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Redistributing Upwards: Land, Housing, and Democratic Erosion in Czechia

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In rhetoric, the far right pitches itself as a defender of ordinary citizens, but its policies often serve the powerful. In Czechia, building and agricultural land reforms put forward by Andrej Babiš's government exemplify this dynamic. Civil society and grassroots organisations are fighting back. But can they turn their opposition into organised political power?

Democratic backsliding is most typically associated with attacks on courts, media freedom, elections, or civil society. In Czechia, some of the most consequential shifts are currently arriving in a less visible way – disguised as solutions. Since returning to power in 2025, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš's ANO movement, backed by the far-right SPD and Motorists parties, has been promoting a series of reforms supposedly designed to tackle pressing problems such as housing unaffordability, land speculation, and precarious food security. However, what these reforms deliver is less public oversight, less social welfare, less resilience, but more power in the hands of corporations and oligarchy.

The first proposed reform aims to introduce a preferential purchase right for farmers leasing agricultural land, ostensibly to protect food sovereignty and curb speculation. The second, nicknamed "Lex Developer" by its civil society critics, is framed as a solution to the housing crisis through faster planning and permitting procedures.

The likely beneficiaries of these reforms, however, are not struggling family farmers or households priced out of the housing market. In a country where the state has long been captured by corporate interests (and the prime minister himself is one of the country's most influential agribusiness owners through the conglomerate Agrofert), these seemingly pragmatic responses to urgent public problems risk major societal and environmental consequences.

A Czech shock doctrine

Human societies are facing multiple, mutually reinforcing crises that scientists increasingly understand as interconnected expressions of deeper structural contradictions in capitalist socio-ecological relations. Under the dominance of the market, housing, agricultural land, and food are treated as financial assets instead of basic rights and strategic resources. The environmental and social costs of this model accumulate over time, occasionally erupting in visible moments of disruption.

Some critics argue that the term "crisis" has lost its meaning. Crisis implies a temporary condition demanding urgent political action, yet many contemporary problems are chronic and structural. They require long-term, systemic transformation rather than emergency responses. Instead, political and economic elites often choose to exploit the language of crisis, using urgency to obscure root causes, advance their own interests, and consolidate the status quo.

As Naomi Klein famously argued in *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), moments of heightened urgency create opportunities for accelerated decision-making, controversial policies, and exceptional interventions.

Drastic measures are often shielded from democratic scrutiny by being presented as technical and pragmatic solutions. It is often through appeals to efficiency that bypassing public debate becomes justified. Critics, meanwhile, are dismissed as simultaneously unrealistic and obstructive, to the point of being held responsible for worsening the crisis.

In Czechia, these dynamics can be illustrated through housing and its entanglement with post-socialist legacies. The Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and its founder, former prime minister and president Václav Klaus, have promoted the idea that democracy is inseparable from the free market and under threat from an unelected civil society operating outside of formal politics. Public debate in Czechia has thus largely accepted that anything from rising prices to housing shortages should be attributed to state bureaucracy and activists: the former for its slow permitting procedures, the latter for delaying development and preventing the market from meeting demand.

A different pattern is followed in the case of food security. In Czechia, agricultural production is concentrated among domestic oligarchs, whose interests are closely linked to the state. High food prices and supply disruptions are therefore often blamed on external factors, such as international retail chains, European environmental policies, and geopolitical instability. What remains similar is the perception of the state and civic actors as a threat.

Both cases reveal a governing strategy which relies on real or perceived crises to shift attention away from questions of power, ownership, and alternative futures, redirecting it towards scapegoats and supposedly straightforward fixes. In this way, solutions to serious contemporary problems are devised by those who contributed to the problems in the first place, whereas weakened democratic oversight helps secure the growing influence of hegemonic actors.

Food sovereignty as concentration

Czechia, due to its socialist legacies and neoliberal transformation, has a peculiar agricultural structure. With the collapse of state socialism, agricultural land was returned to millions of individual owners whose ancestors had lost their land due to collectivisation. After 1989, large production units and farming cooperatives created through this process were transformed into big agricultural enterprises and agroholdings. This led to land ownership becoming highly fragmented, despite farming itself being among the most concentrated and industrialised in Europe. According to a 2024 report by the Czech Ministry of Agriculture, 71.8 per cent of Czech agricultural land is leased rather than farmed by its owners, and most of that land is cultivated by large agricultural enterprises.

In this context, Andrej Babiš's government has proposed introducing a pre-emption right for farmers leasing agricultural land. If adopted, owners wishing to sell their land would first have to offer it to the current tenants. The reform is presented by the government as a response to two widely recognised concerns: the growing financialisation of farmland and the need to strengthen Czech food sovereignty and food security in an increasingly unstable world.

