Research Article

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Academic Citizens: The case of Czech national student organization after the Velvet Revolution

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Abstract: The article analyzes the case of development of the national student organization in the Czech Republic in the context of the structuration theory of social movements. It finds that the Czech national student organization, at the beginning rather imposed in a top-down manner, has successfully established itself as an organization able, at a time, to channel relevant student interests. However, due to underlying logic of its own foundations, it has later become, over time, rather part of academic oligarchy, sharing its vested interests.

Keywords: Higher Education; Student Organizations; Student Movements; Governance

Introduction

As Philip Altbach pointed out, student movements and organizations often have an impact reaching beyond student life and academic institutions, to the overall political and social development (Altbach 2006). This observation certainly holds for the former Czechoslovakia, which in 1993 split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

It was because of anti-Nazi demonstrations by Czech students (and their suppression by German occupational authorities) in October and November 1939 that 17th November was later recognized as the International Students´ Day. Students were also almost only one social group that actively tried to resist Communist coup d´état on 25th February 1948. When a mass demonstration that originated as a student event in memory of the International Students´ Day on 17th November 1989 was supressed by policy of the then Communist government, it triggered further development that quickly led to change of political regime („the Velvet Revolution") in the then Czechoslovakia, confirmed by election of Václav Havel as President on 29th December 1989. At these three of the most significant events of modern Czech history, students were present as if not decisive, then initiating or otherwise significant force (Pabian et al. 2011, p. 191-193).

It might therefore appear as a surprise, given all this tradition of political significance, that further development of establishing students as social movement, or as an organized interest, were then actually modest for some time. For about one and half decade of the post-Velvet Revolution history, student movement had sought how to establish itself as a stable structure. What logic has driven this development? Under what framework did the national student organization constitute itself, and what actions it took to build itself as a stable structure? These are the principal questions that this article aspires to explore.

Theoretical background and methodology

According to Giddens (1984), structuration of a movement or an organization involves a „collective conception" across a set of organizations, that rests on recognition of their interdependent relations within a system (McLaughlin et al. 2009, 30). The structuration can be introduced in a top-down manner through regulatory framework of state legislation, or bottom-up by means of „mobilization"; structures thus established need to be constantly reproduced, and their past actions provide context for future actions (McLaughlin et al. 2009, 40). It follows that for analyzing the ways of structuration of, in this case, a student organization, its mode of governance, selection of membership, method of operation in procedural sense, and formal position within the overall higher education governance scheme, will be of interpretatory importance as much as the actual operations of, and policies pursued by, the organization. Furthermore, of relations and, sometimes, conflicts with other organizations.

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The background research material is drawn namely from other scholarly research, but also from primary sources such as policy documents. To an important extent, this article owes to earlier work by the author, which was published only in Czech in 2004, and re-tells, in a more complex way its findings.

One academic community: the constituting myth of Czech higher education policy and its impact

In the post- Communist era, a new higher education legislation was among the first legislative acts of the new government and parliament. The law was actually drafted by a body of academics, from which a formal organization – the Council of Higher Education Institutions – emerged, and was recognized by the law as the representative voice of higher education institutions vis-a-vis government.

The enactment of 1990 higher education law was a defining moment in many respects. The law, it should be said, was written obviously a bit hastily (with the aim to provide legal framework to „purify" academic institutions from Communist ideology and its proponents) and, conceptually, it was based on somewhat romanticized image of university governance in the Czechoslovak Pre-War World II „Golden Aged". No proper preparatory work and no background research for drafting the law was done. The law then, for instance, enacted protection of „inviolability of academic territory" (the prohibition for police to enter university buildings without permission of the rector, Higher Education Institutions Act 1990, § 2), which was a myth that had never actually been legally recognized in earlier times. The law also introduced a great degree of autonomy for universities, conceived as federations of equally autonomous faculties (endowed with legal personality, too). Thus, the higher education system suddenly switched from a heavy centralized model under bureaucratic management channelled down from the minister of education to rectors and further to deans, to a very decentralized model where each layer had a great degree of autonomy, and rectors and deans were elected by the senate of the university or faculty, respectively. In a university or faculty senate, students made up, by law, between one third to one half of all the members, with equal voting rights with academic staff representatives. Overall, the idea of students as equal partners in higher education – including governance –was accepted in the Czech Republic long before this has become a theme for the Bologna Process.

