

## COUNCIL NEWSPAPERS ON HOUSING. ONLY MOUTHPIECES OF THE GOVERNING COALITION?

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*The study presents an analysis of the communication of the currently highly salient topic of housing in the council newspapers of three Czech towns that differ in terms of their proportion of municipal flats. A quantitative content analysis did not confirm the presumed massive favouring of the governing coalition in the pre-election period. A qualitative analysis documented how communication on the topic of housing is influenced by the editorial policies of municipal periodicals. By changing them, the new administrations of towns can increase the space dedicated to presentation of their own housing policies or set the standards for communication on this topic. The third way is the PR-like manner of selective choice of non-conflicting parts of the local housing policies that portray the town leaders in a proactive role.*

**Key words:** council newspaper; local government; housing policy; content analysis; Czech Republic.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Elections are a celebration of democracy and free media are its watchdog. Does this, however, also apply on the local level and in a country whose history of democracy is not particularly long, such as the Czech Republic? In Germany, a neighbouring country whose media standards are considerably more developed, a content analysis of local newspapers showed that regardless of the quality work of news journalists concerning a diversity of topics and their relatively high independence rate, local newspapers tend to portray a harmonious local world in a rather uncritical way (Arnold, Wagner 2018). In other countries, there has also been an increasingly strong conviction that local newspapers do not contribute to local political life and local democracy as much as they used to (Franklin 2006). In the Czech Republic, local topics are easily marginalized in local newspapers because of commercialization pressure (Waschková and

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Císařová 2016), and the conditions for local reporting have also been deteriorating (Metyková and Císařová 2020). A missing legislative framework and weak support from the state towards local media result in their degradation and the extension of 'information deserts', in other words, regions with no independent media coverage of current affairs (EUI, Štětka and Hájek 2021, 14). Can periodicals published by municipalities be oases where one can quench one's information thirst? Or do they merely water the soil farmed by the governing elites and increase their chance for a voter harvest in the election?

The Czech Republic is characterized by a fragmentation of local government (Illner 2011). Considering the wide range of municipality sizes, the nature of local elections is not uniform, although they are subject to unified election regulations. There are several worlds of communal elections existing in parallel (Balík et al. 2015). In the smallest municipalities with several hundred inhabitants, the electoral lists frequently contain individual candidates that the inhabitants are familiar with or there is only a single electoral list, so the voters do not have a choice (Hájek and Balík 2020). The idea of existence of media plurality in such a limited space is far detached from reality and possibly also from the citizens' expectations. In such conditions, a municipal periodical, if published, becomes a very important source of information on local matters. In municipalities, towns and town districts with several thousand to tens of thousands of inhabitants, voters often choose individual candidates from various electoral lists, and most of them have no idea that this personalized choice is more of an illusion than genuine support for individual candidates (Lebeda 2009). The question as to whether the municipality-owned media play the role of a mouthpiece for the governing coalition is a pressing issue particularly in municipalities of this size. This fact may be documented with lawsuits demanding enforcement of the Press Law (Oživení 2016) or non-recognition of local elections held under unfair conditions in the election campaign. The judicial decision on invalidation of elections to the municipal assembly of the town of Strakonice was a breakthrough, although the reasoning concerning unfair access to the municipality-owned media was not part of the essential basis for the judgments made by the regional court and the Constitutional Court (Hájek and Balík 2020).

The voting in large towns, particularly in regional cities, is closest to the national-level elections. Voters decide which political party or political movement, active on the national level, they will vote for. Notable cases from regional centres are even covered in nationwide media. None of these periodicals are, however, distributed free-of-charge to all households, in contrast to municipality periodicals, which are frequently distributed in this way.<sup>2</sup> Local media therefore have the potential to significantly influence the decisions of voters. In Brno, the second largest Czech city, a communist member of the municipal assembly decided to crop his text 'The Elections Are Coming' after the head of the legal department of the municipal office notified him that contributions published prior to the coming elections cannot be written as an election campaign (Říha 2018). In contrast, according to an assembly member with the coalition Piráti and Starostové, *Olomouc Newspaper* remained 'the mouthpiece' of the governing coalition after the election, which was documented by the fact that the party could only express itself when answering an opinion poll question designed by the city council (Zelenka 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the case of regional government newsletters, the analysis of which could constitute a comparative case for this study. The quality of subnational democracy in the Czech Republic and Poland from the perspective of Dahl's theory of democracy has been discussed in this journal by Maškarinec (2023).

Is local democracy in the largest municipalities also in danger due to unbalanced political communication in municipality-owned media? And is it wrong if mayors of large cities, who, according to authors such as Barber (2013), have the authority to manage the most pressing current issues, take hold of channels to directly communicate the visions of the cities they govern? The first question concerns the responsiveness of local government, which strengthens the input legitimacy of a democratic regime. Efficient problem-solving is related to the output legitimacy (Scharpf 1999; Vetter and Kersting 2003). To maintain democracy, both perspectives need to be reconciled. This fact needs to be taken into consideration within analyses of the functioning of council newspapers, as well as the subsequent recommendations regarding their regulation, whether in electoral or media legislation.

Existing analyses of municipal newspapers usually have a normative framework and are topic-unspecific when it comes to the political content. They favour analysis of the entire content without any link to municipal policies. When quantifying the references to governing parties or the voices from the opposition, they frequently do not differentiate between important and marginal topics. In contrast, the present study is based on two assumptions. First, local politics are not made only prior to the elections. It does not only matter whether the authorities at the town hall use the council newspapers as a tool for free-of-charge election campaign, in other words, whether they attempt to preserve the gained positions using means that are not available to their pre-election rivals. It is also important to pay attention to how the local policymaking in municipal periodicals is communicated by new or renewed municipal coalitions established after the elections. Second, the salience of various political topics differs. An interconnection between the input and output perspectives for local democracy legitimacy is more easily achievable through analysis of communication focused on the pressing issues of municipalities and their citizens.

