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POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY WITH REGARD TO THE DANUBE-ODER-ELBE CANAL IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Jiří Nesiba – Josef Smolík*

ABSTRACT

The article presents the political discussion on the Danube-Oder-Elbe (DOE) international water corridor in the Czech Republic in the period 2010-2021. The issue has become highly politicised among Czech political bodies in the last decade. The article presents the development of political interests in the DOE issue in the Czech Republic regard to the concept of the social responsibility. Due to the fundamentally contradictory changes in the Czech government's policy towards DOE during the period under study, the authors focus on analysing expert documents (e.g., expert strategies, action plans for the Czech Republic, DOE studies, government programme statements) and political decisions in the Czech Republic on the given topic in the last decade. The authors present the results of the research by content analysis of relevant documents, which were examined by cluster analysis on the relationship "costs of solving negative financial externalities" and "DOE ownership". The methodology used is a combination of cluster analysis, PRISMA analysis and descriptive analysis. The research results show that the analysed documents show a high degree of mutual incoherence.

Key words: Water Corridor Danube-Oder-Elbe, Czech Strategy, Czech Action Plans, CSR

Introduction

The Czech Republic is the only place on the European continent where three

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seas meet, because the three main Czech rivers - Morava (Danube River basin), Elbe and Odra flow into three seas, the North Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. By connecting them in the Czech Republic, the Danube-Oder-Elbe (DOE) water connection can be created as a water canal. The DOE is controversial because of all the economic, social and environmental aspects cannot be foreseen in advance. Water sources flow out of the Czech Republic abroad, while no significant river flows into the Czech Republic (Czech Republic called as the “roof of Europe”). In terms of hydrological conditions, the situation in the Czech Republic is specific, and water protection is linked to social responsibility due to the political decision to transform municipal water management (Nesiba, Smolík, 2019). Therefore, since the establishment of the independent Czech Republic, there has been a series of analyses, expert discussions, etc. regarding this project in the Czech Republic (SAO, 2019). Since 1996, when the Czech government opened public discussion about the project, it has been assigned dozens of expert studies and analyses for the DOE mega-project, as well as a number of strategies that are linked to the impacts of the DOE project (e.g., Water Corridor DOE, 2022). The results of the studies and the impact of the strategies for the DOE provide a multi-level governance aspect, therefore, the political decision in the Czech Republic is based on public support (e. g. according to distribution of Czech parliamentary parties).

In the context of the current discussions, the construction of the DOE canal can be defined as a “mega-project”. Mega-projects are large-scale, complex ventures that typically costs a large part of public finances, take many years to develop and build, involve multiple public and private stakeholders, are transformational, and impact millions of people (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2014). DOE canal is typical example of a mega-project that would be implemented in several European countries, and would significantly affect the infrastructure of more neighbouring countries (in this case it concerns Czech Republic as key country, as well as Poland and Slovakia to a certain degree). For this reason, the support of the project in its original scope is also being reassessed by other affected neighbouring countries (e.g., Germany in the Agreement on the navigability of the Elbe River with the Czech Republic, GCR, 2021).

Mega-projects are increasingly used as the preferred delivery model for goods and services across a range of business and sectors (Flyvbjerg, 2014; Walsh - Walker, 2021), have an iconic design (Cerro Santamaria, 2019, p. 264), and these mega-projects may include facilities as hydroelectric power plans, water conservation, transportations etc. (cf. Williams, 2020; Menga, 2015).

Shortly after the Czech regional elections in October 2020, the Czech government approved the start of preparations for the DOE canal (according to the feasibility study, 2018), but the new Czech government formed after the national election (October 2021) initiated steps to cancel the possibility of building the canal in the future, for example by cancelling the so-called territorial reserves around the water corridor (Our Water, 2022).

In the international environment, the Czech Republic does not have a clear long-term vision of its interest with regard to the DOE, and this uncertainty has acquired an international dimension (Cafourek, 2018; SZ, 2019). Therefore, the main risks are based on the side of the Czech Republic, on whose territory the canal is to be built. The complexity of DOE construction affects policy sectors from three perspectives: economic, social and environmental, as methodically posited by Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) management (Table 4).

In the present article, the authors show that for decades the complexity of the project divides decision-making among interested groups and consensus is not found. For a construction of greater importance and with more stakeholders, more detailed analyses and more accurate identification of risks and subsequent cooperation are necessary (Klimes et al., 2019).

As with similarly large canals (e.g., the canal being considered in Nicaragua, the Panama Canal, or Suez Canal), the mega-projects are becoming a politicized topic (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2014; Walsh - Walker, 2021; Molle et al., 2009). The difference between the former critics of the canal and current events is mainly in political activism and the cooperation of environmental organizations (e. g. Extinction Rebellion, Arnika, Hnutí Duha, Greenpeace, Fridays for Future) (cf. Bötticher - Mareš, 2012: 383-390; Danics - Tejchmanová, 2017: 73). From the beginning of the 1990s, it was mainly individual politicians who were critical of the canal (e.g., individual senators of the upper chamber of the Czech Parliament elected for the territory where the canal route is planned) (cf. Jelínek, 2020).

