over the past year, the Istanbul Convention was mentioned in a total of 1,492 posts on Czech Facebook. Based on the screenshot below, it can be observed that the actors expressing negative views about the Convention achieved the highest number of interactions. Most frequently, posts from the chairman of the non-parliamentary party Law, Respect, Expertise (PRO), Jindřich Rajchl, followed by the aforementioned senator Zdeněk Hraba, can be seen. Other political opponents of the Convention, who have had many interactions include the chairman of the opposition party SPD, Tomio Okamura, or representatives of non-parliamentary parties such as Tricolour and Freedomites. Generally, it can be said that politicians’ opinions prevail in this regard. On the other hand, among the most interacted posts, we can also find mainstream media (ČT24, CNN Prima News) or statements from government representatives (J. Lipavský, V. Rakušan).







## Non-Governmental Organizations

Supporters and opponents of ratification of the Istanbul Convention can also be found among non-governmental organizations, although supporters of the Convention prevail in this area. An important voice advocating for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the Czech Republic is the coalition “Voice against Violence” (“Hlas proti násilí”), led by the Czech Women’s Lobby (ČŽL), with Amnesty International being part of it. ČŽL brings together nearly 40 organizations assisting women and working in the field of gender equality. The coalition played a role in signing the Istanbul Convention by the then-Czech government and actively lobbied for its ratification. Organizations such as PROFEM and Rosa also play a significant role in supporting the ratification of the Convention.

In their communication, these organizations focus more on a positive campaign to inform the audience with little knowledge about the Convention. They believe there are better approaches than debunking disinformation, as it is challenging and generally difficult to convince those who already believe in it otherwise. Instead, they find it more effective to communicate the essential information about the Convention.

Among other organizations and groups supporting the ratification of the Istanbul Convention are Amnesty International, the Czech Women’s Union (Equal Opportunities), the Association for Integration and Migration, and the Association for Social Responsibility. These organizations actively inform the public about the Convention’s importance and **collect** signatures for its ratification.

On the other hand, the organization Traditional Family, along with the Alliance for Family, is the primary opponent of the Convention, and has initiated a **petition** to reject its ratification. The organization argues that the Convention cannot address violence against women and is merely an ideological gender fraud. These organizations are generally key players in the Czech debate on gender issues, abortion, and the rights of homosexual couples. They have strong political **connections** and **lobby** among Members of Parliament and ministries.

## Media

According to journalist Silvie Lauder, the media coverage of the topic of violence against women has improved, as they are aware of the importance of the issue and approach it more sensitively, utilizing data and knowledge from experts. While in the past, before the Convention was signed, these topics were trivialized and covered with insufficient seriousness, the situation is improving today. The media now communicate better about the issue of violence against women and the Istanbul Convention, they are willing to listen and accept criticism regarding language and formulations. There is also a greater willingness to inform and increased interest in these issues.

According to an interview with a legal expert, there is also interest in opinions from professionals such as lawyers or academics. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the public reacts to these topics with fewer negative responses when presented by men than by women. This could result from gender stereotypes, leading to higher criticism when a woman presents the topic. Czech mainstream media are mostly neutral in communicating about the Convention, providing information about its essence, presenting arguments from both sides and conducting interviews with experts.<sup>4</sup> However, despite the improvement in media coverage, a problem arises from the **declining** trust of Czechs in traditional mainstream media. Another issue is the active disinformation scene, where these topics can be distorted or presented one-sidedly and where the Convention is mostly not accepted. Generally, though, the Istanbul Convention is a minor topic for outlets known for long-term spread of disinformation.

## Other Actors

Among other actors communicating about the Istanbul Convention are **experts** from the fields of **law** and **sociology**, who provide factual information and, in the vast majority of cases, are supporters of the adoption of the Convention.

The role of the **Church**, which is generally opposed to the Convention, has already been partially indicated (see the critical speech about the Convention by Monsignor Piřha above). Church communication often emphasizes that the Istanbul Convention threatens “traditional values” and the family structure. Church communication is relatively important in this regard, as it extends beyond just the Church itself, reaching into the political realm, where conservative politicians, who traditionally (KDU-ČSL) or perhaps less traditionally (ANO) rely on Christian values as part of their ideology, invoke Christian Church values. On the other hand, the Church cannot be generalized, as reactions to the convention **are not** uniformly adverse, even within the Church community.

The analysis shows that the debate on the Istanbul Convention is (not only) politically polarized and driven by various interests and ideologies. While some politicians and organizations see the Convention as a tool to protect victims of violence and prevent gender-based violence, others have concerns about its impact on “traditional values” and the legal system. The media are crucial in reporting on this controversial issue and debunking disinformation. Non-governmental organizations strive to inform about the purpose of the Convention and dispel myths, while religious institutions oppose ratification due to concerns about preserving “traditional values.” Generally, however, it can be said that the Convention poses a problem mainly for those who fear changes in society, and rather than being about the Convention itself, it is about the so-called cultural war between the “liberal West” and the “traditional values”.

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<sup>4</sup> Out of the 13 recorded media outlets, 11 reported on the Istanbul Convention neutrally, one positively, and one negatively..