COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic has affected almost every aspect of our lives. While millions of people fought with the disease, economies, societies and institutions faced side-effects of government measures resisting the spread of the virus. This article describes the effects of the pandemic on the legislative behaviour of MPs in one of the worst-hit countries in the world, the Czech Republic. The results show that the number of bill proposals and roll calls substantially increased during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic times. Since the start of the outbreak, a third of roll calls and a half of bill proposals concerned the pandemic. Nonetheless, the outbreak did not substantially affect the voting unity of parliamentary party groups nor the opposition became more supportive of the cabinet. Still, while the liberal Pirates became more cooperative during the pandemic than the pre-pandemic period, the rightist antisystem party Freedom and Direct Democracy receded from the rest of the parties on the pandemic issues.

Keywords: Chamber of Deputies, COVID-19, Czech Republic, Legislative Behaviour, Parliament

1. Introduction

COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic has affected almost every aspect of our lives all over the world. More specifically, as of 19 June 2021, more than 177 million cases were confirmed worldwide, including 3.8 million deaths (World Health Organization, 2021). To resist the spread of the virus, states adopted numerous anti-pandemic measures. As a result, societies and economies faced side-effects of the measures, such as job losses, deficiency in education or travel restrictions. Legislatures were not spared either.

Together with the executive, parliaments were focal institutions of the fight with the outbreak in democratic regimes. Notably, after SARS-CoV-2 (Severe
Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2) coronavirus had started to spread, parliamentarians had to deal with many severe issues, such as states of emergency or financial compensations, in a limited time. Simultaneously, assemblies of a large number of people were a significant health threat, including legislators. In other words, parliaments faced more pivotal decisions under more complicated circumstances during the pandemic than usual.

The question on the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on legislatures might be twofold. First, how did the work of parliamentarians changed formally, and what were the consequences of such changes? Almost all parliaments needed to adjust modes of gathering, deliberation or voting, and it is undoubtedly vital to scrutinise the differences between the adjustments. Thanks to early research, we already know the adopted measures from a comparative perspective (Syllová, 2020; Poguntke et al., 2021). Furthermore, scholars already started to scrutinise how the formal changes influenced legislatures’ role in politics in Australia (Mills, 2020), Canada (Malloy, 2020), the Czech Republic (Petrov, 2020), Finland (Neuvonen, 2020), Israel (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2020) or Sweden (Jonason and Larue, 2020).

Second, one might also ask how did COVID-19 change the legislative behaviour of parliamentarians? Unfortunately, the knowledge on this issue is much more limited (e.g. Merkley et al., 2020; Louwerse et al., 2021). Therefore, this article contributes to this research since it answers how the legislative behaviour of MPs in the Czech Republic changed during the COVID-19 outbreak? The selection of the research case is based not only on the fact that the Czech Republic is a parliamentary regime with a central role of its bicameral parliament. More importantly, the country was one of the worst-hit states by the pandemic in the world. To be more specific, as of 19 June 2021, there were 156,130 confirmed cases and 2,840 deaths per million inhabitants, which ranked the country the fourth (after Andorra, Montenegro and Bahrain) in the number of cases and the fourth (after Peru, Hungary, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) in the number of deaths in the world (The New York Times, 2021). Thus, there is a justifiable expectation that the pandemic affected the legislators’ behaviour in the Czech Republic substantially.

I focus on the lower chamber of the Czech parliament, the Chamber of Deputies, which is the key institution of the country’s polity due to asymmetric bicameralism (Vodička and Cabada, 2011). To be more specific, I am interested in two issues. Firstly, how did the amount of legislative work change during the pandemic? Secondly, how did the outbreak change the voting behaviour of the MPs?

The article proceeds in four parts. Firstly, the already existing knowledge on the influence of the pandemic on legislatures is presented. Secondly, I depict the outbreak in the Czech Republic together with the most crucial adjustments of the
2. Parliaments in times of the pandemic

The COVID-19 outbreak posed long-unknown conditions to parliaments all over the world. Bar-Siman-Tov (2020) differentiated four manifestations of the challenge. Firstly, the coronavirus, especially the measures adopted to contain its spread, made it difficult for parliaments to operate. Secondly, legislators found themselves at a higher health risk than the rest of the population since politicians are predominantly older males and meet many people.1 Thirdly, parliamentarians tended to either underestimate or overestimate the risk of the pandemic as there was, for instance, more extensive media attention to infected politicians (see Waismel-Manor et al., 2020). Fourthly, since governments often treated the situation as a national emergency, parliaments faced a threat of a concentration of executive power.