With the establishment of the Czech political scene after the country's accession to the EU, the interests of the opponents and supporters of the DOE project were stable, with environmental parties and associations (e.g., the Green Party, which opposed the project) on the one hand, and the Waterways Directorate of the Czech Republic on the other can be included among the supporters. The role of local governments gradually became crucial, as local political representation, especially in the area around the Morava River, became critical of the plan to build the canal (Senate CR, 2019).

The turning point came in 2013, with the new Czech President **Miloš Zeman**

taking office. He declared himself to be the strongest supporter of the DOE project.¹ The position of the government of the Czech Republic changed radically during 2013-2021, from supporting the project in the program statement of the government (GCR, 2014b), through a neutral position in the program statement of the government (GCR, 2018), to efforts to cancel the possibility of building the project (Our Water , 2022), because DOE can be included in the category of so-called *zombie water projects* (Gleick et. al., 2014).

The specificity of the DOE stems from the fact that the construction is not a typical "water canal", because some sections are led directly through riverbeds. However, it is not just a "waterway" either, because it also includes non-transport functions (water for industry and agriculture, protection against floods, etc.); at the same time, neither is it solely a "water corridor". The current expert elaboration of this project has so far focused on the general political aspects of the construction (e.g., Janáč - Vleuten, 2016), on ecological risks (e.g., Machar et al., 2015; Machar, 2010a) or on the economic and political history of project development (Janáč, 2012; Janáč, 2017).

The presented study analyses political decisions based on professional studies. So far, there is no professional article that deals with the DOE issue from the point of view of political science. Therefore, the source of the analysis is government documents, strategies and expert studies. In addition, there are a number of interested groups that present the project to the public from the point of view of benefits from a transport point of view (e.g., <https://projects.3seas.eu>) or as ecological initiatives pointing out risks (e.g., www.ekolist.cz). If necessary, the analysis used information from these sources, but only to the extent necessary, at the discretion of the authors.

1. Current state of the project

The water canal has a long history, but the DOE mega-project tracing has only approximately stabilized based on the favourable hydrogeological conditions (see Map 1). The idea was advanced the most significantly by Moravian entrepreneurs **T. Baťa** (1876-1932) and **J. Baťa** (1898-1965), who constructed a part of the canal on the Morava River connecting Rohatec and Otrokovice. At that time, the canal was to serve the economic activities of their shoe company Baťa

¹ E. g. on the occasion of a meeting of six European presidents, Zeman opened an exhibition at Prague Castle in December 2014 on the completion of the DOE project, cf. Water Corridor Danube-Oder-Elbe, 2014.

(cf. Kubec – Podzimek, 2007; Podzimek - Kubec, 2015; Podzimek - Forman - Kolařík, 2018; Pavel – Trnka, 2019).

More general discussions about the possible construction of the canal only began with the existence of the independent Czech Republic in the second half of the 1990s. Among the most significant decisions is the Resolution number 635 of the Government of the Czech Republic from 11 December 1996 on the “Financing of the water transport development program in the Czech Republic until 2005” (Union for Moravian River, 1999; DOL, 2022). The Government of the Czech Republic signed an international agreement (European Agreement on Main Inland Waterways of International Importance) committing the Czech Republic to participate in the DOE construction. (Ungerma et al., 2002).

The impetus for the construction of the DOE was given by the Czech Republic’s joining the EU, which included the possibility of transport via the DOE water corridor in the network of European transport routes. After the technical conditions have been met, the DOE connection of waterways would be included by the European Commission in the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) plans and associated documents (cf. ACT, 2003). The DOE waterway corridor should fall into a higher category of international waterways, designated as class IV and above. This class will ensure sufficient conditions for inland waterway transport at the international level (cf. ACT, 2003: on-line).

However, no significant progress has been made in terms of the DOE project since the Czech Republic joined the EU. The total number of professional decisions (studies, declarations, strategical papers) from 1998-2019 was 55 (i.e., Water Corridor DOE, 2022). On the contrary, the discussions on the DOE continue and divide the Czech political scene as well as the public (SAO, 2019).

Figure 1: Three main branches of DOE



Source: own processing according to Ministry of Transport (2019); Water Corridor Danube-Oder-Elbe (2022).

The Czech Republic has minimal experience with such a construction (except the Gabčíkovo – Nagymaros Dams, which became a subject of international litigation, which was not resolved until the late 1990s by the independent Slovak Republic and had to be decided by the Hague International Court of Justice in 1997, e. g. Deets, 2009; cf. Forlati et al., 2020). The negative environmental consequences associated with large projects near state borders created a problem in the Czech international relations (e.g., the Túrow coal mine on the Polish territory affects water resources in the Czech Republic, the governments of both countries signed a special agreement, cf. GCR, 2022a).

