



Forum
Austria and the Czech Republic as Immigration Countries

ARTICLE

Austria and the Czech Republic as Immigration Countries: Transnational Labor Migration in Historical Comparison

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Abstract

This article is an introduction to the forum that compares Austria and today's Czech Republic as immigration countries.

Keywords: migration

Austria and the Czech Republic share a common history and many commonalities in their size, social structures, and culture. This forum deals with a much less observed and discussed commonality: Austria and the Czech Republic have both been countries of immigration for more than half a century, but unlike classic immigration countries, neither of them embraces that fact as a part of their own identity. This forum will provide an overview of immigration to Austria and the Czech part of Czechoslovakia after 1918 and some selected case studies.¹ The dissolution of the Habsburg Empire interrupted or reverted previous itineraries of migration, but the new nation state boundaries did not stop migration altogether. The same is true for the Cold War period, which did not seal off East and West from labor migration as is commonly perceived.

What makes the comparison particularly interesting is the different political developments of the two countries. Austria regained its sovereignty after the signing of the State Treaty and declared its neutrality, which was rather understood as non-alignment. Following the communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the present-day Czech Republic was part of the Eastern bloc (for matters of simplicity, we will refer to Czechoslovakia only when specifically talking about that state). During the Cold War period, there were well-known and well-studied bouts of refugee movement to Austria in 1956 and 1968, the latter also re-connecting Czechoslovakia and Austria on a societal level. What gives these cases pertinence beyond Central Europe is the way flight and labor migration were interconnected. Since the histories of mass flight and labor migration are usually dealt with

¹There is generally much more literature on emigration from the Habsburg Empire and its successor states. See e.g., the seminal book by Tara Zahra, *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World* (New York, 2016); Annemarie Steidl, *On Many Routes: Internal, European and Transatlantic Migration in the Late Habsburg Empire* (West Lafayette, 2021); Annemarie Steidl, Wladimir Fischer-Nebmaier, and James W. Oberly, *From a Multiethnic Empire to a Nation of Nations: Austro-Hungarian Migrants in the US, 1870–1940* (Innsbruck, 2017); Traude Horvath, ed., *Auswanderungen aus Österreich von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zur Gegenwart* (Vienna, 1996); Heinz Faßmann, *Auswanderung aus der österreichisch-ungarischen Monarchie* (Vienna, 1996); Jaroslav Vaculík, *České menšiny v Evropě a ve světě* [Czech Minority in Europe and the World] (Prague, 2009); Dagmar Hájková, *Naše česká věc: Češi v Americe za první světové války*, [Our Czech Cause: The Czech in America during the First World War] (Prague, 2011). The work for this forum, beginning with a selection of the following texts, is based on the conference organized by the bilateral Austrian and Czech Historians Commission (Ständige Konferenz österreichischer und tschechischer Historiker zum gemeinsamen kulturellen Erbe, SKÖTH) with the Research Center for the History of Transformations (RECET) in Vienna in the autumn of 2021. The organizers then selected five especially outstanding contributions which had not been published before and submitted them as a forum to the AHY.

separately, this forum helps to discuss the fluid boundaries between these two phenomena and seeks to reconnect these fields of study.²

Our comparative forum and our individual authors had to take into account quite different economic contexts, which is pivotal because, after all, it was primarily the economy that drove governmental action to take in labor migrants. Austria's economy was organized as a market economy after World War II, albeit with a strong national industrial holding. Czechoslovakia was run as a planned economy after the communist coup in 1948, but after 1989, and even more so after the "velvet separation" in 1993, underwent a rapid transformation toward becoming a market economy even less regulated than the Austrian one. Although a planned economy by its nature involves planning only with the available labor force, after World War II, Czechoslovakia suffered from a chronic shortage of labor, partially caused by the flight, migration, and forced transfer of three million of its German minority population. It tried to compensate that loss partially by importing labor. Austria, by contrast, received hundreds of thousands of refugees immediately after World War II and after the failed Hungarian uprising in 1956.³ When this source of labor dried up and a "Wirtschaftswunder" belatedly set in, it also needed to import labor on a mass scale. Nevertheless, Austria suffered from brain drain and was considered a country of emigration until the 1960s, when the first guest workers arrived. This shows, again, how flight and labor migration are intertwined.⁴