While the 1990 higher education law presents an important evidence for the purposes of this article, namely with respect to formal top-down structuration of higher education governance, it also remains a fact that the law was, as was commented upon several times by international reviews of Czech higher education (e.g., by the OECD in 2009), a premature act that introduced high autonomy for higher education without making it structurally ready for the upcoming massification of the system, which was even quickly followed by a shift towards a universal higher education system (as understood in terms of Trow, 1974).

The idea that students are equal members of the broader „academic community" together with academic staff, as it was incorporated in the 1990 law, overshadowed and superseded the concept of distinctness of student interests, at least for some time. Several factors facilitated such development. First, until 1996 Czech governments pursued no particular policies that would incite student mobilization; in fact, they did not pursue any particular policies on higher education at all. Second, universities and faculties were in a state of internal transformation in terms of governance, curriculum and personnel decisions, which kept university and faculty senates (of which student representatives were members) busy. Third, unlike some other countries of the region, there was not a strong issue of succession to previous Communist student organization. The former Socialist Union of the Youth, dissolved in 1990, was neither defined nor perceived as a student organization, but rather was a youth wing of the Communist party, with categories of membership by age groups. The property of the abolished Socialist Union of the Youth was expropriated by law and taken over by the government, which had declared it would further be transferred to a plurality of youth organizations. A potential national student organization might claim a stake in this, and to some extent this later emerged as an issue, but far from exclusively.

For all these reasons, several years after the Velvet Revolution went without even an attempt to form, bottom-up or top-down, a national student organization. Students were, however, theoretically represented at national level of higher education governance by the Council of Higher Education Institutions (Rada vysokých škol, RVŠ) elected by university and faculty senates; the senate of each university nominated one member of the presidium of the Council and each faculty nominated one member of the general assembly, making the Council a parliament-like body representing higher education community. There were no provisions about student representation specifically, but within the concept of

equal membership in the „academic community", which the Council claimed to represent, students could have been legally elected into the Council. Given the fact that at a number of institutions students made up one half of the nominating body – the senate, it is possible that in some individual cases students were actually elected as members of the Council of Higher Education Institutions, although nowadays no clear record of this is available.

Early years of national student representation: fights for structure and its control

Already over the first years of its existence, however, the Council of Higher Education Institutions realized that lack of systemic representation of students by this body inherently undermines its own claim to represent the whole „academic community". The Council had then attempted to take some action. The Council appointed a committee (led by an academic) to act as mediator for student interests. It also attempted to incorporate various, mostly discipline-based (i.e., organized by logic of academic study interest) student unions that, sometimes ephemerally, emerged across universities. This initiative did not take a root. Since these organizations were interested mainly in studies of their respective disciplines, and had very little interest in the general policy of higher education, most of them failed to ever have established any regular contact with the Council. Several of them had, however, attempted a merger into a single, allegedly nationwide „Union of Students" (Studentská unie), which constituted but quickly disintegrated itself between 1991 and 1992, and also never joined collaboration with the Council of Higher Education Institution. As an offspring of this attempt, another organization called „Student Professional Association" (Stavovská unie studentů) was then established, and had existed for some time. This organization also played some role in future development of national student representation (Nantl 2004).

In 1993, the Council of Higher Education Institutions established a „Student Chamber" of itself (Studentská komora Rady vysokých škol, SK RVŠ). The name, and concept, was modelled on how student representations at most higher education institutions are organized within a university or faculty senate. (A senate mostly has two chambers, one comprising student representatives and the other one for academic staff, and these chambers may act separately on some issues.) Each university elected, by its senate, one student representative to the SK RVŠ. At that time, and prior to 1996, members of SK RVŠ were not members of the Council, thus were not allowed to vote in the Council general assembly, and were not represented in the Presidium of the Council. Therefore, SK RVŠ, already a top-down projected student representative body, was also somewhat subject to control and patronage by the leadership of the Council (Nantl 2004, p. 165).