In order for the Czech Republic to avoid ambiguities, the basic principles of long-term projects are usually expressed in the special strategic documents of the Czech government. Strategic documents began to form as an instrument of long-term government policy in the period after the Czech Republic's accession

to the EU. The governments of the Czech Republic have started to use this type of document to set the strategic goals of the Czech Republic.

Through strategic documents, the Czech Republic voluntarily commits itself to longer-term strategic planning, but different professional areas of strategy show different professional views with regard to the DOE. The basic aspects of the strategical documents can be analysed, in which way they are consistent or no-consistent with a possible future DOE project. Using the example of several strategies, the ambiguities of strategic government planning in relation to the DOE project can be documented:

Table 1: Main overview of Czech strategical documents with secondary impact on DOE

Consistent with DOE	Neutral	Non-consistent with DOE
Transport Policy of the Czech Republic 2014-2020, with a view to 2050.	Concept of Protection against the Consequences of Drought for the Czech Republic.	Agenda 2030 - Strategic Framework in Development Analysis.
Concept of Freight Transport of the Czech Republic 2017-2023 with a view to 2030.	Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change in the Conditions of the Czech Republic" (the so-called Adaptation Strategy).	Environmental Safety Concept 2016-2020 with a view to 2030.
The Transport Policy of the Czech Republic for 2014–2020 with the Prospect to 2050.	Flood Protection Strategy for the Territory of the Czech Republic.	Strategic Goals of Forestry until 2030.

Source: GCR, 2020a; CR, 2020b; GCR, 2014a; MoE, 2020a; MoE, 2020b; VODA-SUCHO Interdepartmental Commission, 2020.

The strategic plans of the government of the Czech Republic represent one of the few official sources that can be considered an indirect document that refers to the government's policy towards the DOE. At the lower levels of the Czech Republic's politics, resolutions of regional and municipal authorities (especially around the rivers Morava, Bečva, Elbe) can be a source of official political decisions, but they are not the subject of this analysis.

2. Political disputes

The project only became a priority for the Government of the Czech Republic in the period of 2013-2017, whose term of office falls within the first term of Czech President **Miloš Zeman**, who is a supporter of the DOE project. In 2013, the DOE project was directly mentioned as a priority in the Programme Statement of the Government of the Czech Republic (GCR, 2014b). Four years later, in the 2017 programme statement of the government, there is only a marginal remark that the government will decide on the basis of expert analyses (GCR, 2018). The new Czech government, elected in October 2021, no longer mentions the DOE in its programme statement. It will not deal with the project, despite the fact that the previous Czech government, after the regional elections in 2020, instructed the Ministry of Transport to continue preparations for the project connecting the Czech Republic and Poland (connecting the ports of Kožle and Bohumín). In a programme statement from the beginning of January 2022, the Czech government also clearly stated its views on the DOE canal in the Czech Republic. The government programme declaration stated that the government would continue to develop inland waterway transport. At the same time, it was stated that all work on the DOE canal project would be stopped, while friendly water transport on existing rivers would be supported (cf. GCR 2022b). The factors of the post-2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 onwards may also have influenced this decision.

The independent Czech Supreme Audit Office also did not have a long-term strategic policy stance (SAO), which in 2019 audited state finances spent on project activities (cf. SAO 2019). The main issues include the following (Tab. 2).

Table 2: The most important Czech studies and strategies about DOE

TYPE OF DOCUMENT	ACTOR	NAME	YEAR
Study	Directorate of Waterways	<i>Feasibility study "Connection of South Moravia to the Danube by water"</i>	2003
Study	Ministry for Regional Development	<i>Territorial study of the reality and effectiveness of the territorial protection of the Danube-Oder-Elbe canal connection</i>	2007
Study	Directorate of Waterways	<i>Analysis of the economic potential of the Danube-Oder-Elbe transport corridor</i>	2012
Strategy	Ministry of Environment	<i>Strategic Framework of the Czech Republic 2030</i>	2015
Strategy	Ministry of Transportation	<i>Concept of Freight Transport of the Czech Republic 2017-2023 with a view to 2030</i>	2017

Strategy	Ministry of Environment	<i>National Action Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change</i>	2017
Study	Ministry of Transportation	<i>Feasibility study of the Danube-Oder-Elbe water corridor (postponed from 2014)</i>	2018
Strategy	Ministry for Regional Development	<i>Regional Development Strategy of the Czech Republic 2021+</i>	2019
Strategy	Ministry of Environment	<i>State Environmental Policy 2030 with a view to 2050</i>	2021

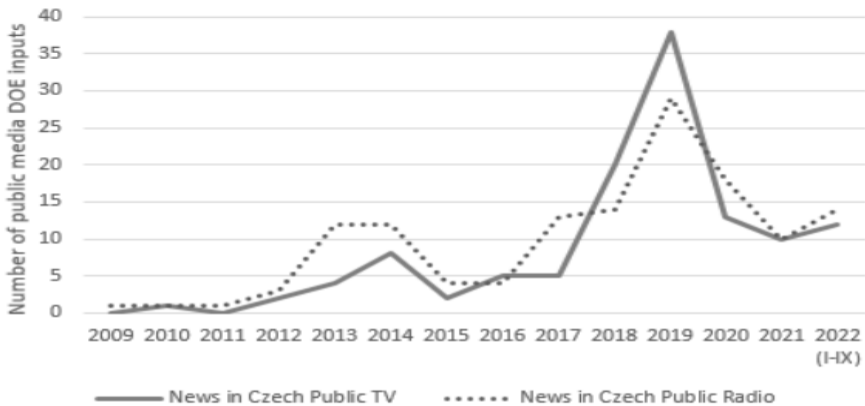
Source: Database of Strategy, 2021; own processing.