So far, scholars have focused primarily on the first challenge for the operation of legislative assemblies. Generally, parliaments were choosing among three strategies to deal with the restrictions (Poguntke et al., 2021). First, some parliaments reduced the number of physically present participants. This was the case of the Czech deputies and senators who decided to assemble in half the number at the time of the most severe spreading of the virus (Parliament of the Czech Republic, 2021). Second, many parliaments employed a strategy of a physical distance (online procedures of deliberation and decision-making). For instance, even the British House of Commons, probably the most traditional legislature in the world, utilised a combination of physical and virtual attendance (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2020). Third, the easiest way of facing the coronavirus was a cancellation strategy. For example, in Australia, the House of Representatives and Senate had initially decided to adjourn sittings for 20 weeks since March 2020 despite the protests of opposition parties, but the decision was changed later (Mills, 2020).

Many parliaments changed their rules of procedure, especially as they adopted online forms of attendance and voting during plenary sessions and committee and commission meetings (Syllová, 2020; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021; Pecháček et al., 2021; Poguntke et al., 2021). Still, there were significant differences among the states. While the most progressive countries (e.g. Estonia, Poland or Romania) adopted the changes relatively quickly or on a large scale, other countries still do not allow the distant attendance at all (e.g. Austria, Denmark, France, Italy or the Netherlands).

1Male, aged over 65 years might face a greater risk of developing into the critical or mortal condition when infected by COVID-19 (Zheng et al., 2020).
Soon, experts started to discuss how these changes of operation influenced parliaments’ role in politics. For example, Malloy (2020) pointed out that the Canadian opposition focused mainly on scrutiny of government actions in the pandemic, while the government mainly concentrated on law-making (see Morden, 2020). As a result, these two functions were emphasised over others (such as transparency or representation), which was intensified by virtual meetings. In Australia, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated both the capacity and willingness of the executive to govern without the parliament (Mills, 2020). Moreover, the parliament proved to be unable to define a more assertive role for itself. As a result, ‘the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic either eliminated or by substantially compromised Parliament’s capacity to perform each’ principal function of the parliament (Mills, 2020, p. 18). In Sweden, changes were adopted under no specific framework for civil crises, and they led to a shorter law-making process, although not a single step in the process was skipped (Jonason and Larue, 2020). In Finland, the availability of information turned out to be the central issue when the legislature controlled the government during the pandemic (Neuvonen, 2020).

Based on the example of the Czech Republic, Petrov (2020) introduced his effectiveness-enhancing theory. According to the author, parliaments faced a significant trade-off in the pandemic between controlling the executive and supporting its capacity to fight the coronavirus efficiently. Petrov argues that parliaments should show some deference to the executive but should not clear the field for governments completely. To explain this, deliberative and scrutiny functions are essential not only for preventing the abuse of power but also for increasing the effectiveness and legitimacy of emergency measures.

Yet, only a few studies are scrutinising how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the legislative behaviour of MPs. The most relevant research showed that the opposition expressed positive sentiment in parliaments during the early phase of the pandemic (Louwerse et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the sentiment turned more negative later after the first wave of the crisis had passed. Importantly, the early positive sentiment applied especially to large opposition parties with considerable prior government experience. Similarly, the evidence from social media, internet search trends and public opinion surveys in Canada shows that political elites and the public were in a unique period of cross-partisan consensus on essential questions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as seriousness or necessity of some basic measures (Merkley et al., 2020). As a result, both studies suggest that the outbreak noticeably influenced the legislative behaviour of parliamentarians.