This paper aims to supplement existing knowledge on topic-focused analysis of council newspapers both prior to elections and after them. We intend to find out in what way local politicians communicate a particular topic via the newspapers in various periods. In our opinion a good choice of a topic is one that has shifted from being a 'partisan' to a 'valence' issue (Clegg and Farstad 2021); i.e., a topic that does not only build the profile of one party but is considered important by most parties. Housing and its affordability, in the context of large cities, is currently a globally relevant issue (Wetzstein 2017). In addition, major Czech cities show not only the increasing, but also the path-dependent saliency of the housing issue (Ryšavý and Sedláková 2022). Local housing policies reflect both the intensive increase in prices, the income ratio after 2015 (Delmendo 2022) and the decision-making of local politicians since the reestablishment of the local administration after 1989. For decades, privatization of municipal housing stock represented typical local housing policies. 'It was not until cities had almost entirely freed themselves from the role of owning housing stock that local politicians began to treat housing as a more serious issue and devote more attention to it.' (Ryšavý and Sedláková 2022, 309). With a boom in housing prices, people have begun to prioritize support for housing among other state social policies (Tuček 2018). Politicians competing for voter support have not been able to sidestep a topic which most of their predecessors preferred to let the market resolve.

We ask whether the availability of housing has become a mere slogan in the pre-election political marketing; something that cannot be omitted regarding the

situation on the housing market. An answer to this research question is determined based on a content analysis of local newspapers; the analysis involves three out of the ten biggest cities in the Czech Republic. All the three cities have been similarly affected by the housing availability crisis, but their histories of local housing policies differ. In Olomouc, the municipal housing stock has been almost completely sold. In contrast, the city of Brno and its districts own several tens of thousands of flats at present. The political representation in the selected cities consists of a similar combination of political subjects, but they may differ in the way they politically communicate the topic of housing. An analysis of council newspapers allows us to compare the content of this communication in various periods of the election cycle. Put briefly in the main research question, we ask who is connected in council newspapers to the topic of housing, where, when and how.

## 2 COUNCIL NEWSPAPERS IN THE WORLD OF LOCAL MEDIA AND LOCAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION?

City hall bulletins, council newspapers and municipal-owned media. Periodicals with these and similar labels represent a distinctive means of communication. In the Czech Republic and elsewhere, they often do not receive much attention from political scientists and media studies (see e.g., Kurp 1994, 168-169). Interestingly, local administrations of numerous Czech municipalities publish their own printed media. Although, from the legislative viewpoint, Czech city newspapers are regarded as media, they may be fairly defined as council publicity tools (Waschková and Císařová 2015, 70). They are oftentimes distributed free of charge to all households. This luxury is available, particularly for large cities, thanks to their budgets; concerning the nature of the current housing crisis, the study is particularly focused on them.

For a long time, pioneering work on analyses of council newspapers has been conducted in the civil sector particularly by the association OŽIVENÍ (hlasnatrouba.cz; see also Kužílek 2006; Kameník and Kužílek 2015; Oživení 2018). Older master's theses and a legal analysis by Svatošová (2006) are referred to in studies published by political scientists (Fleissner and Müller 2016; Soukop and Hurtíková 2020) as well as by media analysts (Waschková and Císařová 2015).

The pioneering activities of the non-profit sector did not lack impact. An amendment of the Press Act (Tiskový zákon 2013) included a definition of printed municipal or regional periodicals. It defined the publishers' obligation to provide objective and balanced information and give appropriate space for opinions of members of the municipal assembly. Council newspapers were, however, not explicitly labelled as public service media: in accordance with the relevant legislation, these include Czech Radio, Czech Television, and the Czech News Agency. Unfortunately, the amendment complicated the understanding of the basic nature of council newspapers (Waschková and Císařová 2015).

Several authors have, nevertheless, inferred that council newspapers may be understood as public service media and as such should meet the respective requirements. There have been proposals for further amendments of the legislation and more rigorous enforcement of existing rules. One of the motives is that financing from public funds should be under public scrutiny. Other normatively oriented research projects are based on McQuail's social

responsibility theory or Habermas' concept of critical publicity (Fleissner and Müller 2016). Regardless of the starting point, the criticism is targeted on the situation where council newspapers provide most of the space for the currently governing political party, movement or coalition. In such cases, the council newspapers are referred to as 'mouthpieces of politicians' who govern in the municipalities (ibid.). An amendment to the Press Law (2013), which emphasized the need for opinion pluralism, did not manage to change the vast prevalence of promotion of the governing politicians' opinions and attitudes (Kameník and Kužílek 2015; Soukop and Hurtíková 2020). Even over a span of four or five years, the quality indicators monitored by the civic association Oživení in newspapers, published by the largest local governments, did not show any significant positive difference. In some of them, the situation deteriorated (Kameník and Trunkátová 2018). An international comparison revealed greater qualitative differences among newspapers in individual countries (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland) than in the quality of newspapers on the national level (Oživení 2018). Concerning the input legitimacy, the non-profit organization's study evaluates the status quo as follows: 'Local periodicals commonly do not fulfil their potential role as a tool promoting higher participation of citizens in local governance, as they do not provide the citizens with sufficient information and options for participation, nor do they provide an overview of various opinions on local matters' (ibid., 12).