Among the number of studies, there are studies that demonstrate the ambiguous attitudes of the Czech government. The first study is the “*Study of the DOE water corridor construction project*” from 2006, at the time assigned by the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The authors of the study point out the issues with the operation of the international waterway (according to the experience of, e. g., the Danube Commission on the Danube in similar cases of border disputes) and the future financial problems of the operation (cf. Podzimek, 2006).

One year later, another study entitled “*Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Danube-Oder-Elbe Water Corridor Construction Project*” (2007), issued by the Ministry of Transport and prepared according to the Implementation Guidelines for Evaluating the Effectiveness of Waterway Investments, reiterates the fact that efficiency cannot be determined unilaterally (Confima, 2007). The Czech government divided the two branches of the project to deal with the variant of navigating the Oder in the Kožle – Bohumín section as a separate project, which may be possible to be carried out without the continuation of the Oder branch of the DOE (cf. GCR 2014a).

The Czech political representation thus wavers between the economic point of view, environmental risks, and lobby groups (construction or environmental). The last large study is called the Feasibility Study, prepared in 2018. This study caused the largest media and societal discussion. The Feasibility Study was meant to become a key and most comprehensive document for further decision-making of the Government of the Czech Republic (Feasibility Study, 2019). The results of this study opened the interest of the media for the monitored period of 2010-2021. According to the public medias’ records, highest publicity came in 2019 (38 inputs in the Czech public television, 29 inputs in the public Czech radio).

Graph 1: Number of Czech public media inputs reporting on DOE



Source: Czech television, 2022; Czech radio, 2022.

Completion of the Feasibility study meant a series of negotiations, where the results of the study were commented on by the professional public, often critical of the methodology used in the study. The economic evaluation of the project failed to reflect ecological risks in this study (e.g., interview with members of the official opposition committee, cf. Machar, 2022; Rulík, 2022).

The key message of this study was the information that the results confirmed the riskiness of the project option of the Elbe branch between Přeřov and Pardubice (see Map 1). The Central Commission of the Ministry of Transport therefore recommended monitoring “only” the Danube–Oder branch of the entire project, negotiating with Poland and Slovakia about corridor crossing points, and in cooperation with both countries carrying out environmental and social-economic impact assessments of the waterworks. The Ministry of Transport thus became the manager of foreign negotiations with representatives of the participating countries. If the corridor project reaches the stage that an international agreement will have to be negotiated, its future management should be coordinated by the Ministry of Transport (MoT, 2020).

In June 2019, a debate on the Feasibility Study took place in the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, which presented the disagreement on the Czech political scene between the supporters and the opponents of the DOE mega-project (Senate CR, 2019). Criticism of the Feasibility Study also made the supporters of the construction of the project less certain (e.g., the Ministry of Finance of the Czech Republic). One of the arguments is the suspicion of data

manipulation and *fraudulent study procedures* (cf. Collective of authors, 2021). The DOE has become a political issue that is being followed by an increasing number of members of the public.

The supporters of the project have a natural platform from the essence of the matter around the institution "Directorate of Waterways of the Czech Republic", around the journal "Waterways and Sailing", they are logically supported by the "Danube-Oder-Elbe Association." It acts as a professional interest group participating in the project lobbying with a prospect of cooperation in future possible construction. That is why in 2019, a Memorandum of mayors from 56 municipalities adjacent to the future DOE canal was signed, asking the government to share the decision-making power to local political representatives of municipalities and regions, which want to be part of the process. In addition, representatives of the Olomouc Region are requesting an extension of Baťa Canal to the Olomouc Region (Collective of authors, 2019).

There is a large number of environmental political movements, which leads to their intensive cooperation, which is also reflected in political activism. These movements are activated via social media and carry out protests actions and information campaigns (cf. Císař, 2004; Císař - Navrátil - Vráblíková, 2011; Binka, 2015).

Opponents of canal construction can be divided into the following groups: political parties (especially parties with an environmental agenda), pressure organizations, local governments that would be affected by the considered DOE canal, academics from universities (environmentalists, sociologists, political scientists). These four actors are not only from the Czech Republic, but also from other involved countries (Poland, Austria, Germany, Slovakia). Above all, the political activism of pressure groups or political parties also has an impact on public opinion in Central Europe (cf. Císař, 2004, p. 65-72; Kuřík, 2013, p. 32-62).