3. COVID-19 outbreak in the Czech Republic

The first cases of COVID-19 in the Czech Republic were confirmed on 1 March 2020 (Ministry of Health, 2021). After a few preventive measures, the government
declared a nationwide state of emergency on 12 March for the first time in history (Government of the Czech Republic, 2021). The government had to inform the Chamber of Deputies, which may annul the state of emergency. According to the Constitutional Act on the Security of the Czech Republic (no. 110/1998 Coll.), a state of emergency may be declared for a maximum period of 30 days, which may be extended with the prior consent of the deputies. The state of emergency was extended several times during the pandemic.

The first consecutive state of emergency lasted until 17 May 2020. During that time, the country adopted a full spectrum of measures restricting the spread of the coronavirus (Hale et al., 2021). As a result, after the first wave of the outbreak, the country was one of the most successful countries in the European Union in protecting citizens’ health. While there were 791 cumulative confirmed COVID-19 cases and 28 deaths per million inhabitants in the Czech Republic on 17 May 2020, in the European Union, there were 2,469 cases and 274 deaths (Ritchie et al., 2020). Fortunately, the early adoption of strict measures outweighed the underestimated ‘preparedness of the health care system for mass contagion’ (Supreme Audit Office, 2021a, p. 2).

The following summer, the Czech Republic eased the measures to a lower level than all neighbour states (Hale et al., 2021). In the light of approaching regional and Senate elections at the beginning of October, the cabinet hesitated to readopt strict measures. For instance, in August, the Minister of Health, Adam Vojtěch (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens – ANO), recalled his initial instruction on wearing masks at schools, shops or restaurants after Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (ANO) had intervened in the debate (CT24, 2021).

Nonetheless, the daily number of newly confirmed cases exceeded the Spring record even before the end of August and continued to rise in September and October. On 5 October, the government reinstated a nationwide state of emergency. Still, on 7 November, the cumulative number of deaths per million people in the Czech Republic surpassed the level in the European Union (Ritchie et al., 2020). The country successively faced the second, third and fourth waves of the outbreak. During the time, the Czech Republic mostly followed less strict measures than the neighbour states (Hale et al., 2021). Between September 2020 and May 2021, the Minister of Health was replaced four times due to political turmoil and affairs, impeding management consistency (including Adam Vojtěch, who was appointed in May 2021 for the second time). The state of emergency lasted until 11 April 2021, when the measures started to follow from a newly adopted anti-pandemic law. At that point, there were 147,557 cumulative confirmed COVID-19 cases and 2,597 deaths per million inhabitants in the Czech Republic compared with 63,840 and 1,447, respectively, in the European Union (Ritchie et al., 2020). As a result, the Czech Republic became one of the worst-hit countries globally (The New York Times, 2021).
Furthermore, the country quickly confronted other challenges similar to other states. To be more specific, due to the government measures against the spread of the coronavirus, the economy suffered, and the country’s GDP declined by 5.6% in 2020. Thus, the government employed many financial programmes to support the economy (Government of the Czech Republic, 2021). As a result, the 2020 state budget resulted in the largest shortfall in history. Nonetheless, the Supreme Audit Office (2021b) alerts that more than half of the increased budget expenditures were caused by social or operating expenses instead of remedies for government measures. Moreover, the office criticises the management of purchases of personal protective equipment (Supreme Audit Office, 2021a).

COVID-19 pandemic substantially affected also the working of the parliament in the Czech Republic without precedent. On 11 March 2020, the day before the state of emergency was declared, all nine parliamentary party groups agreed to finish a plenary session of the Chamber of Deputies prematurely. The president of the chamber Radek Vondráček (ANO) pointed out: ‘The risks are really high, as we have said. If the contagion manifests here in the Chamber of Deputies, the ministers of the government, members of the State Security Council would also be quarantined, and in this situation, it is not sensible to continue this meeting’ (Chamber of Deputies Debate, 2020). On the contrary, the Senate gathered a week later as the second chamber has to debate bills in 30 days according to the Constitution (art 46, para 1). Still, to lower the risk of the infection, only a half of 81 senators assembled, they spoke from their seats, and the number of discussed issues was limited (Senate Debate, 2020).