Terminology

In historical migration research, migration is understood as a social process that offers answers to complex economic, ecological, social, and cultural conditions of existence that are mitigated by legal frameworks.⁵ One of the problems migration historians are confronted with is the unclear definition of the term *migration*, which can cover both long-term relocation across national borders and simple changes of residence without the temporal component playing a role. Although a perception of migration as a linear process covering long distances with a permanent change of residence is still prevalent, more recent migration studies include the spatial relocation of individuals, families, groups, or even entire populations for a limited amount of time. That broad approach is better suited to capturing both temporary and permanent migration.⁶ However, there are two drawbacks: the broad definition of the term and the expansion of the field make it harder to distinguish migration from any kind of spatial mobility, and we can observe an increasing fragmentation of historical migration research.⁷

One of the recurrent themes for migration studies in Austria and other Western European countries is the "guest workers" with their many spatial and temporal variations.⁸ Guest work could lead to temporary residence, onward migration, remigration, or to permanent residence with all its consequences, such as family reunification. Thus, a broadly diversified field of research with many international focal points has emerged, increasingly including the migrants' own perspectives. The research paradigm developed by Leo and Jan Lucassen and Dirk Hoerder set out from a holistic view of family or community interaction (micro-level) in cultural, social, and economic spaces (meso-level), regulated by nationwide laws, power hierarchies between genders, age groups, generations, classes, and economic power structures (macro-level). In the experiential world of potential and actual migrants, these

²For labor migration to Austria, see Günter Bischof and Dirk Rupnow, eds., *Migration in Austria*. Contemporary Austrian Studies, vol. 26 (New Orleans, 2017).

³See: Börrries Kuzmany, *Aufnahmeland Österreich: Über den Umgang mit Massenflucht seit dem 18. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, 2017).

⁴Gudrun Biff, *Migration und Arbeit* (Vienna, 2023), 42.

⁵Klaus Bade, *Population, Labour and Migration in 19th- and 20th-century Germany* (Leamington Spa, 1987), 11.

⁶Jochen Oltmer, *Migration im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2010), 1.

⁷Verena Lorber, *Angeworben. GastarbeiterInnen in Österreich in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren* (Göttingen, 2017), 29–30. See also: Sylvia Hahn, *Historische Migrationsforschung* (Frankfurt am Main, 2012), 24–25.

⁸Vida Bakondy, "Austria Attractive for Guest Workers? Recruitment of Immigrant Labor in Austria in the 1960s and 1970s," *Contemporary Austrian Studies* 26 (2017): 113–37; Peter Payer, "Gehen Sie an die Arbeit. Zur Geschichte der "Gastarbeiter" in Wien 1964–1989," *Wiener Geschichtsblätter* 59 (2004): 1–19.

three levels are integrated through intertwined behavioral norms.⁹ Parts of this research agenda have been adopted by the much smaller Austrian and Czech research communities, but we are still missing comprehensive migration histories for both countries.¹⁰

The very fact that a country is attractive for migrants could be regarded as a measure of success, and the West did present mass flight from the Eastern bloc as proof of its own superiority. But this kind of moral triumphalism was absent in the perception of labor migration. Austria became an immigration country (or became one once again, we should add, in view of the longer pre-history of internal migration in the Habsburg Empire) by calling in guest workers from Yugoslavia and Turkey in the late 1960s. The mass import of labor dwindled half a decade later, after the first oil crisis, when Austria closed itself off much like Germany and other Western European countries. However, immigration from Yugoslavia and Turkey never stopped completely, since the guest workers already living in Austria brought their spouses and families.¹¹

The end of full employment after the second oil crisis further changed attitudes and legislation concerning mass migration, and then impacted flight migration as well. When thousands of Poles came to Austria in 1980/81 during the rise of the *Solidarność* labor movement and applied for asylum after the declaration of martial law, Austria was much less welcoming than after the Hungarian Uprising or the Prague Spring (see the article by Maximilian Graf for details). Only a small fraction of the Poles was granted asylum, though the government decided not to send back any refugees. A similar scenario developed in 1989/90, when the Social Democratic government introduced a visa regime for Poles and Romanians. Throughout the 1980s, refugees from the East had been labeled “economic refugees,” and a consensus was building that mass migration to Austria was unwanted. De facto, Austria remained a country of immigration, which was needed to compensate for the continuous brain drain of well-educated Austrians, above all to Germany, where at the time, wages were higher and the much bigger labor market offered more opportunities.