A completely different approach has been pursued by Czech President **M. Zeman**, who tried, before changes due to Covid-19, to initiate negotiations on financing the DOE from Chinese sources (Rulík, 2022). Among the most prominent adepts on the coordination of direct investments, the Chinese company SinoHydro was informally mentioned, e. g. at the time of visit by the Chinese President **Xi Jinping** in Czech Republic during March 2016, when the Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Czech Republic and China was signed (Office of the President of the Czech Republic, 2016).

Based on these discussions and the polarization of Czech society, three main political groups in general can be singled out according to their relationship to the

completion of the DOE project. On the one hand, there are professional associations that have a consistent view (on the one hand, environmental associations, on the other, professional transport and construction associations), but there are different political representations where the approach to DOE varies according to election results (Czech parliamentary but also local political representatives). It is evident from the previous text that DOE actors change over time, currently (2022) three main interested groups can generally be detected: opponents of the DOE, supporters of the DOE and some groups whose position is unclear. (e.g., the strategic interest in the import of LNG liquified gas into the Czech Republic may mean a regrouping of these groups).

Table 3: General distribution of DOE actors (2010-2022)

Opponents of the DOE	Unstable opinion	Supporters of the DOE
<i>Local self-government affected directly by the DOE.</i>	<i>Most parliamentary parties in opposition from 2021.</i>	<i>President of the Czech Republic Miloš Zeman.</i>
<i>Political parties in the Czech government from 2021.</i>	<i>Professional associations monitoring the protection of drinking water.</i>	<i>Waterways Directorate of the Czech Republic.</i>
<i>The professional public focused on the protection of the environment.</i>	<i>Austrian diplomacy.</i>	<i>Polish diplomacy.</i>
<i>Ministry of the Environment.</i>	<i>German diplomacy.</i>	<i>Slovak diplomacy.</i>
<i>Local self-government directly affected by the DOE.</i>		

Source: DOL, 2022; own processing.

Former Czech President **Miloš Zeman** has a stable and clearly defined long-term approach to the project on the side of supporters. On the other hand, critics of the project are represented by environmental organizations. The academic community or local municipalities do not have a clearly defined long-term position in the monitored period. Currently, the opinion of the Czech public is key. On the one hand, it is influenced by the opinions of pressure groups. Among the pressure groups criticizing the project we may include eighteen environmental organizations from Germany, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Austria, including the German branch of Friends of Earth Germany (BUND), umbrella organizations DNR, NABU, WWF and Czech Arnika, which are calling for an end to preparations for the Danube-Oder-Elbe canal. The European Commissioner for the Environment and The European Commissioner for Transport both received a joint letter in which the ecological organizations warn about the

environmental and economic impacts (risks) of the project construction and calculate possible impacts on international policy (BUND, 2020). Supporters of the DOE project may in the future profit from a political interest in the import of LNG liquefied gas into the Czech Republic. This may mean a regrouping.

On the Czech political scene, the Green Party also launched an election campaign against the construction at the regional and national level. Therefore, the pressure of the public is growing to the detriment of the project, in addition to the most significant support of the project from the Czech President **M. Zeman** (and other business stakeholders, e. g. Sinohydro company, Aquatis company etc.), whose mandate ends in 2023 (cf. Hromková - Horáková, 2017). This type of mega-project needs political as well as public support at the municipal level (Flyvbjerg, 2012). The political representation of the Czech Republic is influenced by a number of new external factors that also have an indirect impact on the DOE project. In particular, the reduction of traffic in connection with Covid-19 (to the detriment of the DOE) and on other hand efforts to diversify the import of energy raw materials.

3. Overview of the discussed issues

The Feasibility Study from 2018 is the most comprehensive material to determine the efficiency and economic benefits of the DOE construction for the Czech Republic. The results of the study and economic calculations were discussed in the Senate chamber of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. The study, as set up and assigned, is unable to resolve the discrepancies. These issues are still unresolved (no independent technical body or inter-ministerial committee) and therefore support of the project from political parties or the public is declining (see Table 4). We present arguments that are still not resolved at the time of writing of this study (Ungerma et al., 2002; Buček, 2004; Buček, 2005; Machar, 2007; Rulík et al., 2014). The discussion focuses on 3 main sectors: environmental, social and economic. The analysis of the presented three sectors is based on a qualitative content analysis of the entire Feasibility Study, which has several thousand pages of content (Feasibility Study, 2019). For a better orientation, a preliminary study commissioned by the Ministry of Transport and conducted in February 2018 by the private organizations Sweco, Aquatis and the DOE Association, entitled “*Review and Assessment of Achievement Alternatives of Transport Policy Goals*”, can be used as a source (Sweco Hydroprojekt et al., 2018)

The authors of this text determine these main areas of discussion not only on the basis of the content of the Feasibility Study, but also add the experience of the actors of the negotiations during the opposition to the study (Machar, 2022; Rulík, 2022), as well as from scientific journal articles that monitor the preparation of the project for a long time (Machar 2010a; Machar 2010b; Machar 2010c; Poprach et al., 2016).