Although the deputies initially planned to gather in mid-April, they had to assemble on 24 March (Chamber of Deputies, 2020). This was because the chamber president—at the government’s request—declared a state of legislative emergency to enact the first cabinet measures against the pandemic according to the Rules of Procedure of the Chamber of Deputies (para 99). Similar to the Senate, only a half of the MPs assembled. Notably, the representatives’ limited attendance in both chambers resulted from an ad hoc agreement of parliamentary party groups.

Nonetheless, the MPs were forced to gather in full strength on 21 April (Parliament of the Czech Republic, 2021). To explain this, the Constitution (art 47, para 1) determines that if the Senate rejects a bill, it is adopted if an absolute majority of all deputies approves it. Thus, almost all 200 MPs gathered to meet the quorum of 101 votes. Such an action took place for the rest of the pandemic repeatedly if necessary despite the severity of the spreading.

Given the total number of infected people in the Czech Republic, it would be naïve to expect legislators to remain untouched by the disease. After many parliamentarians in quarantine or isolation, the news on the first infected MP, Karla Šlechtová (ANO), became public on 25 August 2020 (Heller, 2020). Since then,
many other MPs have become infected. Unfortunately, one of the MPs, Jiří Ventruba (Civic Democratic Party – ODS), died of the disease on 9 March 2021 after a few other MPs had fought the severe illness in a hospital (iRozhlas.cz, 2021).

To summarise, the parliament in the Czech Republic employed mainly the strategy of reducing the number of physically present participants during plenary sessions (see Poguntke et al., 2021). On the contrary, neither the Chamber of Deputies nor the Senate utilised online virtual attendance or voting. Both chambers strictly followed the Constitution, which asserts that ‘Deputies and Senators shall perform their duties personally’ (art 26). Thus, the pandemic did not lead to any change in the Constitution or the rules of procedure.

4. Legislative behaviour of MPs during the pandemic

The form of parliamentary work in the Czech Republic was substantially affected by the pandemic. Nevertheless, the question of changes in the legislators’ behaviour during the pandemic remains. Thus, answering this question becomes the aim of the following scrutiny.

To be more specific, the goal of the article is to evaluate two issues. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic influenced almost every aspect of life in the Czech Republic. Therefore, legislators had to deal with the unprecedented government measures against the disease and their immense impacts on the economy and society. As a result, it is reasonable to assume that the total amount of legislators’ work increased during the pandemic and that the very COVID-19 pandemic caused the increase.

Secondly, the study on parliamentarians in four Western-European countries showed that the opposition expressed positive sentiment in parliaments during the early phase of the pandemic (Louwerse et al., 2021). Generally, there is evidence of cross-party agreement during the pandemic (Merkley et al., 2020). Thus, I anticipate that the severity of the health crisis led to adjustments of the MPs’ voting behaviour. To be more specific, I expect that the pandemic influenced the voting unity of the parliamentary party groups and coalition and opposition camps. According to the already mentioned studies, it is justifiable to expect the increased voting unity, especially in the early phase of the pandemic. Furthermore, I hypothesise that the attitude to the anti-epidemic measures became one of the main dimensions of parliamentary politics during the pandemic.

To evaluate these issues, I focus on the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. Thanks to asymmetrical bicameralism, the lower chamber is the focal institution of the parliamentary regime in the country (Vodička and Cabada, 2011). At the time of the pandemic, the VIII. Chamber of Deputies was in operation after the 2017 legislative election and awaiting the election in
October 2021. Overall, 221 MPs have held the deputy mandate since the beginning of the term. Nonetheless, I exclude seven MPs who changed their parliamentary party group (PPG) during the term from the analyses of voting patterns as they would distort the results. \(^2\)

Importantly, I differentiate three agendas of the chamber. Firstly, I employ the pre-pandemic period as control data. It reveals patterns of the MPs’ legislative behaviour before the COVID-19 outbreak. The period includes the legislators’ parliamentary work between 27 June 2018 (the appointment of the second cabinet of Andrej Babiš) and 11 March 2020 (the day before the first state of emergency was declared). The MPs voted on 4,490 roll calls, and 309 bills were proposed during the pre-pandemic period.