Soon after the end of the Cold War, a new wave of refugees arrived from former Yugoslavia. Unlike in 1981 and 1989/90, Austria did not close its doors to the refugees and instead implemented a humanitarian policy that allowed more than 100,000 citizens of the defunct Yugoslavia to stay in the country.¹²

After the conclusion of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, Austria did not insist on mass repatriation, unlike Germany, but much like Sweden, it allowed the refugees to stay as long as they could prove they had a job and could finance their families. This combination of a humanitarian approach (initially in 1991/92) and a utilitarian approach (in the second half of the 1990s, Austria needed workers, who then helped the economy to grow much faster than Germany, which always remained the most important political point of reference) formed the basis of successful immigrant integration. But this opening up to immigration was short-lived, since the first conservative and right-wing populist coalition pursued anti-migratory rhetoric and policy (Gudrun Biffl deals with this closure, and the fact that it did not work, in her contribution to the forum.), Austria remained a country of immigration, even more so after the enlargement of the European Union by ten new member states in 2004. Since then, the discrepancy between anti-immigration rhetoric and persistent immigration has been a defining feature of Austrian politics and has contributed to the rise of the right-wing populism, and the right-wing turn of the conservatives, especially under chancellor Sebastian Kurz.

⁹Dirk Hoerder, Jan Lucassen, and Leo Lucassen, “Terminologien und Konzepte in der Migrationsforschung,” in *Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa. Vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, eds. Klaus J. Bade et al. (Paderborn, 2008), 28–53, here 28.

¹⁰What comes closest to a comprehensive migration history of postwar Austria is, again, Verena Lorber’s history of the guest workers in Austria. For the Czech Republic, it is the work of Dušan Drbohlav; Marie Jelínková, *Manuál lokální integrace migrantů v České republice* [Guidance for the Local Integration of Migrants in the Czech Republic] (Prague, 2020); and Pavel Barša and Andrea Baršová, *Přistěhovalectví a liberální stát. Imigrační a intergrační politiky v USA, západní Evropě a Česku* [Immigration and the liberal state. Immigration and immigration policies in the USA, Western Europe, and the Czech Republic] (Brno, 2005).

¹¹Vida Bakondy, et al, eds., *Viel Glück! Migration heute Wien, Belgrad, Zagreb, Istanbul* (Vienna, 2010).

¹²Philipp Ther, *The Outsiders: Refugees in Europe Since 1492* (Princeton, 2019), 124–27.

The Czech Republic developed into a country of immigration again after the end of the Cold War, and even more so after the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993.¹³ The better economic situation after the “velvet divorce” resulted in the consolidation of the Slovak minority and a continuous inflow of Slovak labor and students. Another reason was the war in former Yugoslavia, as a result of which around 5,000 refugees, mostly Bosnians and a smaller number of Croats, entered the Czech Republic.¹⁴ The Czech public was of mixed opinion on this influx of refugees due to the economic transformation crisis, and some politicians warned that the country might be overburdened. But in the end, a humanitarian approach along the lines advocated by president Václav Havel prevailed, and much like in Austria, most refugees were allowed to stay if they wanted to. This was also due to an increasing shortage of labor, for which the government tried to compensate from the mid-1990s onward by taking in around 100,000 guest workers from Ukraine.¹⁵

Much like in Austria in the late 1960s, it was expected that the labor migrants to the Czech Republic in the 1990s, who received time-limited contracts, would return to their homeland. But of course, this did not happen, not least because employers did not want to lose the workers already employed in their companies and did not want to train new workers who would have been needed if the guest workers had simply remained guests and been replaced by newly imported workers on a rotational basis. The Czech Republic’s accession to the European Union accelerated the import of labor from other new member countries and from the successor states of Yugoslavia. Especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic remained a popular destination because the wages were much higher, and the language was easy to learn.