In this situation, the Student Professional Association emerged as a challenger to the SK RVŠ, and although by the record available could have hardly claimed to be a national organization, it had enough leverage to mobilize some support across individual universities as well as within membership of the SK RVŠ. Negotiations were held between those two organizations, in spring 1993, about establishing a joint platform. In 1994, the two organizations established „Student Coordination Centre" – based on parity between both organizations – as a body to express to general will of students in the country. That the SK RVŠ was forced to do such an arrangement with an organization that lacked mass membership and real presence across most of higher education institutions, can demonstrate, how weak the position of the SK RVŠ then was. But soon it became clear that the Student Professional Associate –which, unlike the SK RVŠ, was a legal entity, thus able to acquire property – was driven by financial interest to take stake in the then forthcoming distribution of the property of the former Socialist Union of Youth. Having a seal of a national student organization might perhaps improve standing of the association for this purpose. In the end, this was all unsuccessful, and the Student Professional Association disappeared.[1] For the SK RVŠ, however, this experience of a threat from a rival organization was an important defining moment, a part of its own interpretative scheme that made ensuring the status of the only national representation of students a priority for many years to come (Nantl 2004, p. 165).

1 There is, however, an interesting link in future history of the country. A moving spirit behind the Student Professional Alliance was a founder of a private security company, then still a student at one of the Prague universities. While the Association failed, his company grew up to being one of largest providers of security services in the Czech Republic. In 2009 he set up a political party, which was elected to Parliament in 2010 with about 10 percent of vote on a programme of fighting corruption and inefficiency, and Mr Bárta then served as Minister of Transport between 2010-2011. The party, destroyed by a wave of scandals involving corruption and incompetence, split in 2013, and then disappeared from any relevance after early election in September 2013.

Becoming an established organization

The Council of Higher Education Institutions redefined its organizational structure in 1996 and incorporated students as full members. SK RVŠ continued to be an autonomous body within the Council, but student representatives now sat and vote in the general assembly of the Council, and the president and two vicepresidents of the SK RVŠ gained *ex officio* seats in the Presidium of the Council. The Council also established a position of a student vicepresident of the Council, elected by the whole general assembly. In practice, SK RVŠ presidents are elected into this position, but technically these two roles can be separate. This arrangement has an impact as it motivates the SK RVŠ to elect such leaders (judged both by personality and policy agenda) that are likely to get acceptance from the whole Council, as otherwise it would hinder full operational capacity in the overall system. Too radical departure in policy, or style, by the SK RVŠ from the whole Council could therefore be punished, and this enables the Council to protect its own mission to represent the whole „academic community" as well as the traditional emphasis of consensus.

Changes of 1996 determined how the Council, and the SK RVŠ, looks and functions up to now. Based on the then adopted statutes of the Council, it is, in legal terms, a consortium of universities without constituting a legal entity. All public (and since private sector emerged post-1999, many but not most private) higher education institutions are members. The existence of the Council is foreseen by higher education law, but it is not mandatory. By legal requirement, however, individual members of the Council must be elected (delegated) by senate of the respective institution. By law, the Council has the right to be consulted by the Minister of Education on legislative proposals and other important measures in respect of higher education (Higher Education Institutions Act 1990, § 16; Higher Education Institutions Act 1999, § 92). There is no specific mention of student representation at national level in statutory law, although the SK RVŠ declared itself, in 1996, to be a „national body of student self-government as foreseen by law", referring to the role of the whole Council of Higher Education Institutions (Nantl 2004, p. 166).

In addition to, as well as in consequence of, this formal framework, the operating mode of the SK RVŠ is also profoundly shaped by its financial and administrative background. SK RVŠ has its budget, which is part of budget of the whole Council, based mainly on fees paid by universities that elect members of the Council including students. Administrative support to the Council is provided by „Agency to the Council", which is incorporated within Charles University in Prague as commissioned coordinator of the consortium that makes up the Council. Administrative staff to the SK RVŠ is part of the Agency, and is then employed by Charles University according to the request of SK RVŠ president within approved budget. (SK RVŠ staff has been quite modest – a secretary and, since 2003, a spokesperson, both employed part time). By tradition, however, the physical location of SK RVŠ office is at an institution, where the president is registered as student, and premises for the office are provided by that institution. The necessity to undertake complex management of resources and activity in a very subtle and intertwined environment, which often rests on unwritten rules, traditions and expectations, contributed, with other factors, to strong role of presidency in the SK RVŠ structure.