Secondly, I scrutinise the pandemic period, including the legislative behaviour from 12 March 2020 until 11 April 2021. The period starts with the first state of emergency and it finishes on the last day of the last state of emergency. Importantly, even though the end of the state of emergency was not the end of the pandemic as such, it limits the tensest phase of the pandemic. To summarise, the MPs dealt with 3,459 roll calls and 278 bill proposals during the pandemic period.

Thirdly, some non-pandemic issues were also a matter of the MPs’ interest even during the pandemic. Therefore, I differentiate bills dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak together with roll calls on such bills. To do that, I identify bills that employ specific words (‘COVID-19’, ‘SARS*’, ‘pandemie*’, ‘koronavirus’*) in their very text or an explanatory report. As a result, I create a subset of the pandemic period, which takes only the bills and roll calls directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic into account. To be more specific, there were 149 bill proposals and 1,274 consequential roll calls concerned directly in the outbreak.

4.1 Amount of work

Law-making is one of the main functions of the Chamber of Deputies (Vodička and Cabada, 2011). Before the pandemic, 15.0 bills were proposed to the chamber on average every month. Contrary to this, the monthly number of proposed bills rose to 21.3 on average during the pandemic, which stands for a 42.0% increase.

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\(^2\)These MPs are Marian Bojko, Jaroslav Foldyna, Tereza Hyťhová, Václav Klaus, Zuzana Majerová Zahradníková, Ivana Nevludová, and Lubomír Volný.

\(^3\)SARS-CoV-2 is the official name of the coronavirus type that causes the COVID-19 disease.

\(^4\)Pandemie’ stands for pandemic in Czech language.

\(^5\)Koronavirus’ stands for coronavirus in Czech language.
To be more specific, 53.6% of bills dealt directly with the COVID-19 pandemic during the outbreak, while other bills reacted on other issues.

Importantly, Figure 1a shows that most COVID-19 bills were proposed in times of the first and second waves of the outbreak in Spring and Autumn 2020, respectively. Interestingly, Figure 1b reveals that the relative share of COVID-19 bills was gradually increasing during the pandemic period. While in 2020, the COVID-19 bills accounted for a minority of all bills presented to the chamber, they became a majority in 2021. In other words, bills on COVID-19 gradually took over the chamber’s legislative agenda during the pandemic. Nonetheless, it is expectable that more bills react to the outbreak during the time. This expectation is even more valid as the operationalisation identifies COVID-19 bills based on even a single reference in an explanatory report.

Voting during plenary sessions is probably the most representative measure of all the chamber’s functions (Vodička and Cabada, 2011). Before the pandemic, the MPs voted 7.2 times a day on average. Contrary to this, during the pandemic, the legislators voted 9.1 times per day on average, which is the increase of 26.4%. Thus, the MPs faced substantially more roll calls during the pandemic compared with the previous period.

The details of the increase in absolute terms are depicted in Figure 2a. While the number of roll calls had fluctuated noticeably before the pandemic, it remained relatively stable during the pandemic. The main exception was a traditional summer recess that took place also in August 2020, as the outbreak seemed to be under control.

Figure 2b confirms that the voting on the COVID-19 bills was a strong reason for the increase in the total number of roll calls. To be more specific, COVID-19 roll calls accounted for 36.8% of all the pandemic roll calls. Interestingly, the
number of roll calls on COVID-19 bills fluctuated substantially in both absolute and relative terms. For example, from the start of the pandemic in March until May 2020, the MPs voted on more COVID-19 bills than all the other issues combined (including, for instance, procedural votes). Contrary to this, in September 2020, only 5.1% (15 out of 296) roll calls related to the COVID-19 bills.