Why should we pay attention to printed council newspapers in an era of increasing attention to utilization of social media in political communication both in the West and the East? (cf. Lilleker and Jackson 2011; Bruns et al 2016; Surovič and Štětko 2018; Vaccari and Valeriani 2022) It is particularly social media that gave rise to the hope of overcoming the present information monopolies (Hájek 2013). It might seem that the role of traditional printed media, including the specific branch of council newspapers, would gradually fade particularly because of the growing influence of social media. Having said that, it would be inappropriate not to pay attention to them.

One of the reasons is the fact that studies of social media are usually nationally focused (one of the exceptions is Seizov 2018). The fact that less attention is paid to relationships between media and local politics, compared to the national and currently also international or transnational levels, is also pointed out by researchers from the area of local political communication (Kurz 1994; Tenschler 2013; Baugut, Fawzi and Reineman 2017). They frequently observe the relationships among journalists working for local media or directly among the owners of these media as one party, and local politicians as the other, as well as the factors shaping these relationships (Hájek, Vávra and Svobodová 2016; Baugut, Fawzi and Reineman 2017), or they conduct more complex case studies concerning the relationships between local media and local bodies (e.g., Mecfal 2014; Mecfal 2016).

Local politicians are interested in services such as Facebook and Twitter, but still consider traditional channels of communication with potential voters to be more important (Larsson and Skogero 2018). They do not attempt to leave out journalists and address the public directly. For online communication of politicians, journalists represent an important target group (Bernhard and Dohle 2015). In contrast, for journalists, activities of local administrations on social networks serve as an information source to cover local issues, which complements, rather than replaces, traditional ways of information retrieval (Harmatiy and Kravčák 2021). Although it may not be the final stage of

development, according to a recent study ‘the local newspaper is more important for the local politicians’ popularity than Facebook’ (Elvestad and Johannessen 2017, 33). After all, what kind of media should meet the demand from politicians better than media published by the cities themselves?

### 3 METHODS AND DATA

Quantitative content analysis is one of the basic methodological procedures in both media studies and political science (Berelson 1952; Neuendorf 2017). A more topic-specific analysis differs from existing studies of municipal periodicals, which usually focus on the degree of politicization and plurality of opinions (Kameník and Kužílek 2015; Fleissner and Müller 2016; Soukop and Hurtíková 2020). It allows for a comparison of the extent to which politicians and other local bodies express themselves in local newspapers in relation to a particular topic in both the synchronic and the diachronic perspective. The former involves local contextualization, while the latter captures the dynamics of media representation of politicized messages in relation to the election cycle.

As with other cases, even here the employed quantitative content analysis has its limits that may be overcome in various ways. A rather analytically simple option would be the extension of the number of compared local periodicals. Another very interesting option might involve a confrontation with the conclusions from a similar analysis focused on another topic having a similar impact in local politics.<sup>3</sup> The present study chose a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis of local periodicals whose nature was closest to interpretive reading (Kronick 1997). The qualitative analysis focused on the politicized content of the message and its contextualization throughout the changes of the local political representations, which is reflected even in the management, preparation and content of council newspapers. Through reading of the texts, the number of relevant media articles was reduced. It was determined that in some of the texts, that fulfilled the criteria for inclusion into the quantitative content analysis, the prevailing topic was not housing but e.g., transport, safety, cleanliness and greenery in the city, etc. Deeper insight into the changes in the applicability of the housing issue on the pages of council newspapers was gained through analysis of local government documents and interviews with selected city representatives and officers whose scope of responsibilities includes housing policy.

The currently prevailing quantitative analyses of council newspapers showed an inverse trend; they either concerned a greater number of periodicals over a shorter time span, typically the pre-election period (the association Oživení), or focused on a smaller number of periodicals over a longer period: from the election year and analyses of 11 regional cities (Soukop and Hurtíková 2020?)<sup>4</sup> to a systematic selection from three deliberately chosen periodicals published by ‘progressive’ municipalities over a ten-year period (Fleissner and Müller 2016). The present study chose three newspapers from three regional cities, particularly Brno (*Metropolitan*), Olomouc (*Listy/Newspaper*), and Pardubice (*Zpravodaj/Newsletter*). With certain exceptions, the cities of importance for

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<sup>3</sup> The easiest choice would probably be the topic of local transportation, which has a similar or higher saliency in election campaigns (cf. Hájek and Balík 2020).

<sup>4</sup> A quantitative analysis concerning references to the coalition and opposition parties in regional city newspapers over a longer time span was presented in a master’s thesis by Foldyna (2022).

political parties and movements (Soukop and Hurtíková 2020) correspond to the regional centres affected most significantly by increasing housing prices.

Although their indicators differ from ours, previous studies still provide us with important input information. The study conducted by the association Oživení shows that the content of newspapers from Pardubice and Olomouc in 2014 was highly unbalanced, since the space provided for coalition parties was several times bigger. In comparison, the Brno *Metropolitan* was one of the relatively most balanced regional periodicals. Repetitive monitoring of opinion pluralism in municipal periodicals (Kameník and Kužílek 2015; Oživení 2018) suggests a convergence in evaluation. In the election year 2018, the opinion pluralism index<sup>5</sup> of all three newspapers was ranked in the first third out of 65 periodicals evaluated. Nevertheless, concerning the more complex index focusing on the contribution of a periodical in informing citizens about politics and activities of the local administration, *Metropolitan* achieved the top of the ranking, the *Newsletter* of Pardubice was ranked at the end of the first quarter, and *Olomouc Newspaper* was in the second half.