Another important factor for this was the significantly long tenure of individual SK RVŠ presidents. Almost all office holders since 1996 served a full term (3 years), one served consecutively two full terms (from 1996 to 2002). Presidents are, thus, almost literally an embodiment of organizational memory. Given the transactional costs of a change in the office (disruption of administrative background due to moving the office from one institution to another, possibility of a removed president to remain, at least for some time, still as vice president of the Council of Higher Education Institution and then an alternative actor itself), it should be no surprise that no SK RVŠ president has ever been removed from office by the membership.

In search for external recognition

Indeed, organizational stability – both internally and externally - was to a large extent the focus of SK RVŠ activity for many years after gaining its current form in 1996. This may look extraordinary if we consider that after 1996 also new higher education law was debated (and finally approved to come into force from 1999), and the original draft included a proposal for tuition fees at public universities. But then the fall of the government, appointment of a technocratic interim cabinet (that completed the work on the law) and early election in 1998 meant a complete change of context for policy making, the issue of tuition fees lost relevance, and thus also its mobilizing potential. As the new higher education law (1999) did not present a substantial change of policy, the SK RVŠ was left with years of time to cultivate its internal culture and external relations.

External, in particular international, relations actions were also very much driven by the historically felt quest to cement its own position as the only national representative of students. In this, SK RVŠ was at first institutionally hindered by the fact of being a part of the wider body, the Council of Higher Education Institutions. That made its structure ill-comprehensible for international partner organizations, and somewhat problematic with regard to the most-valued criterion of then-Western Europe student organizations, the independence of a national student organization. SK RVŠ worked, on a systemic basis since 1999, with a partner organization in Slovakia, the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions of Slovak Republic (Študentská rada vysokoških škol Slovenskej republiky, ŠRVŠ SR), which operated in a very similar setting (the higher education law was, until 1993 dissolution of Czechoslovakia, a federal law) but where Czech students had a „chamber" of the comprehensive Council, Slovak students had an independent Student Council alongside a Council of Higher Education Institutions (representing academic staff). ŠRVŠ SR, which already then was internationally quite visible and recognized, and SK RVŠ formed a „Joint Czecho-Slovak Student Committee", which has operated since then basically as a joint meeting of leaderships of the two organizations held twice a year. The Committee served as a tool for transfer of expert knowledge, but concrete initiative never materialized, partly due to unbalanced relationship of Czech and Slovak higher education system characterized by one-way inflow of students from Slovakia to the Czech Republic, which at times also created social unrest among Czech students (especially with regard to student accommodation).

In 1999 the SK RVŠ also joined Central European Student Network (CSN), which was a regional network of both national and local student organizations across Central and South-East Europe, organized to support the CEEPUS mobility programme. The issue itself was not very relevant for the SK RVŠ, which had no possible role in organizing student mobility or conditions for mobile students, but CSN was recognized as a regional network of student organizations by ESIB – the National Unions of Students in Europe, as the European Student Union (ESU) was then known. SK RVŠ therefore joined the CSN as a step towards membership of ESIB (now ESU), which it achieved in 2001, and subsequently, together with SRVŠ SR from Slovakia, left the CSN formally in 2003. Instead, however, SK RVŠ was the leading actor towards forming a Visegrad Student Cooperation Network, formally agreed in November 2003 (Nantl 2004, pp. 170-174).

At the European and regional level of student politics, the issue of „single national representation" was still a focus for the SK RVŠ. Unlike the Czech Republic and Slovakia, many countries of Western Europe but also Poland and some countries of South-Eastern Europe had a plurality of national student organizations. In case of Western Europe this was often due to systemic context of binary higher education with different organizations representing students of either universities or professional higher education institutions. To the SK RVŠ, this was a dreadful example. All the more, that about the same time it joined ESIB (ESU) in 2001, new private higher education institutions emerged under the new legislation allowing them, and their students (with different interests, namely in respect of financing) started to join the SK RVŠ that had to internally find a new balance. SK RVŠ therefore sought explicit and exclusive recognition. Such recognition was at first included into the Visegrad Student Cooperation Network agreement (2003), by which all involved organizations (although in case of Poland there were two of them) recognized themselves as the only legitimate representatives of students in their countries. SK RVŠ then also sought, in the end successfully, a change in ESIB (ESU) membership policy (Nantl 2004, see below).