3.1 Ecological risks

It has not yet been analysed the variant development of model situations that may occur in complex ecosystems that extend from ecology to the social sphere (include secondary or tertiary impacts of the construction on ecosystems). These impacts include the following issues:

- The canal will have a larger flow than the current flow of the rivers (width 50 m and depth 4 m); this will change the natural conditions of water runoff. Water flows away from the Czech Republic, i.e., it depends on rainfall; if artificial canals in the Czech Republic are constructed (on other rivers), the natural outflow of water to the three seas can be disrupted, there can be water loss in riverbeds in Poland, Germany, Slovakia or Austria.
- The outflow of water from the Czech Republic could accelerate, increasing evaporation in the shallow bed of the canal. This will affect water for agricultural production, both in the Czech Republic and in the border areas, while in the border areas the abstraction of water for agricultural irrigation from the canal is not clearly defined; it is not clear who will have the right to draw.
- Soil desiccation, surface erosion, falling groundwater levels or deterioration of aquifers along the canal could be accelerated. Rivers have a so-called hyporheic biodiversity aspect that affects the river landscape. This is essential to the ecosystem around the river and cannot be measured or modelled. The same amount of water flows in the sediments as in the riverbed. Groundwater protection zones will be affected.
- There are risks of groundwater over-exploitation against the current of the river at the canal, e.g., pumping water from the Danube into the water canal, which, however, requires the consent of Austria or Slovakia. It is related to the minimum river flow (so-called minimum ecological flow), also in the rivers around it. It could bring new disputes among canal operators, citizens, state institutions, and individual states.

- The construction of the canal may worsen the regulation of flood risks, while each of the states will have a different interest in the operation of the canal in a crisis situation.
- Ocean shipping will change Czech foreign policy towards greater involvement in the seas and oceans (e.g., ocean liners are the biggest polluter of the oceans, there should be an ecological standard for admission to the canal), but without the possibility of influencing it as a landlocked state.

3.2 Social risks

The project of DOE does not address the future ownership and the operation of the canal (e. g. in the context of employment, local government rights etc.). This may create confusion in the future regarding the relationship between international, national and regional policy. This is also related to the redistribution of costs and operating revenue. It is not yet resolved who will be entrusted with the organization of the canal management (the state through the ministry, a special office, a private or PPP project). In terms of energy self-sufficiency, the secondary function of the DOE corridor is highlighted. Within the framework of strategic documents, the Czech Republic works with the “State Energy Concept”, which prefers the future energy mix of the Czech Republic, but at the same time deals in detail with the stability of the electricity system. According to the Study, the contributions of hydropower should have a positive effect, because hydropower plants will be built along the corridor, especially pumped storage hydropower plants suitable for providing so-called support services, which help solve imbalances in the transmission network. However, the study does not point to the problem of water pumping in the DOE and does not specify who will be the owner of this system (state or private sector).

Socio-political risks include the international commitments. So far, meetings on a formal platform are carried out between Czech and Polish diplomacy (both working groups and ministries of both countries, while the highest political representations also share their views). For a long time, both countries cooperate within the framework “Czech-Polish Intergovernmental Commission for Cross-Border Cooperation.” Therefore, a memorandum was signed in Warsaw in 2017 (MoT, 2017).

3.3 Economic risks

The risk of a rentability is probably the most effective brake on a strong political decision. The result of the Feasibility Study (2018) is the statement that the economically advantageous variant is the construction of only two branches of the canal, namely the Danube-Oder. The Elbe branch does not pay off economically (MoT, 2018). The former Government of the Czech Republic (until 2021) decided to continue the project in the future only for Danube-Oder connection by allocating 15 billion CZK (see GCR, 2020a). New Czech Government (from 2021) has rejected financial support even for this limited version of the project due to economic disadvantages (GCR, 2022b).