At first glance, such a proposal sounds reasonable. Few people would object to protecting agricultural land from speculative investment. But the popular image of a family farmer working a modest piece of land, which agrifood enterprises and retail chains like to use in their marketing, hardly corresponds to the realities of Czech agriculture, dominated by large enterprises farming hundreds or thousands of hectares. By contrast, family and smaller private farms operate on only about 10-20 per cent of agricultural land. Therefore, the pre-emption right would grant dominant agricultural actors an opportunity to gradually purchase the land they already cultivate, and to further increase their control over

agricultural resources.

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The gap between crisis rhetoric and the outcomes of proposed solutions is particularly visible through the government's attempt to frame the reform as a defence of food sovereignty, a concept developed by farmers' movements and food justice activists in defence of their communities' access to land and ability to shape their own food systems against the control of large agricultural businesses. Research consistently shows that highly concentrated agricultural systems tend to favour a narrow range of export-oriented commodities and large-scale industrial production. In Czechia, this often means vast fields of cereal and industrial crop production (accounting for over 62 per cent of total crop production), while production of fruit, vegetables, and other labour-intensive foods is declining due to cost efficiency (for example, fruit production fell from 557,447 tons in 2000 to 123,530 tons in 2024).

Concentration of land ownership will thus inevitably undermine rather than strengthen food sovereignty, as well as more sustainable and just food systems. Our research on state food politics conducted at BOKU University in Vienna has also shown that Czech agricultural policy is primarily shaped by large agricultural enterprises and their profit-driven interests, while alternative food movements or small-scale farmers with more diverse and sustainable production have only a marginal influence.

Instead of tackling the structural problems of Czech agriculture, such as stagnating rural development, barriers faced by people who want to start their own farm, or the lack of support for more diverse forms of food production, the proposed preferential purchase right for farmers leasing agricultural land risks reinforcing the already dominant model based on the concentration of land, subsidies, and political influence by the domestic agricultural oligarchy and powerful agrifood enterprises.

Speculation as progress

If the agricultural land reform uses the language of food sovereignty to justify a further concentration of land ownership, the amendment to the Building Act recently approved by the Parliament performs a very similar trick in the urban space. In this case, the crisis language focuses on housing unaffordability. It is now an almost undisputed fact that Czechia, and Prague in particular, suffers from the worst housing crisis in the EU. Home ownership, so popular and normalised in a country where many were able to privatise their dwellings during the post-socialist transformation – creating what some scholars call a "super-homeownership" housing regime – is now increasingly out of reach.

As journalist Táňa Zabloudilová noted, young people facing housing insecurity are now increasingly being told by mainstream media that renting is the best option, and that tenancy is a widespread housing option in Western European countries. What they are being told less often is that those countries also have a strong tradition of social housing and tenants' rights. Meanwhile, rents continue to rise in Czech cities, with average prices reaching approximately 19 euros per square metre in Prague this year. Moreover, affordable public housing is still a rarity, and the few affordable options on offer are often occupied by people with good connections and political influence, regardless of their income. For example, a recent investigation revealed that Minister for Regional Development Zuzana Mrázová of the ANO movement lived in affordable municipal housing while serving as mayor of Bílina.

Instead of building a robust social housing sector or taming housing financialisation through higher property taxes, the government recently passed an amendment to the building code, blaming expensive housing on slow construction due to long planning procedures, annoying regulations, pointless environmental reviews, and activists getting in the way – a mantra many Czechs have learned to repeat.

While accelerated construction will not deliver affordable housing and is a problem in itself, especially from the perspective of environmental and heritage protection, legal experts, planning specialists, environmental organisations, and municipal representatives also highlighted the amendment's potential to reduce public oversight and participation, and to strengthen the position of developers and investors. The "Lex Developer" would benefit large corporate projects specifically, as permission procedures will not be sped up for small-scale projects.

As critics of the reform have pointed out, the housing crisis is a result of decades of commodification, speculative investment, the retreat of public housing, and successive governments' unwillingness to seriously treat housing as a social right rather than a market commodity.[1] While politicians promise that building more will eventually make housing affordable, a growing share of newly built homes is acquired by investors, institutional landlords, and people who already own property. Moreover, developers can slow down or halt construction when the costs of labour and materials rise, undermining the argument that faster permitting procedures can address the housing crisis.

In Czechia, the housing crisis also causes a generational divide. Many older Czechs bought homes during the post-socialist transformation or before prices spiralled out of reach. Rising property values have since given them assets that younger generations can only dream of, and for some, investing in real estate has become a substitute for a pension system they no longer trust. Young people without family wealth, stable incomes, or access to credit often have no such option and remain trapped in an increasingly expensive rental market.

Yet these inequalities rarely decide elections. Homeowners still form a majority of the electorate, and in a country with some of Europe's lowest property taxes, many directly benefit from rising property value. This helps explain why the mainstream debate largely avoids framing the housing crisis as a political question of wealth, inequality, and redistribution, and why the narrative of a technical problem of slow permitting has far greater appeal.