Until spring 2003, the membership policy of ESIB (ESU) was comparatively liberal and based on the experience of Western Europe, where parallel national student organizations mostly were due to binary higher education systems. As new national student organizations from the rest of Europe started to apply for ESIB (ESU) membership after 2000, this led to difficult issues that were hard to judge under the then-valid statutes of the organization, which foreseen mostly formal criteria for membership. This forces ESIB (ESU) to change its membership policy, and consider also other set of criteria such as legitimacy, real representativeness and recognition by other policy actors in a given country. The new policy also officially declared a preference that, where possible and not prevented by structural reasons such as law, there should be only one national student organization in a country. The SK RVŠ was an active proponent of this membership policy change of ESIB (ESU) (Nantl 2004, p. 179).

Years of stability and policies pursued

Internal consolidation and external recognition of the SK RVŠ as Czech national student organization was then basically completed around 2003, which enabled the organization to focus on policy, but that presented other challenges. While the SK RVŠ was, at that time, already a well-defined and functioning organization with a

degree of professionalism, its constituency has evolved, and around the same time, it included a significant number of representatives from private higher education institutions. At the same time, the issue of tuition fees at public institutions re-emerged as draft law submitted in Parliament (although not by the government, but as a member´s initiative).

Tuition fees have been a latent issue of Czech higher education policy for decades. For most of the time, the *status quo* (students at public institutions generally study for free, while students in private sector pay the full tuition) remains unchallenged, be it by governments, political parties, or higher education system actors. But from time to time, the issue resurfaces. The position of the SK RVŠ, over time, has been ambivalent and switching. In 1993-1994, SK RVŠ even mildly supported introduction of tuition fees. In 1996, when the new higher education law was deliberated, the organization rejected it overwhelmingly. At around 2003, this was already more difficult as representatives from private institutions challenged the *status quo*. The organization reverted to a legalistic approach, basically referring to the Constitution (it guarantees free higher education at public institutions, but subject to „ability of the student and availability of resources in the society", whatever that may mean). When the proposal to introduce tuition fees was discussed in Parliament in 2002, the SK RVŠ adopted a policy resolution against it, but did not campaign publicly in this sense, although some local student representations at several public universities did. SK RVŠ then also sought to design an organizational solution so as to keep unity and ability to resolve on an action, while accommodating increasingly competing interests within the student community; in the end, by change of its rules of organization, members from private institutions got the right to adopt separate statements on behalf of their segment, while they lost right to vote on issue concerning purely public sector (Nantl 2004, pp. 168-170).

In the extensive area of cost-sharing in higher education, tuition fees proved to be divisive enough to be avoided as a theme even by the national student organization itself. SK RVŠ had, however, stepped into the field of student living costs, and between 2003 – 2005 actively pursued a policy in that area. At the beginning of the first decade of this century, the capacity of state-subsidized dormitories at universities was not keeping pace with growing student numbers. Moreover, there was an increasing miss-match between capacity of dormitories and sizes of universities even within one city, as comprehensive universities with social sciences and humanities started to grow in comparison with historically stronger segment of technical higher education. Many institutions were unable to provide subsidized housing even to students from very far away. At institutions with higher proportion of students of Slovak origin, namely in Prague and Brno, nationalist sentiments emerged within the local student community. The system of subsidized dormitories was ready to collapse.