The content analysis presented here, concerning the coverage of the topic of housing, observed the two-year period from November 2017 to October 2019 divided into four periods, so that it covered the entire year preceding the municipal elections taking place in October 2018 as well as the entire year after them. The second period constitutes the six months preceding the elections. The third six-month period is the period after the 2018 municipal elections characterized by the establishment or re-establishment of council coalitions and preparation of the program statement. The first and the last six months may be considered periods not directly related to the elections. A revision of a city's policies may also bring about a change in the manner of political communication towards citizens including communication via council newspapers.

Samples for analysis were articles related to the topic of housing. For this reason, all issues of council newspapers of the three selected cities were first searched for any texts from the delimited period containing the following key words: 'housing', 'houses' and 'flats' and words derived from them (Note: The search for relevant texts was carried out by students of sociology at the Faculty of Arts of Palacký University within the sociological practice courses under the guidance of the first author). The selection was subsequently expanded with texts related to 'home', for instance ones concerning retirement homes, homelessness, or individuals in homeless shelters, etc. A subsequent check of individual sample texts, in contrast, resulted in the exclusion of obviously unrelated ones (for instance ones mentioning parking houses, random mentions of houses in articles related to transportation, etc.).

The basic data set included 254 texts. The number of pages of the individual newspapers ranged from 24 (Pardubice) to 32 (Olomouc) up to 40 (Brno). The periodicals were published monthly in Olomouc and Brno; in Pardubice, there was a summer double issue with the usual number of pages. The analysis of texts considered the different page count of the individual newspapers as well as the missing advertising section in one of the newspapers (*Newsletter*).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The opinion pluralism index expresses the proportion of space allowed for messages different from the governing coalition's opinions from the total space dedicated to political information.

<sup>6</sup> In Brno and Pardubice, periodicals are published even by individual city districts with their own administration. Olomouc does not have such an internal division.

Apart from the location and extent of the texts, individual articles were classified according to their type as advertising, political and non-political texts. The category of political texts contained ones where elected politicians from either the governing coalition or an opposition party were represented. As a result of the elections, some of the opposition parties became coalition parties and, in contrast, some of the parties disappeared from the municipal assemblies because of their low success rate. Non-political texts were sub-divided into ones expressing statements of the city hall’s officers, ones quoting external experts (e.g., architects), and others (articles on the history of housing, etc.). The classification was checked multiple times and minor mistakes in classification were corrected.

TABLE 1: NUMBERS AND STRUCTURE OF THE ANALYSED TEXTS

		Brno	Olomouc	Pardubice	
		METROPOLITAN	NEWSPAPER	NEWSLETTER	Total
Advertising		18	40	X	58
Political	Coalition	26	15	15	56
	Opposition	13	12	3	28
Non-political	Bureaucrats	31	9	16	56
	Experts	4	1	2	7
Others		11	19	19	49
Total		103	96	55	254
<i>Total number of pages</i>		<i>880</i>	<i>768</i>	<i>704</i>	

Source: Brno Metropolitan, Olomouc Newspaper, Pardubice Newsletter. Authors’ own calculation.

#### 4 RESULTS OF THE QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The quantitative content analysis was conducted in accordance with the following research questions: To what extent is the topic of housing politicized in municipal newspapers? In other words: How often is the topic of housing in these newspapers related to local politicians? What is the proportion between the statements of the governing coalition and the opposition parties in relation to housing and when were these statements made? How do individual newspapers under comparison differ? The frequency and extent of the individual types of texts on housing were dependent variables; independent variables were the place (three cities) and time of publication (four six-month periods framing the elections of 2018).

*Whose voice is stronger? The housing market or local politics and administration?* Before we approach the analysis of the extent to which the topic of housing is linked in municipal newspapers to coalition or opposition members of the municipal assembly, it is useful to focus on the overall composition of the set of sample texts. Despite their different numbers of pages, both Brno and Olomouc newspapers contained a similar number of texts concerning housing (102:96), which suggests a higher relative representation in the *Olomouc Newspaper*. When omitting advertising texts, however, there is practically the same number of texts in *Newspaper* and the *Pardubice Newsletter* (56:55), although the latter has fewer pages. As for *Newsletter*, it was unfortunately impossible to analyse the advertising section, since the version available online did not contain it.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> These ‘blank spaces’ involved 5 out of 24 pages of the *Newsletter*. According to the analysis of the association Oživení, focusing on five pre-election issues of the newspapers, the extent of

Notwithstanding this deficit, a comparison of *Metropolitan* and *Newspaper* is sufficiently illustrative. In Brno, the most published texts related to housing were non-politicized (45 % of media statements) and politicized texts (38 %); in Olomouc, the most prominent type were advertising texts (41 %). A distribution over time is illustrated in Figure 2. The pages of the newspapers also document the path-dependent saliency of the housing issue (Ryšavý and Sedláková 2022). In Brno, with its tens of thousands of flats, the topic is addressed by politicians as well as officers. In contrast, in Olomouc, following the almost complete sale of municipal apartments, greater space in the pages of *Newspaper* was dedicated to the market in the form of advertisements commissioned by real estate companies compared to statements by local politicians and administration. These appear in a repeated fashion with the advertisements of one company, which is a rather poor information source for the city's inhabitants. Olomouc *Newspaper* may therefore be regarded as the mouthpiece of the market rather than the governing parties.