Overall, there are two major absolute as well as relative peaks of roll calls on the COVID-19 bills. Firstly, in Spring 2020, parliamentary politics faced a previously unknown challenge that demanded maximum attention. The deputies discussed and approved the vast number of government measures reacting to the disease damages. Secondly, the relative as well as absolute amount of the COVID-19 roll calls substantially increased between October and December 2020 when the second wave of the pandemic hit the country with full strength. At that time, the deputies had to discuss the restoration of many government measures together and implement new actions, especially to support the economy.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a substantially increased amount of parliamentary work considering the number of roll calls and proposed bills compared with the pre-pandemic period. The analysis shows that bills dealing directly with the COVID-19 outbreak are to blame for the increase. Interestingly, while the share of the COVID-19 bills was rising gradually during the pandemic, the roll calls on such bills were the most frequent during the first and second waves of the pandemic. To conclude, while the first and second waves of the pandemic translated into the frequent roll calls on a relatively low share of the COVID-19 bills, the later phases of the pandemic led to rather uncomplicated confirmation of the COVID-19 bills despite their growing share. Thus, on the one hand, especially the first and second waves of the outbreak were the opportunity for a rigorous debate on the COVID-19 bills and the pandemic as such. On

Figure 2. Roll calls in the Chamber of Deputies (2018–2021).
Notes: The break on 12 March 2020 separates the pre-pandemic period from the pandemic one. Roll calls on the COVID-19 bills refer directly to the outbreak.
Source: Author based on Parliament of the Czech Republic (2021).
the other hand, the discussions and roll calls on the pandemic bills have become less frequent during the time, which was most likely caused by the decreasing salience of the issue.

4.2 Voting behaviour

There is a justifiable expectation that the pandemic affected the MPs’ voting behaviour due to the severity of the health and accompanying economic and social crises (see Merkley et al., 2020; Louwese et al., 2021). One of the most basic but still relevant properties of voting behaviour is voting unity. Thus, I inspect the Rice index of all parliamentary party groups and both coalition and opposition camps. After the 2017 legislative election, the first single-party minority cabinet of Andrej Babiš (ANO) took office on 13 December 2017. Since the cabinet did not receive the confidence of the Chamber of Deputies, the second minority cabinet of Andrej Babiš (ANO) was named on 27 June 2018, and it remained in the office for the rest of the term. The cabinet was composed of ANO and the Social Democrats (ČSSD), while the Communists (KSČM) tolerated the cabinet based on a formal agreement. Thus, I treat ANO, ČSSD, and KSČM as the coalition parties. Considering the opposition, I differentiate between all opposition parties and the prosystem opposition parties, excluding Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), the antisystem anti-immigration party. Last but not least, I calculate the Rice index of all MPs to reveal their overall voting unity.

The average Rice index of the nine parliamentary party groups before the pandemic was 0.879. Nonetheless, the voting unity of most of the parties did not

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6The Rice index ranges from 0 (when a PPG splits into two halves) to 1 (when a PPG is united) (Rice, 1925).
change substantially after the state of emergency had been declared, as Figure 3 shows (the average Rice index of 0.888 during the pandemic). Only KDU-ČSL, TOP 09 and STAN experienced a major increase in their voting unity during the pandemic. Importantly, these are the smallest PPGs consisting of 10, 7 and 6 deputies, respectively. The Rice Index may systematically overestimate the disunity of small parties as only a single defector decreases the index substantially (Sieberer, 2006). Similarly, the index increases easily if only a single potential defector suddenly toes the party line. Importantly, the majority of parties experienced higher voting unity on the COVID-19 bills. The only exceptions were ODS and the Pirates as the leaders of the opposition.

Interestingly, while the coalition camp enjoyed the increase in its voting unity during the pandemic on COVID-19 bills, the opposition was rather struggling. Still, the prosystem opposition faced the growing voting unity on the COVID-19 bills. Last but not least, the voting unity of all MPs was noticeably higher during the pandemic compared with the pre-pandemic period. Moreover, it also applied to the roll calls on the pandemic bills.

Furthermore, Figure 4a shows a slight increase in the voting unity of opposition and coalition camps after the declaration of the first state of emergency in March 2020. Simultaneously, the voting unity of all the MPs decreased as a consequence of the unification of only opposition and coalition groups instead of easing the total polarisation. Nonetheless, neither the increase of the voting unity of both camps nor the decrease of the total voting unity exceeded other changes during the legislative term. This also applies to the subsequent decline in voting unity in Summer 2020. In the second state of emergency, the voting unity of all MPs increased significantly in March and April 2021.