Against that context, the SK RVŠ brought forward in 2003 a proposal to abolish subsidies to dormitories, and to use the adequate allocation of the state budget to fund a scheme of direct grants based on uniform criteria across the country. Opposition has formed against this in the ranks of mainly technical universities, both within senates and regular students, and also across student dormitory councils (bodies of self-administration by students at dormitories, with various functions), which had the capacity to mobilize students housed at dormitories. In 2003 and 2004, student protests even went publicly, most notably a student demonstration against the plan in Prague and a „student tribunal" organized by local student leaders in Liberec, to which SK RVŠ representatives were summoned. The position on dormitories and housing grants also became the principal issue in elections of individual members of the SK RVŠ by their university senates, and in 2004 already there was a strong opposition to the plan within the body itself. Manoeuvring through internal conflict reflecting division of the entire student community, the SK RVŠ strengthened its public relations activity and media presence (from 2003, it employed a spokesperson) and professionalized handling of government relations. In the end, the plan was (with basically no change against the original proposal) approved by ministerial regulation, and implemented from September 2005. [2]

2 Although the impetus to deal with issue of student housing came indeed from an existing social situation and conflict, it still may be interesting to note that part of motives behind the SK RVŠ policy were again by a perceived challenge from another organization. For several years from 2002, there was an „Academic Centre for Student Activities" (ACSA) at the technical university in Brno, led by a local student leader. The ACSA provided training to student representatives but, among other things, also organized annual „national student conferences", where policy declarations were adopted. To the SK RVŠ, through the eyes of their interpretative scheme, this was yet another challenge to their position as national student organization. The SK RVŠ therefore believed that a direct student housing support scheme, in which the body would negotiate with the Ministry of Education on the amount of the grant, would make SK RVŠ more relevant to the „regular student" (Nantl 2004, p. 183).

In the era of higher education reform (attempts)

From 2006 until, in the end, 2015, Czech higher education policy was about a complex reform of higher education, including its legal framework. Since the beginning of the century, the higher education system opened up in terms of study opportunity, and by 2005 it already was a universal system of higher education by the typology of Martin Trow (Trow 1974). However, higher education governance (in all aspects of it) remained broadly the same as was designed by the post Velvet Revolution, 1990 higher education law for the-then elite university system. Also the 1999 higher education law did not alter the framework fundamentally (the most significant changes were to deprive faculties of the status of legal entity; and their full incorporation into universities; personnel and salary policy autonomy for higher education institutions, and quality assurance scheme through accreditation of all level of study programmes at all types of institutions by an external accreditation body). OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education in the Czech Republic brought a set of observations and recommendations to the government (File et al 2009). Curiously, some of the OECD recommendations basically repeated unimplemented recommendations from a similar exercise already in 1992 (Pabian 2007). Based on then still informal feedback from the OECD report team, the government decided in 2006 to initiate a work on a White Paper that would outline higher education reform.

Already the process of preparing the White Paper on Tertiary Education was controversial, which was partly due to the weak position of the government that was in the position of minority in Parliament. Another source of controversy (especially within the higher education community itself) was the doctrine of "competitiveness" underpinning the project. On the whole, the White Paper was recommending to involve external actors into strategic management of institutions through boards of governors with role in selection of rector, on the other hand to give institutions full institutional autonomy to decide strategy and internal structure, to enhance diversification of institutions by profile, to replace programme accreditation by institutional accreditation, and to introduce a new type of cost-sharing by tuition fees (on the model of the „deferred" fee) with more social grants available to students (Fiala & Nantl 2010, p. 567-570).

The response from higher education actors was generally negative, although some rectors, especially from larger and more complex universities, displayed sympathy to some aspects of the project, namely in the area of governance and quality assurance. By 2010, it must be said, due to raising size and complexity of higher education institutions, the Council of Higher Education Institutions (for a long time the top dog of national higher education governance) was already outweighed by rectors, i.e. the Czech Rectors´ Conference (Česká konference rektorů, ČKR). In spring 2010, the Czech Rectors´ Conference adopted a policy paper on higher education reform, in which the body acknowledged the need for some change in line with the evolution of the whole system, and implicitly or explicitly endorsed several points of the government White Paper (ČKR 2010).