*An election voter hunt or a long-standing topic?*

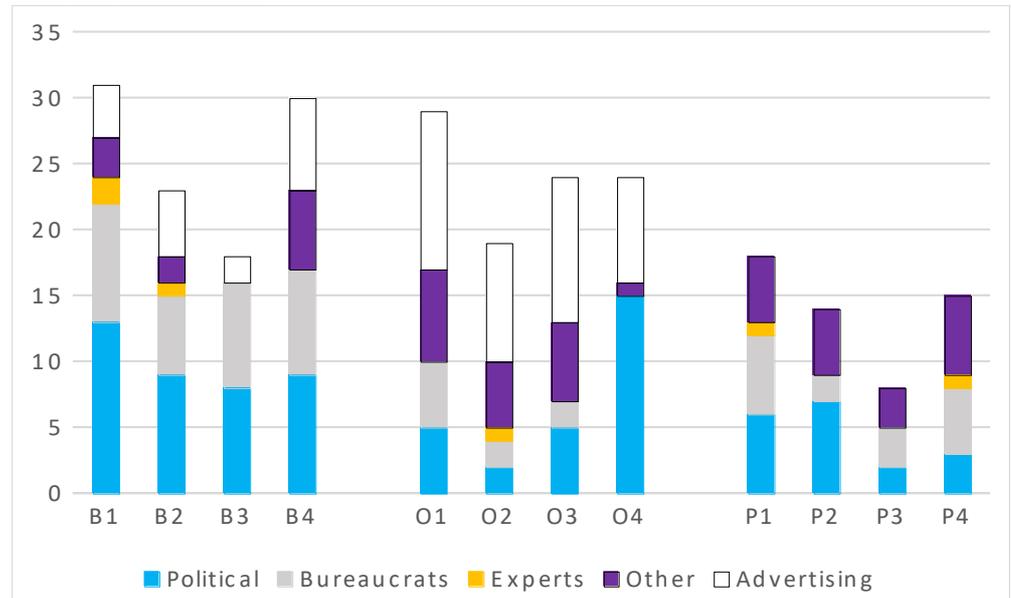
Decision-making on the part of former city representatives certainly matters. Changes may also occur, however, over a shorter time span. The development of representation of political texts within the two-year period under observation may be characterized by three divergent trends (Figures 1, 2). In general, the most stable situation occurred in Brno, whose *Metropolitan* frequently included approximately 2 % of texts on housing related to the political representatives of the city. There was, nevertheless, a visible increase in the proportion of texts attributed to the new coalition governing after the 2018 election and a corresponding reduction of space provided for the opposition. A dramatic increase in politicization of the housing issue following the elections took place in Olomouc, particularly within the new coalition led by the former strongest opposition party. A topic previously neglected by politicians began to receive attention comparable to that in Brno. In contrast, Pardubice manifested a decrease in politicization of the housing issue; following the elections, the topic was not addressed by the opposition, but it was also less frequently addressed by representatives of the governing coalition, which saw a significantly smaller changes compared to Brno and Olomouc. The topic of housing was therefore still most frequently addressed in texts quoting municipal officers and in 'other' texts concerning housing in the past (the section *Traveling through the Past*), invitations to exhibitions related to housing, etc.

As for the political text, from the general viewpoint, all three newspapers provided greater space for coalition politicians. Immediately before the elections, however, the extent was rather smaller. Pardubice was one of the observed cities where the number and extent of political texts addressing housing was the highest in the pre-election period. It was only here, however, that the assumption about the pre-election period being more extensively used by politicians to present their own positions, however, not conclusively. Extra space was dedicated in the *Newsletter* to the housing issue, not due to politicians of the council coalition; as with Brno and Olomouc, it was the opposition who addressed the topic of housing more often before the elections compared to the other periods. In Olomouc, the topic was addressed only by the opposition; in Pardubice it was also mentioned in the preceding and the following periods. In Brno, the voice of the opposition prior to the election was only slightly less represented than texts related to politicians of the council coalition.

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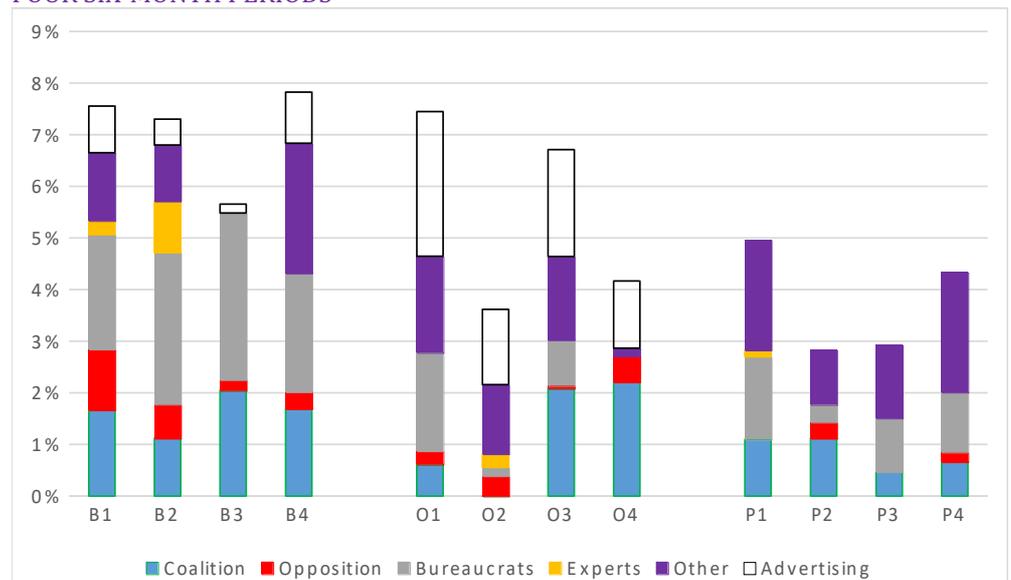
advertising in the three selected cities is rather similar, but the greatest extent was reached in Olomouc (Oživení, hlasnatrouba.cz).