To assess the changes in more details, Figure 4b depicts the voting unity only on the COVID-19 roll calls. In that case, the coalition camp enjoyed approximately the same voting unity during the whole pandemic. Contrary to this, the opposition camp initially faced a slight decrease in voting unity, which reversed in Autumn 2020. Later, the opposition enjoyed a significant increase in voting unity at the final stage of the pandemic. Last but not least, the voting unity of all MPs was gradually increasing during the term, which was followed by a relatively major increase in the very end of the pandemic. Interestingly, this finding contradicts the conclusions that cross-partisan cooperation occurs mainly in the early phase of a crisis (Louwerse et al., 2021).

To conclude, the analysis of the voting unity of MPs reveals a slight increase in cooperation on the COVID-19 bills within almost all parties as well as opposition and coalition camps. Nevertheless, there was no substantial increase in the voting unity of either opposition or coalition camps in the early phase of the pandemic. The most visible pattern shows that all the MPs were gradually more united on the COVID-19 bills during the pandemic. This finding agrees with a previous
conclusion that the roll calls on the pandemic bills were becoming less frequent during the progress of the pandemic, which was most likely caused by the decreasing salience of the issue.

Last but not least, to draw a complex picture of the MPs’ voting behaviour, I employ spatial modelling of politics (see, e.g. Downs, 1957; Poole, 2005). To be more specific, I utilise a roll call analysis based on the assumption that legislators are aware of their political position, and they constantly compare the status quo with a proposal they vote on. Thanks to this, as representatives reveal their opinion on thousands of proposals, it is possible to identify their specific position relative to other MPs. Such an analysis has been already employed in the case of the Czech Republic (e.g. Lyons and Lacina, 2009; Hájek, 2018).

I calculate three models of (i) pre-pandemic, (ii) pandemic and (iii) COVID-19 roll calls. I do not take MPs who joined fewer than 25 votes into account. Besides this, I exclude roll calls with a minority of five or fewer MPs. As a result, the datasets include 200 MPs and 3,961 votes, 200 MPs and 2,809 votes, and 200 MPs and 1,053 votes, respectively. If a deputy voted for a proposal, I code the roll call as 1 (Yea) in all datasets. On the contrary, I employ 0 (Nay) when a deputy voted against a proposal or abstained. If a legislator did not attend a plenary

Figure 4. Evolution of deputies’ average voting unity (2018–2021). (a) All roll calls; (b) roll calls on COVID-19 bills.
Notes: The figure depicts the voting unity of the coalition (ANO, CSSD, KSCM), opposition (non-coalition parties) and all deputies (MPs). Shaded areas delineate nationwide states of emergency. Source: Author based on Parliament of the Czech Republic (2021).
session, I treat the choice as missing. The roll call analysis is based on the method IDEAL (ideal point estimation) (Clinton et al., 2004).

The spatial models of roll calls are depicted in Figure 5. Since the current findings suggest that the politics in the Czech Republic is driven by an institutional and an ideological dimension, the models are two-dimensional (Hájek, 2018). To make the models comparable, I rotate the coordinates, so the line between ODS and KSČM becomes horizontal.7 Besides this, the coordinates are adjusted, so the distance between the two parties runs from 0 to 1. The distance between the two parties is employed as the anchor since ODS and KSČM represent two side-poles of the economic left–right ideological spectrum, which is the driving ideological dimension in the Czech Republic (Hájek, 2018; Bakker et al., 2020).

As Figure 5 shows, the pandemic did not substantially affect the spatial patterns of the coalition (ANO, ČSSD, KSČM). Similar to the pre-pandemic period, the three coalition parties were located close to each other even during the pandemic with mutually distinct positions. Still, there is a minor difference in the case of roll calls on the COVID-19 bills, during which the positions of the coalition MPs started to slightly mix together (see Figure 5f). This finding is in agreement with the results of the previous analysis on the coalition’s voting unity, which was the highest in the case of voting on the COVID-19 bills.

Contrary to this, the story is much more vivid on the opposition side of the spectrum. Importantly, before the pandemic, while the horizontal dimension represented both institutional (coalition vs. opposition) and main ideological dimensions (socio-economic left vs. right), the vertical dimension most likely represented the axis between social conservatism and liberalism (see Figure 5a). The side-poles of the spectrum were the liberal Pirates (bottom) and the conservative SPD (top).