The position of the SK RVŠ regarding higher education reform was mainly based on the defence of the *status quo*. In most aspects, the SK RVŠ referred to their earlier policies, for instance, in case of tuition fees, to a policy paper that it adopted in 2002. Most of the active work of the SK RVŠ was then dedicated to defending the role of university and faculty senates in general (government was proposing to impose limitations on their functions, and to transfer some of these to external boards of governors) and representation of students in senates and, thus, in governance of higher education institutions. It adopted, in 2009, a policy paper on „academic self-government", which decried „managerial model" and endorsed the „partner-not-consumer" approach (SK RVŠ 2009). Most interactions regarding the government project for new higher education law were channelled through a working group, which was convened by the Ministry of Education, and attended by Czech Rectors´ Conference and the Council of Higher Education Institutions including the SK RVŠ. The work of this group (whose composition altered in terms of individual persons over the course of time) lasted from 2010 to 2015.

New challenges (and real movements coming on the scene)

At times, conflict over the projected law broke into the public arena. When the legislative council to the government (advisory body that overseen government legislative work) was to deliberate over conceptual outline of the draft law (in the Czech legislative scheme, this is the first step of legislative procedure for a bill proposed by the government), in February 2012, demonstrations were held in Prague and other cities. There emerged a bottom-up movement „For free universities" (Za svobodné vysoké školy), which organized most of these protest events (demonstrations and public debates, but also

occupational strikes at several sites), and was made up from students and mainly junior academic staff. It was endorsed by trade unions and, also, the-then president of the SK RVŠ was among prominent organizers and speakers of the protest movement.[3] However, when the government announced that future law would not contain tuition fees, the bottom-up activity faded, and shortly the usual framework of working consultations with representative bodies was resumed. In March 2012, the Minister of Education resigned (for reasons unconnected to the reform project), and after appointment of his successor, the government abandoned the project of a complex reform, and the work narrowed down to (more modest and much least controversial) plan to introduce institutional accreditation for higher education institutions. However, in June 2013 the government collapsed and resigned, and although the draft law was ready by then, it took then until April 2016 for the law to be signed, after approval by Parliament, into law by the president.

By then, the high profile and high stake issues went down the surface, and as for the SK RVŠ, it pointed its focus on generation enough capacity and skills to play a role under the new quality assurance scheme, which reserved it one seat at the new national accreditation authority, as well as guaranteed student participation at all the level of quality assurance system (as it is in line with current European Higher Education Area standards, ESG 2015). Whether the structure and mode of operation of the SK RVŠ will stand the test of time (and of the changing style of communication and public engagement), remains to be seen. It is sure to be tested. Recently, a „Czech Association of Doctoral Students" (Česká asociace doktorandek a doktorandů, ČAD) was established as legal entity (registered association with individual membership); it advocates for better working and social conditions of doctoral students, thus in a role more akin to a trade union. While SK RVŠ was also a member of EURODOC (European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers) since 2005, it has never been particularly active in this field, and since 2009 focused overwhelmingly on issues of governance and defending the role of students in university senates. Also, there emerged a „Czech High School Student Union" (Česká středoškolská unie, ČSU), which is a registered association with individual membership and organized as a loose and flexible network, sharply contrasting with the hierarchical scheme of the SK RVŠ and the whole Council of Higher Education Institutions. Both new associations have quickly gained media attention and presence, and have started to be *de facto* accepted by the Ministry of Education as partners for dialogue.

Conclusion

As we have seen, from the structuration perspective the Czech case of national student organizations represents a case of a very top-down scenario, where the framework for development of the organization was imposed by academic elite. The framework also includes elements that motivate the student organization – namely its leaders – for the sake of both status and maximum operating capacity in a given setting, to incorporate, or accept, values and priorities of the academic profession, which dominates the Council of Higher Education Institutions. However, as we have also seen, bottom-up movements, if and when they emerged in the Czech context, always proved to be short lived and perhaps not substantiated enough to inspire a permanent structure. Whether this speaks about efficiency of the national student organizations in incorporating vocalized interest and views across student community into its policy, or rather about lack of really compelling interests in a higher education system that combines still decent quality (Czech Republic is one of the few European countries with a balance between incoming and outgoing students) and affordability (public higher education being free, with the exception of excessively long studies), would be an interesting topic for a broader research.

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3 It would be difficult to assess whether this reflected position of the body, or a personal position, as the individual was politically member of the-then opposition social democratic party, which sought to capitalize politically on protest against proposal of the-then liberal-conservative government, and he later was political appointee at the Ministry of Education while it was under control of the social democratic party.

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