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF TEXTS ON HOUSING IN THE THREE NEWSPAPERS AND FOUR SIX-MONTH PERIODS



Source: Brno Metropolitan, Olomouc Newspaper, Pardubice Newsletter. Authors' own calculation.

FIGURE 2: SPACE TAKEN UP BY TEXTS ON HOUSING IN THE THREE NEWSPAPERS AND FOUR SIX-MONTH PERIODS



Source: Brno Metropolitan, Olomouc Newspaper, Pardubice Newsletter. Authors' own calculation

In summary, while it is generally possible to agree with the repeating finding that municipal newspapers provide more space for representatives of the governing coalition, in relation to the housing issue, it does not happen every time and in every place. A comparison of only three periodicals shows the significant variability of the development in time and space. The results of the quantitative content analysis do not correspond to an explicit assumption that the coalition would attempt to benefit from its position particularly in the pre-election period. A long-neglected topic which gained importance before the 2018 elections provided an opportunity for the opposition parties to make themselves heard as well. A question for the qualitative analysis was therefore how the topic of housing was communicated by political bodies in various periods.

## 5 RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The qualitative analysis indicates how municipal newspapers are used in relation to local housing policies and local policies in general. Our comparison of three cases is based on how housing is presented in the newspapers by the governing coalition through strategic documents, program statements, as well as statements from individual politicians. It subsequently points out how housing is communicated by representatives of the opposition. The elections do not only result in the changes to the structure of the coalition and the opposition, but frequently also in changes to the way local policies are communicated via the newspapers. These changes constitute an important part of the context of the individual statements.

### *Metropolitan (Brno)*

In the existing studies, it was the Brno *Metropolitan*, out of the three newspapers analysed, that was considered the one with the highest quality and which presented a relatively large variety of opinions. There was a twofold principle for publication of the *Metropolitan* valid over the period under observation which declared that members of the editorial office work as journalists, not public relations workers. The content of the newspaper is reviewed by the editorial board representing not only city hall workers but also members of all parties represented in the assembly. In contrast to other cities, the editorial board in Brno does not include city councillors and local politicians do not hold the majority in it. The newspaper has a rather stable list of sections, including *OPINIONS* of representatives of individual parties of the assembly and the mayor's *WORD*. It was particularly in these sections that politicians' statements on housing appeared. A quantitative content analysis showed that prior to the 2018 elections, the voices of coalition and opposition politicians were provided a rather similar space.

The *Metropolitan* provided all opposition parties with the opportunity to prepare topics for the intense stage of the election campaigning, which involved the topic of housing. Compared to the traditionally represented topic of vacant municipal flats, opposition members of the assembly paid more attention to two projects of the city hall coalition. The greatest criticism was targeted on the project Rapid Re-Housing focusing on families living in unsuitable conditions and in danger of homelessness, as well as on the plan for exchange of lucrative houses and apartments owned by the city for land in the vicinity of one of the sports centres that was promoted by the city mayor. The deputy mayor responsible for housing, healthcare, and family policies repeatedly used the opinion section to express support for housing for young people, seniors, and the disabled as well as the housing strategies adopted by the assembly. Most of these topics appeared in the June issue of the year 2018, for which the editors chose the topic 'The city as a developer'. This was an issue presented ongoing construction and reconstruction projects. A several-page article explained when, how, and about what the city assembly decides. No politicians were quoted there. The project Rapid Re-Housing was described through an interview conducted by a journalist with an expert on social housing.<sup>8</sup> A shorter article described the steps undertaken by the city administration following the sudden closing of one of the private housing facilities. The latter issue became another opportunity for the opinion columns

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<sup>8</sup> In the previous issue, the topic of the relocation of the main train station, which had been controversial for years, was addressed by a foreign architect cooperating with the city architect on the urban planning study concerning the locality.

of opposition assembly members, who criticized the city hall's communication with citizens who opposed the moving of people accommodated in the housing facility into their neighbourhood. Neither the opposition nor the coalition parties dealt for instance with the issue of the fairness of the rules for allocation of municipal apartments, which apply to an incomparably greater number of citizens, particularly candidates for rented accommodation (Jančaříková 2018).

Following the municipal elections, Brno saw a transformation of the city hall coalition where some of its previous members were joined by its main critics. The new deputies for social matters and for the matters of housing and city property attempted in the opinion section to present a policy different from the one adopted by the previous administration. If the topic of housing, was one uniting the opposition parties before the elections, after them it began to divide them. The former mayor deflected the criticism from his successors and advocated the policy of the former city coalition. In contrast, a representative of the new opposition party, the populist SPD, criticized even one year later the social housing project, although its continuation was not supported by the new coalition. The topic of housing was addressed briefly, but repetitively even in the columns written by the mayor. This seems like a step towards a change in the structure of the *Metropolitan's* sections that took place later. Apart from the mayor's regular addresses, there were also the so-called *Deputies' words* that also appeared outside the framework of the opinion pages: even the new deputy responsible for housing matters was given space several times to provide more detailed information on the starting and cooperative housing. The increasing prevalence of opinion-based texts from coalition politicians, which was identified by the quantitative analysis of statements on housing, is connected specifically to this obvious transformation of *Metropolitan*.