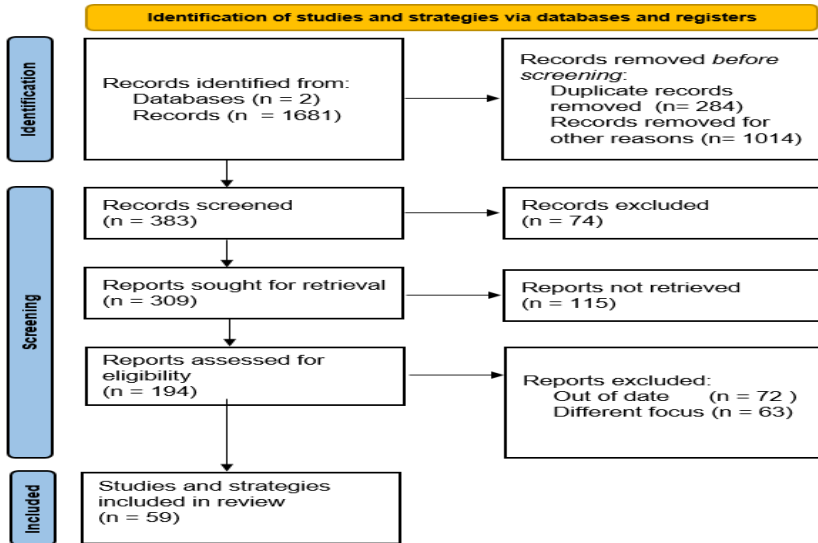
4. Research and Interpretation

The research focused on the analysis of studies, legislative acts, political strategies, ministerial decrees that have been gradually developed for the canal since 2006. This research was supplemented by an analysis of the national development strategies of the Czech Republic, which follow the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), approved in Paris 2015. The SDGs were set up in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly and are intended to be achieved by the year 2030. They are included in a UN Resolution called the 2030 Agenda or what is colloquially known as Agenda 2030. The research therefore took into account all publicly available official information related to the possibility of building DOE (studies, legislative acts, political strategies or ministerial decrees), which total number was 1681. The two main databases were used: *Collection of Laws of the Czech Republic* (Collection of Laws of the Czech Republic; 2022) and *Portal of strategic documents of the Czech Republic* (Database of strategies: Portal of strategic documents of the Czech Republic; 2022).

The data collection of all relevant documents was performed by using PRISMA analysis, which gradually selected the source documents from the number of 1681 to the most relevant 59 documents. The screening method eliminated the information that was duplicated (e. g. individual legal norms refer in their interpretation to one original source), replaced by a new political decision, or became obsolete for political decision-making. As the keyword of searching parameters we used evaluation of topic as: DOE, river and water protection, environmental safety, river transport, water transport strategy, water project, water policy. From the total source formula, 8 studies and 51 strategies were included into the research according to key words in the documents. These are

documents that have been selectively presented in Tab 1 and Tab 2. Selected documents since 2003 represent professional outputs to address the issue of DOE, which open the field for various political interpretations.

Table 5: PRISMA data set of DOE studies and Czech strategies



Source: Collection of Laws of the Czech Republic (2022); Website of Water Corridor Danube-Oder-Elbe (2022); Database of strategies: Portal of strategic documents of the Czech Republic (2022).

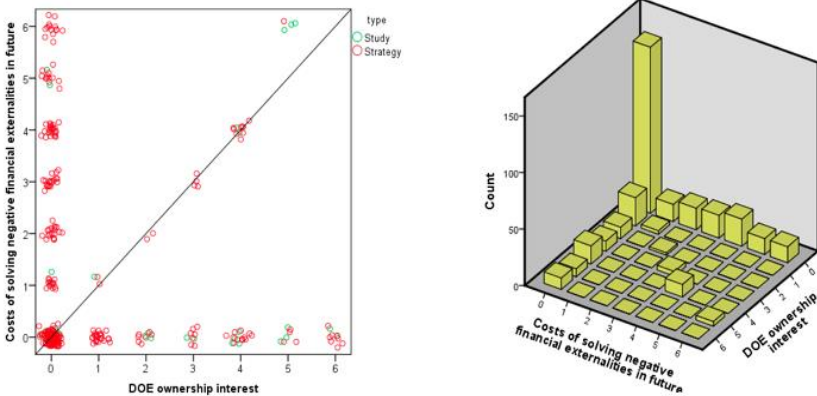
The aim of the statistical research was to find out to what extent each analysed document contains two types of information; firstly, whether the currently approved documents indicate the possibility of ownership for various political bodies in the Czech economy (municipalities, regions, state, Public-Private-Project management); secondly, whether costs for possible negative financial externalities that are associated with the operation of the DOE itself are mentioned. How the documents identify the future owner of the DOE canal with the institution that bears the risk of paying future extra costs in the form of negative financial externalities? This is the relationship of responsibility to future operations, where clear competence is determined.

Cluster analysis was chosen as a method to show the degree of grouping of solution proposals in individual strategic documents according to selected two

criteria. The research was ranked by two items of information from the documents. These are detected two variables, the x-axis represents "DOE ownership interest" (I) and the y-axis represents "Cost of solving negative financial externalities" (II). DOE ownership interest is a factor that takes into account the operational risk for the owner (financial risk and benefits). The cost of solving negative financial externalities represents the level of risk responsibility. If the examined document solves both aspects (I and II), the result of the analysis places the document on the diagonal axis between the x-axis and y-axis (see Fig 1). The documents were examined from six options, the same on axes "x" (1-6) and "y" (1-6):

- 1) DOE documents do not address ownership interest in the sum of 27 items (I) or the cost of solving negative financial externalities at all in the sum of 17 items (II).
- 2) The documents are not in conflict with I. (12 items) and II. (21 items) for municipalities along the canal.
- 3) The documents are not in conflict with I. (13 items) and II. (29 items) for the regions concerned.
- 4) The documents confirm I. (27 items) and II. (34 items) state institutions for a main role in the DOE (ministries, special authorities).
- 5) The documents are not in conflict with I. (11 items) and II. (15 items) for the international institutions.
- 6) The documents open the possibility of I. (11 items) and II. (17 items) shared by PPP (Public Private Partnership).

Figure 1: Cluster analysis of Czech national DOE documentation



Source: Own processing.