A certain paradox also transpires in the way power holders abuse Czech antipathies for communism and activists. In my earlier research on urban activism, I found that people in Czechia rarely mobilise because they oppose development itself. More often, they do so because decisions are made without them, in a top-down manner. In other words, participation, transparency, and public scrutiny emerge as responses to democratic deficits, not as their cause. Promoters of the "Lex Developer", however, often frame civil society as a source of problems and public engagement against pragmatic market solutions as ultimately antidemocratic – a remnant of communist times.

The building code reform thus epitomises a peculiar Czech version of democratic deficit in which democracy is invoked to defend markets, while citizens attempting to exercise democratic influence and protect values such as heritage and a healthy environment are dismissed as enemies of progress.

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advances in more inconspicuous ways: through planning amendments, property law, and other reforms which the public may perceive as too technical to warrant their attention

Organising resistance

Both the agricultural land and the housing reforms assist the further concentration of power and capital in the hands of a few, aggravating structural problems at the heart of housing unaffordability and fragile food security. They also try to silence and delegitimise the opposition, represented by activists, civil society, and smallholders of farmland. According to Gabriela Svárovská, a Green member of the Czech parliament, the government's project is "a peculiar form of corporate communism: costs, subsidies, and risks are distributed across society as a whole, while profits, assets, and decision-making power are concentrated in the hands of a small number of corporate groups."

Under Babiš's far-right government, democratic infrastructures in Czechia are facing a serious threat. But the backlash against both reforms also reveals these infrastructures' resilience and determination in increasingly hostile conditions. The "Lex Developer" has long been challenged by the association of environmental organisations Zelený kruh ("Green circle"), heritage protection organisations, local activist groups, and some municipalities. The land reform has been challenged by the Association of Private Farming of the Czech Republic, which forms the most important opposition to the large agroindustrial lobby, advocating instead for a more decentralised and sustainable agricultural model based on family farms. Other critics include smaller agroecological initiatives promoting soil care, such as the Živá půda ("Living soil") project, promoting more equitable access to farmland, and the Nadace pro půdu ("Foundation for the land"), focused on acquiring agricultural land for smallholder, organic, and beginning farmers.

In both cases, awareness-raising has been the main tactic, and civic associations are increasingly aware that cooperation and alliances across civil society and social movements are essential when facing a powerful opponent – a state captured by corporate and oligarchic interests. The concerns of private farmers in particular have often been amplified at mass protest events organised by Milion chvilek pro demokracii ("Million moments for democracy"), a grassroots movement able to mobilise hundreds of thousands of citizens through public campaigns, demonstrations, and community organising.

Still, many on the Czech Left view these anti-government protests and the civic organisations opposing the reforms as politically toothless, understanding democracy primarily in apolitical terms, as a matter of political culture, ethics, corruption, populism, and institutional integrity. Despite focusing on a variety of critical issues, the narratives put forward by Czech civic organisations tend to be only vaguely linked to questions of social inequality and economic power. In this polarised context, many professional civic organisations and pro-democratic mobilisations are regularly framed by both Left and Right as elitist, foreign-funded, disconnected from ordinary citizens' everyday problems, and as supporters of liberal ideologies dictated by the EU.

Meanwhile, MPs of ODS, the main opposition force, representing the neoliberal orthodoxy, voted in favour of the "Lex Developer" in the name of economic growth and market efficiency. In doing so, they exposed a contradiction at the heart of Czech liberalism: attachment to property rights and individual freedom can easily evaporate when confronted with concentrated corporate power.

The situation is dire from a democratic perspective, but it also offers an opening for a real shift in Czech politics, which increasingly suffers from the absence of a strong Left. It is also an opportunity to build a truly grassroots counter-hegemony that translates dispersed experiences of insecurity, exclusion, and ecological crisis into a shared political project capable of challenging dominant economic and political arrangements. Some of this emancipatory work is being pioneered by Re-set: The Platform for Social-Ecological Transformation, particularly through its efforts to directly confront Czech fossil oligarchy and state capture by corporate interests, and by promoting decentralised economic power and organising solidarity struggles from below.

Current developments in Czechia offer a broader lesson for Europe and for green politics. Democratic erosion does not always arrive through spectacular attacks on democratic institutions. It also advances in more inconspicuous ways: through planning amendments, property law, and other reforms which the public may perceive as too technical to warrant their attention. The Czech government's approach to housing and food sovereignty and security reveals a dangerous approach that does not just ignore the causes of crises but actively reproduces them, exploiting urgency to expand corporate power at the cost of democratic participation.

While we need to mobilise solutions to the multitude of crises we face today, we must also pay attention to how these crises are framed, who gets to define the solutions, and who is left out of the debate. In the face of a democratic deficit becoming institutionalised via concentrated corporate power, we must also ask how cleavages in a polarised society can be mended, particularly through finding common ground for solidarity, nurturing collective capacities for democratic participation, and rebuilding the social power needed to confront interconnected crises in just and inclusive ways.



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