#### *Newspaper (Olomouc)*

A quantitative content analysis demonstrated the crucial importance of advertising among media statements related to housing in the *Olomouc Newspaper*. It also identified that the topic of housing saw a significant politicization after the elections. The editorial boards of *Olomouc Newspaper* had been politicized even in the previous election period, since the chair of the board was the city mayor and other members were his deputies and councillor, representatives of opposition parties, and the city hall's spokesperson. The city councillors took turns preparing editorials of individual issues,<sup>9</sup> but these were not rich in information. The section *Booked for the Opposition Assembly Members* was located at the end of the newspaper between Sport and Entertainment. Those few texts in the year before the elections that mentioned the topic of housing appeared in two contexts. The first is the subordination of the housing to the city's social policy. A brief description of the city's new strategic plan adopted by the assembly named 'the social sector including housing' as one its pillars (Red 2018, 4). The second context may be labelled as the market context. One of the opposition assembly members pointed out the settlement of a citizens' petition, criticizing the conditions for implementation of a particular developer project. The fact that the importance of the topic of housing availability may be increasing was only admitted by one member of the editorial board – an opposition assembly member, according to whom implementation of the strategic play would 'bring along modernization of the city and better services for citizens,

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<sup>9</sup> An exception to this rule, as interpreted by the editor of the newspaper, was his own editorial in the issue informing on the election results. These were published prior to the election of the new city council.

whether that involved the public spaces and greenery, housing availability, or the transportation quality and safety' (Pejpek 2018, 29).

Following the elections, the political representation of the city underwent changes. The winners, the party ANO 2011, created a new coalition with some of the parties that had refused to cooperate with it in the previous election period. After 2018, the rules for publishing in *Olomouc Newspaper* also changed. The editorial board began to be led by an employee of the marketing department which was subordinate to the mayor's office. Most board members are still members of the council and politicians in general. The editorials are created by the city hall's spokesperson, but individual council members can express themselves in a whole-page editorial interview, which resulted in an increase in the number of references to housing. The editorial board adopted and published the rules which, among other things, delimit the space for statements from assembly members in the section *Opinions of Assembly Members* and in opinion polls on selected topics.

Neither the elections, nor the changes to the editorial policy changed anything about the fact that housing was not established as an independent topic. It instead remained within the framework of the social policy of the city in the program statement of the city council, which mentions 'affordable housing' multiple times within the 'social sector'.<sup>10</sup> The emphasis put in the program statement on 'more readily affordable flats' is accompanied by a goal, a non-ambitious one for a city with a hundred thousand inhabitants, to build 'at least twenty flats under the scheme of affordable housing' (Red 2019, 8). In subsequent interviews, the mayor's deputies (Newspaper No. 3 and 5/2019) provided information on municipal housing projects, piling up adjectives such as 'starting', 'assistance', 'affordable', 'supported', and 'social' housing without giving any detailed explanation. In an opinion poll asking, 'Do you have any ideas for changes in the city's social policy?', representatives of the coalition and the opposition agreed on most of the groups that would deserve support in the housing area: seniors, young families with children, the disabled, and those who cannot afford to pay expensive rents or buy their own housing. The only difference concerns the topic of homeless people, which divides the attitudes of the liberal and the populist part of the opposition. A representative of Pirátská Strana considered homelessness one of the most urgent problems of the city, mentioning the Brno project Housing First as an example worth following. In contrast, a representative of the populist SPD party requested a reduction in 'subsidized social programs intended for maladjusted citizens'. Following the opinion poll, the topic was concluded with an article complemented with a photograph depicting the new mayor making a vigorous gesture while restoring order in front of the railway station, a place strongly linked to the homeless.<sup>11</sup> The almost idyllic image of a caring city hall was later disrupted by articles from other media repeatedly pointing out a legally unsolved transfer of municipal flats built in the past by the city with state support and subsequently transferred to their inhabitants. Even the few flats owned by the city after extensive

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<sup>10</sup> A similar emphasis is evident in the statement from the opposition communist party reflecting on the approved budget: 'For us, the communist party, the social sector is important. We are absolutely against insensitive increasing of rents in flats, nursing homes and barrier-free flats.' (Zima 2019).

<sup>11</sup> A reflection on who deserves support from the city appeared in the Newspaper 9/2019 in responses to the question 'How shall the city solve the problem with drunk individuals and disturbances of public order?' Members of the assembly came up with various forms of repressions. Housing is addressed only exceptionally. The topic is closed with 'a word from the mayor' presenting a plan to offer jobs to those homeless individuals who are willing to work.

privatization proved to be problematic. The opposition criticized the delays in preparation of the promised concept for development of affordable housing as well as the construction of new apartments.

#### *Newsletter (Pardubice)*

According to the results of the quantitative content analysis of municipal newspapers, the case of Pardubice seems to be the opposite of Olomouc. The topic of housing saw depoliticization following the elections. Elements of depoliticization were also manifested in the *Pardubice Newsletter*, published by the city together with a prominent private publisher in the regional press (Vltava Labe Media). According to the journalists interviewed, there are no written rules. The nature of the editorial boards is apolitical (Foldyna 2022, 44), although at least in the past the content of the individual issues used to be consulted with the mayor and her deputy (Hándlová 2010, 152). At present, the texts are approved at a meeting with higher city hall officers (heads of individual departments and of the mayor's office). Political representatives of the city are interviewed (*What is being talked about*) or are quoted in anonymous texts of the editorial office. The opinions of the city assembly members are published in the section *Discussion Forum*. Councillors, higher officers, and representatives of relevant organizations can react to articles and often make use of this option.<sup>12</sup>