Attempts at Legal Regulation

The first legislation dealing with foreign workers’ access to the labor market in the Republic of Austria dates back to the interwar Christian Social government. The aim of this law, drafted in 1925, was to give preference to native workers when filling vacancies. The next debate arose at the end of the 1950s, when high economic growth increased the demand for labor. The social partners were supposed to counteract the labor shortage and thus the social partnership became the central institution in the organization of guest work. In this context, the interests of labor representatives and the *Wirtschaftskammer Österreich (WKÖ)* (Austrian Federal Economic Chamber) were diametrically opposed. While the WKÖ called for a liberalization of the labor market, the withdrawal of the state and the admission of guest workers, the employee representatives preferred the promotion of the “silent” labor market reserve through retraining and an active labor market policy run by the state.¹⁶

The Raab-Olah Agreement of 1961 constituted a compromise where the temporary employment of guest workers was regulated by means of a quota system. Subsequently, Austria established recruitment offices in Spain, Turkey, and Yugoslavia.¹⁷ This regulation governed the guest worker sector until the

¹³See Barša and Baršová, *Přistěhovalectví a liberální stát*.

¹⁴See Ther, *The Outsiders*, 235.

¹⁵See Dušan Drbohlav, *Ukrajinská pracovní migrace v Česku: migrace - remittance - (rozvoj)*, [Ukrainian Labour Migration in the Czech Republic: Migration – Remittances – (Development)] (Prague, 2015).

¹⁶Lorber, *Angeworben*, 257.

¹⁷BGBL. No. 193/1962, Agreement between Austria and Spain on the Recruitment of Spanish Workers and their Employment in Austria. Spanish workers and their employment in Austria, Art. 3; Federal Law Gazette No. 164/1964; Agreement between the Republic of Austria and the Republic of Turkey on the Recruitment of Turkish Workers and their Employment in Austria, Art. 3; Federal Law Gazette No. 42/1966; Agreement between the Republic of Austria and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on the Regulation of the Employment of Yugoslavian Workers in Austria, Art. 1. See also: Lorber, *Angeworben*, 95. The duration of employment specified in the employment contracts was not allowed to exceed the duration of the quota. In 1970, employers had to pay 850 shillings for the recruitment of Yugoslavian workers, or 500 shillings if the transport was not carried out by the recruitment commission. For Turkish workers, the recruitment fee was 1,200 shillings or 500 shillings if the travel costs were borne by the employer. For Spanish migrant workers, 1,200 shillings had to be paid. In 1974, the recruitment fee increased to 1,100 shillings for a Yugoslavian worker, 1,300 shillings for a Turkish worker and 600 shillings (excluding travel by train) for a Spanish worker (WKÖ Archive, inventory SP-A Commission Istanbul E 2/E 6/E 7/E 8, information sheet on the recruitment and employment of foreign workers 1970; WKÖ Archive, inventory SP-A Commission Istanbul V 2, minutes of AGA meeting 1974, 3).

introduction of the *Ausländerbeschäftigungsgesetz* (AuslBG) (Employment of Foreigners Act) in 1976, when, in the wake of the first oil crisis and rising unemployment, guest workers were encouraged to return to their countries of origin.¹⁸ Bilateral agreements regulated the recruitment process, named the responsible institutions, and regulated the rights of guest workers. This organized form of recruitment was intended to subordinate migration to state control as much as possible. In this way, the state sought to retain the ability to adapt the flow of guest workers to economic demand.

However, this never worked properly. Since the state-run recruitment agencies acted too slowly, companies increasingly switched to self-recruitment in the late 1960s, and more and more labor migrants entered the country on tourist visas and then looked for a job. Moreover, a pattern of chain migration developed, which was desired by neither Austria nor the sending countries.¹⁹ In the subsequent period between 1977 and 1984, the annual net migration was 3,678 persons. However, the worsening economic situation and mass unemployment led to a reduction in the foreign labor force in the early 1980s. In 1984, there were 138,710 registered foreign workers in Austria, representing 5.1 percent of the labor force. Then, in the late 1980s, the annual positive migration balance rose to a plus of 12,392. Early on, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) under Jörg Haider exploited the issue, and subsequently, the concerns of guest workers were handed over from the Ministry of Social Affairs to the Ministry of the Interior.