The research of the cluster analysis leads to a clear conclusion. In the case of the international level (5) or PPP management (6), not a single analysed document combines these possibilities. The documents most often do not address issues I and II in future operation together. If attention is paid, then it is either in the question of ownership, or only in the question of addressing future financial negative externalities to existing public institutions, but which are not included in the possibility of ownership in the future canal.

Ownership and the financial cost of negative externalities for the same institution (see Fig. 1) is combined only in thirteen cases out of all documents. It is therefore only 26% of the currently approved documents that address this relationship of clear responsibility (see Tab 1 and Tab 2).

The future DOE project does not have the clear issue of responsibility included from the strategic documents.

The preparation of the DOE thus appears as a system archetype *shifting to a burden*. As far as the public is concerned, this increases mistrust of the project as a whole, especially on the part of the people living along the future canal, but also on the part of ecological organizations. Preparing and communicating with the public has fundamental problems in the preparation of the documents themselves. The official national documents show a high degree of incoherence and ambiguity. The uncertain economic risks do not contribute to the public's political support for the project.

These ambiguities could be resolved by creating a separate strategy document dedicated only to the DOE mega-project. Due to the unique importance of DOE, this special document should go through inter-ministerial processing among individual ministries, expert advisory commissions. Such a strategic document can provide support for long-term political decisions.

5. Discussion

There is still no scientific discussion about the DOE mega-project in the current professional Czech and international political science literature. Topics that connect water transport, political decisions, international diplomacy associated with the management of waterways (such as DOE) can be linked to specific research. This contribution complements this area with political science perspective and research.

Owing to the complexity of the Danube-Odra-Labe megaproject, the authors have attempted to explain the most important aspects that have manifested themselves in connection with the forthcoming DOE project over the past ten years from a political science perspective. In Czech local politics, the DOE issue has so far been discussed only from an environmental point of view (mostly as criticism of the project) or from a transport economic point of view (mostly as support of the project). However, there are other aspects of the project that have not yet been addressed at the same level (international relations, social, industrial, technical). The relationship between supporters and opponents of the project is always resolved only temporarily, even within the framework of political decision-making, but even more so in the environment of other stakeholders (e.g., the relationship between the municipalities and the government of the Czech Republic or the development of international relations).

Therefore, this article is intended to open the discussion. The topic of the project is certainly not a closed chapter, and thanks to the specific location of the Czech Republic and hydrogeological conditions, the DOE project will be an open topic. From the research that the article contributes to the discussion, it appears that the DOE project has created political polarities between opponents and supporters in the examined period 2010-2021. We can therefore assume that this will continue to be the case in the future. The political fragmentation deepened further during the period under review, also due to the fact that a clear definition of the canal's contribution to the Czech Republic was not ensured, not only from an economic point of view, but also from an environmental or social point of view.

Public opinion, both at the level of the municipalities directly affected by the construction of the DOE and at the level of the Czech public (which determines the budgetary consequences associated with the financing of the project), will continue to be a crucial factor in any efforts to reopen this issue for political discussion in the future. The research found three main points of political debate affecting the DOE project:

- 1) Polarization of political parties and related interest groups;
- 2) The relationship among the government decisions and the municipalities concerned;
- 3) Public opinion in the regions affected by the construction, and the public attitude of the entire Czech public.

Conclusion

The article presented the development of the DOE project 2010-2021, showing the relations of interesting groups (supporters and opponents of the project), radical changes in the approach of the Czech government (from clearly declared support in the government programme statement in 2013 to the refusal of government support in 2021). Therefore, the authors focused on the analysis of professional documents. Using content analysis of relevant documents, the PRISMA method and cluster analysis, the documents, projects and policies show a high degree of inconsistency with respect to two research factors: "DOE ownership" (I) and "cost of solving negative financial externalities" (II). This gives a number of arguments to the opponents of the canal construction, e.g., political parties in the new Czech government (from 2021), pressure organizations (Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth Czech Republic, Extinction Rebellion etc.) as well as local municipal and regional authorities. The article argues that the official DOE documents of the Czech Republic suffered from the inability to combine interdisciplinary approaches and to create a credible position on which the political representation could finally decide. The authors examined the available documents and found a significant discrepancy between the interpretations of individual documents. It has been shown that this inconsistency in official documents concerns the relationship between two factors examined: DOE ownership (I) and the cost of resolving negative financial externalities (II). The documents do not agree on the issue of "ownership" of the canal, nor on the issue of identifying the risks that will compensate the negative financial externalities of the stakeholders.

The analysis presented showed that there is an ambiguous political opinion regarding the future financial operation of the canal, e.g., financial costs and benefits for different stakeholders (state, municipality, region, private sector). There is no clear financial responsibility in case of negative externalities.

This incoherence has not contributed to a positive attitude of the Czech public towards the whole megaproject. The Czech Republic has a key role to play in the success of the megaproject. Until the DOE megaproject is firmly anchored in expert documents, the government will always be dependent on momentary public sentiment and support relative to short-term political issues.

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