As concerns the topic of housing, the pages of *Newsletter* had long been dominated by a long-term project for starting accommodation. Every year, young people were offered several dozen municipal flats under favourable renting conditions. The topic was addressed most frequently by the deputy mayor or a higher officer whose scope of responsibilities involved the project, but it was also mentioned by the mayor in an interview on investments. Another piece of information mentioned was the option combining starting flats with social flats in a more extensive project involving reconstruction of municipal housing stock. Instead of focusing on starting accommodation, the city hall communicated information concerning new projects related to housing in the pre-election period, whether municipal flats or developers' projects on brownfields. Criticism from representatives of two opposition parties received a response from the deputy mayor. After the elections, one of the criticizing parties became part of the re-established city hall coalition. The number of references to starting accommodation and preparations of new projects on housing for seniors and other target groups increased once again.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

For a long period of time, the issue of housing in the Czech Republic had been largely left up to the private initiatives of individuals in need of accommodation and their families. Considering the increasing prices of flats and rents, the affordability of housing represents an increasingly pressing problem for thousands of inhabitants in the three selected cities and those who would like to establish their own households, i.e., particularly young people. The cities differ especially in the way their past political representations dealt with the housing stock that became assets under their management. Privatization of municipal flats has transformed the housing market into an environment with unequal opportunities concerning the factors of location and age. The content analysis

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<sup>12</sup> The most extensive dispute concerning the topic of a waste incineration plant included representatives of two opposition parties.

shows that where privatization progressed most, a municipal newspaper became more of a mouthpiece of the market than the governing coalition in relation to the housing.

It seems, however, that from the perspective of communication of local housing policies via council periodicals, there were no radical differences. Concerning housing, the pages of the municipal newspapers commonly referred to dozens of flats, whether as part of the existing housing stock or as planned construction. From the vantage point of problem-solving related to the housing availability 'it is a drop in the ocean', as the deputy for social policy from Pardubice put it. From the perspective of local political campaigning, however, it may be the visible tip of the iceberg where a dispute over a rather small social housing project conceals the issue of empty apartments and rules for allocation of municipal flats in various city districts (see Brno).

Now let us return to the research question: Who is connected in council newspapers to the topic of housing, where, when and how? The answer is much more complex than presumed in the hypothesis concerning the mouthpiece of governing parties. In other words, those who rule the city use, particularly prior to the elections, the local newspapers as tools for their election campaign. The quantitative content analysis, focusing on the topic of housing and its affordability, did not provide sufficiently robust evidence to support such a statement. If opposition parties are given some space, they may also make use of the pages of municipal periodicals prior to elections. The openness to opinions, other than those stated by the governing parties, does not automatically ensure either critical discussion, or the fulfilment of the standards of public service media on the part of these periodicals. The opposition, as is obvious on the example of the Brno *Metropolitan*, may use the space to express populist criticism of projects focused on socially excluded individuals and try to benefit from manifestations of the NIMBY syndrome among rank-and-file inhabitants of the city. The post-election period saw, however, a considerable change in editorial office policies. The introduction of a new section *Deputies' words* provides the new Brno coalition with an obvious advantage in communication of (not only) the topic of housing towards the citizens.

In Olomouc *Newspaper*, the voice of the market was stronger than that of the local politicians. The new city coalition began to use it to create the image of a caring city hall. Issues are newly addressed through opinion poll questions answered by members of the assembly, as well as the greater space provided for the mayor. In this way, it opened the door for often rather theatrical activities which, however, prevent critical discussion and marginalize the role of the political opposition.

The Pardubice *Newsletter* is closest to the model of a newspaper serving as a PR tool of the city hall (Zavattaro 2010). It is steered by officers who provide space for politicians' statements. What is foregrounded are non-problematic policies focused on young people. It is impossible to expect that those at whom the policies are targeted would constitute most of its target readers. Young people attracted to Pardubice, based on its well-functioning project of starting housing, do not find the newspaper in their mailboxes. Moreover, it is not necessary, as the offers for starting flats are more than sufficiently met by applicants who receive information from other information sources. In contrast, the information on projects, that might potentially raise citizens' disagreement resulting from the NIMBY syndrome, is communicated very carefully.

All three cases investigated show that the policies of the editorial offices have a substantial influence on the way local housing policies and other issues are communicated. The changes in the city's representation may or may not happen after the elections start or substantially affect following changes in editorial office policies. Whether they bring an advantage for the governing coalitions in the next election campaign remains to be investigated in a follow-up study. It is therefore appropriate to conduct an analysis of the content of council periodicals not only in the pre-election period but in combination with an analysis of publishing practices. Only then will it be possible to capture to what extent and in what way the periodicals become the proverbial mouthpieces of the governing political parties or whether they are actually an important tool in communicating policies which might help resolve pressing matters concerning the cities and their inhabitants.

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## OBČINSKI ČASOPISI O STANOVANJSKI POLITIKI. SAMO TROBILA VLADAJOČE KOALICIJE?

*Študija predstavlja analizo komuniciranja trenutno zelo pereče stanovanjske politike v mestnih časopisih treh čeških mest, ki se razlikujejo po deležu občinskih stanovanj. Kvantitativna vsebinska analiza ni potrdila domnevnega množičnega favoriziranja vladne koalicije v predvolilnem času. Kvalitativna analiza je dokumentirala, kako na komunikacijo na temo stanovanjske politike vpliva uredniška politika občinskih periodičnih publikacij. Z njihovo spremembo lahko nove mestne oblasti povečajo prostor za predstavitev lastne stanovanjske politike ali postavijo standarde komuniciranja na to temo. Tretji način je piarovski način selektivne izbire nekonfliktnih delov lokalnih stanovanjskih politik, ki mestne veljake prikazuje v proaktivni vlogi.*

**Ključne besede:** občinski časopis; lokalna oblast; stanovanjska politika; analiza vsebine; Češka.