The collapse of the Eastern bloc and the opening of Austria's eastern borders led to the next phase of migration. The annual figures between 1989 and 1993 stood at 67,610 persons. The government reacted to this sharp increase by limiting the number of guest workers by percentage and introducing a so-called federal maximum number. This legislation stipulated that a maximum of 10 percent (from 1994 only 8 percent) of employees in Austria could have guest worker status.²⁰ Rising xenophobia resulted in an ever more restrictive immigration policy even after Austria's accession to the EU. When ten new member states joined the EU in 2004, Austria took advantage of the full length of the transitional provisions to protect its labor market until 2011. Nevertheless, the migrant population in Austria increased again as a result of mass flight from the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and Russia's war against Ukraine. The most recent data show that migrants constitute 19 percent of the general population.

The Czech Republic also has a long tradition as a refugee and immigration country.²¹ The communist takeover led to an increased flight from the country, whereas labor migration by Czechs was rather low. The aforementioned labor shortage after the expulsion of the German minority was partially compensated by internally deported Slovaks, Roma, and repatriates from Transcarpathia and Czech settlements in southeastern Europe. In the 1960s, Czechoslovakia introduced a guest workers scheme for Yugoslavs, who were followed by guest workers from Poland, Vietnam, Hungary, Cuba, Mongolia, Angola, and Korea in the 1970s and 1980s.²²

The state-directed and organized migration, on the one hand with bilateral treaties and, on the other, with individual recruitment, but in much smaller numbers. This changed decisively after the Velvet Revolution. Czechs were able to leave the country more easily and looked for job opportunities in other Western countries. Most workers from other socialist countries were made to leave the

¹⁸BGBI. Nr. 218/1975, *Ausländerbeschäftigungsgesetz* (AuslBG).

¹⁹Lorber, *Angeworben*, 259.

²⁰Rainer Bauböck and Bernhard Perchinig, "Migrations- und Integrationspolitik," in *Politik in Österreich. Das Handbuch*, eds. Herbert Dachs, et al. (Vienna, 2006), 726–42.

²¹See David Kraft, *Exil z Rakouska a vztahy k Československu 1934–1945* [The Exile from Austria and the Relations to Czechoslovakia 1934–1945] (Prague, 2009); Kateřina Čapková and Michal Frankl, *Nejisté útočiště: Československo a uprchlíci před nacizmem 1933–1938* [Unsafe Shelter: Czechoslovakia and the Refugees from National Socialism 1933–1938] (Prague, 2008); Michal Frankl, *Občané země nikoho: uprchlíci a pohyblivé hranice středovýchodní Evropy 1938–1939* [Citizens of No man's Land: Refugees and the Moving Borders of Central and Eastern Europe 1938–1939] (Prague, 2023).

²²Dušan Drbohlav, "Immigration and the Czech Republic (with a Special Focus on the Foreign Labor Force)," *The International Migration Review* 37, no. 1 (2003): 197; See also Ondřej Vojtěchovský, "Na dočasné práci v socialistické zemi. Jugoslávští dělníci v Československu od šedesátých do osmdesátých let 20. Století" ["Temporary Working Abroad" in a Socialist Country. Yugoslav Workers in Czechoslovakia from the 1960s to the 1980s] *Paměť a dějiny*, 4 (2021): 30–45; Ondřej Vojtěchovský and Péter Vukman, "Jugoslávská politická emigrace po roce 1948 v Československu a Maďarsku" ["Yugoslav Political Exile after 1948 in Czechoslovakia and Hungary"], *Dějiny a současnost*, 5 (2021): 10–14.

country when the guest worker contracts expired. Thus, the number of guest workers fell sharply; in April 1993 only 1,330 of them were officially registered.²³ The government also tried to regain control over migration processes by concluding various bilateral and multilateral agreements. Contracts were signed with Germany in 1991, Poland and Slovakia in 1992, Vietnam in 1994, Ukraine in 1996, Russia in 1998, and Hungary in 1999.²⁴

Strong economic growth after the transformation crisis led to a sharp increase in the demand for labor and the number of guest workers. Around 2000, there were already around 460,000 migrants (not including tourists, transit migrants, and asylum seekers), accounting for around 4.5 percent of the total population. Most guest workers come from Ukraine (41,438), followed by Slovakia (33,136), Vietnam (15,318), and Poland (5,281).²⁵ Seen from a comparative perspective, this number corresponds more or less to the Austrian figures in the 1980s.