However, during the pandemic, the second ideological dimension transformed from social conservatism vs. liberalism to the attitude towards anti-pandemic measures (see Figure 5b). To be more specific, SPD became the only PPG that explicitly and sometimes even radically opposed the mainstream approach to the disease. For instance, the party members repeatedly questioned the number of COVID-19 deaths, and they rejected most of the governments’ anti-pandemic measures. As a result, SPD substantially deviated from the rest of the parliamentary spectrum. Importantly, the division applied not only to the roll calls on the COVID-19 bills (see Figure 5c) but to the whole pandemic period (see Figure 5b).

Simultaneously, the Pirates moved significantly closer to other prosystem opposition parties (compare Figure 5d and e) during the pandemic. Moreover, the positions of prosystem opposition parties came even closer when voting on the

7To reveal the two parties’ centre of gravity, I calculate mean coordinates on both axes.
Figure 5. Deputies’ spatial coordinates in the VIII. Chamber of Deputies (2018–2021). (a) Pre-pandemic roll calls; (b) pandemic roll calls; (c) roll calls on COVID-19 bills; (d) pre-pandemic roll calls (without SPD); (e) pandemic roll calls (without SPD); (f) roll calls on COVID-19 bills (without SPD).

Notes: The calculations were conducted in R using IDEAL, ‘pscl’ package (Jackman, 2015). The break on 12 March 2020 separates the pre-pandemic period from the pandemic one. Roll calls on the COVID-19 bills refer directly to the outbreak.

Source: Author based on Parliament of the Czech Republic (2021).
COVID-19 bills (see Figure 5f). In other words, the positions of ODS, TOP 09, KDU-ČSL and STAN became almost identical.

To summarise, the roll call analysis shows that the pandemic not only changed mutual positions of some parties but it also replaced one of the ideological dimensions. On the one hand, the pandemic affected the coalition parties only slightly. On the other hand, the pandemic opened a crucial space for the opposition parties to redefine their position towards the cabinet and the political spectrum. As a result, while the prosystem opposition parties brought their positions closer together during the pandemic, SPD decided to occupy a unique and previously unknown position outside the mainstream.

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic substantially affected parliamentary life in the Czech Republic, one of the worst-hit countries by the outbreak globally. The study shows that the operation of the Chamber of Deputies changed not only in its formal aspects but also in the matter of the legislators’ behaviour. To be more specific, the MPs faced a significant increase in the amount of work. Furthermore, the impact of the pandemic even transformed the second most influential ideological dimension of the country’s parliamentary politics.

Importantly, the pandemic brought significant shifts to the legislators’ work in the first and the second waves of the outbreak when the salience of the COVID-19 disease was the highest. On the contrary, bills reacting directly to the pandemic were adopted by relatively fewer roll calls in later pandemic phases. It implies the subsiding impact of the outbreak on parliamentary politics together with a stable or improving progress of the pandemic.

Still, the pandemic demonstrated its power to shift the voting patterns of some MPs substantially. On the one hand, the legislators in the Czech Republic have not confirmed the expectation that politicians primarily cooperate across the parties in the early phase of a crisis. The voting unity of all MPs remained the same after the start of the outbreak. Thus, although the opposition was obliging to cooperate with the cabinet on some significant issues, the general trends of broad cross-party cooperation did not change. On the other hand, the pandemic created an opportunity for parties to unify internally and change their mutual relationships. As a result, antisystem party SPD opened a new dimension of parliamentary politics on the attitude towards government measures against the pandemic. Although it is not justifiable to expect that the dimension will not be only temporary, its creation shows the strength of the pandemic and a potential impact on parliamentary politics.

Thus, the next steps of the research should focus on more details of the pandemic’s effects on the legislative behaviour of MPs. To be more specific, various
tools should be employed to inspect how exactly the MPs cooperated on solving the pandemic or did not collaborate at all at different pandemic phases. Furthermore, it is essential to ask how the outbreak affected other parliamentary activities, such as speech-making or interpellating. Last but not least, the studies should be done across states to inspect the effects from a comparative perspective.

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