It is more difficult to obtain figures on Czechs working abroad. According to Dušan Drbohlav, about 50,000 were employed in Germany in 1992, by far the most important destination for Czech guest workers. Three years later, this number dropped to about 35,000. The Czech Republic experienced a strong increase in guest workers after its accession to the EU in 2004.²⁶ The good economic situation continued to fuel this trend until the global financial crisis and the bursting of the Eastern European bubble in 2008, when the number of immigrants decreased slightly but rose steadily again from 2014. These trends deepened despite the Czech Republic's strong opposition to the admission of refugees from the Middle East in 2015/16. To date, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been the biggest challenge for the country, which has positioned itself as a major recipient, with about 500,000 Ukrainian refugees. This was not just a humanitarian gesture; the Czech Republic was also located on the mental map of many Ukrainians because of the previous contacts through labor migration. As a result of the intake of Ukrainian war refugees, the number of migrants in the Czech Republic rose to over 10 percent of the total population and this trend is expected to continue.

One of the major findings of our forum is the parallels between Austria and the Czech Republic with respect to immigration flows and migration policies. Nevertheless, we are equally interested in a contrasting comparison that highlights key differences. The articles in our forum present precise statistics that may serve as a first step toward more comprehensive migration histories of Austria and of the Czech Republic. The works by the economist Gudrun Biffl come close to that for the period after the Cold War, and it remains to be hoped that in the Czech Republic, the immigration after 1989 and 1993 will one day be condensed into a research monograph as well.

Factual migration processes are often out of line with migration discourses, and this is particularly true for Austria and the Czech Republic. Very often, governments can only react to large-scale migration processes, and this is especially true for flight migration, as evidenced most recently by the so-called refugee crisis in 2015/16. However, governments also actively shape the attitude toward migration. The initial premise of this forum is that both Austria and the Czech Republic are living with a cognitive dissonance: they have been immigration countries since the postwar period, and even earlier in the "short" twentieth century. Both countries depend on labor migrants in various sectors of their economy such as the construction industry, trade, and basic services. Seasonal workers in tourism and agriculture also play an increasingly important role in both countries. Yet, neither country perceives itself as a country of immigration.²⁷ Were one to write a history of migration discourses, then

²³Petra Bousková, "Pracovní Migrace Cizinců v ČR v 70. a 90. letech" [Labor Migration of Foreigners in the Czech Republic between the 1970s and 1990s] in *Narodní Diskuse n Kulatého Stolu na Temu Vztahu Mezi Komunitami* (Prague, 1998), 34–45.

²⁴Drbohlav, "Immigration and the Czech Republic," 199.

²⁵Drbohlav, "Immigration and the Czech Republic," 200.

²⁶See Barša and Baršová, *Přistěhovalectví a liberální stát*.

²⁷At least there are the first attempts in Austria to document the history of migrants' memories. See Dirk Rupnow, "The History and Memory of Migration in Post-War Austria: Current Trends and Future Challenges," *Contemporary Austrian Studies* 26 (2017): 37–68; Vida Bakondy, et al, *Schere, Topf, Papier. Objekte zur Migrationsgeschichte* (Vienna, 2016); and the oral history project by Georg Traska, Institute of Cultural Studies of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, entitled: Multilingual Memory of Migration, <https://lehrerinnenbildung.univie.ac.at/arbeitsbereiche/sprachlehr-und-lernforschung/forschung/laufende-projekte/vielsprachiges-gedaechtnis-der-migration/>, accessed 11 February 2024.

the list of anti-migratory statements would be much longer than a constructive approach that attempts to make the best of past migrations, and all the problems resulting from them. Historians have very little influence on these discourses, politics, and societal attitudes. And yet it is our responsibility to contribute to reducing that cognitive distance, because a lot depends on it, perhaps even the preservation and development of liberal democracy.