
Photo: Public domain | composite photography

# Czech Prime Minister Implicated as Communist Secret Police Agent – Yet Nobody Cares

Veronika Pehe

Cultures of History Forum, published: 21.07.2021

DOI: 10.25626/0129

In April 2021 a Czech researcher stumbled over a file card that identified Prime Minister Andrej Babis as a former agent of the StB. This new piece of evidence, however, was barely discussed in the Czech public. The article tries to explain this non-existing debate about the Prime Minister's StB past and finds answers in the changing significance of anti-communism as a driving force of Czech public debate and memory politics.

Recommended Citation

Veronika Pehe: Czech Prime Minister Implicated as Communist Secret Police Agent – Yet Nobody Cares. In: Cultures of History Forum (21.07.2021), DOI: 10.25626/0129



# Czech Prime Minister Implicated as Communist Secret Police Agent – Yet Nobody Cares

In early April 2021, the Czech online daily Seznam Zprávy reported that the Slovak Nation's Memory Institute had uncovered new archival evidence confirming that Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš had been an agent of the Czechoslovak State Security (StB) – the secret police of the communist regime.[1] The incriminating document was a personnel card (statistická karta) containing Babiš's personal details and designating him with the codename "Bureš".

This potentially explosive information went practically unnoticed in the Czech media; over the course of the next month, only about forty articles mentioned the revelation. Of these, the vast majority were simple news items rather than commentaries, and a significant proportion were duplicate texts in regional newspapers. The statistical card was yet another piece in a large-scale puzzle that seemed to indicate Babiš had, indeed, collaborated with the communist secret police. Yet the Prime Minister managed to win several court cases arguing that his name was erroneously included in the StB records. It is perhaps telling that one of the most comprehensive reports was published in the German Der Spiegel.[2] Clearly, the never-ending saga was not worth a longer commentary – even from the range of staunchly anti-Babiš media outlets that sprung up after Babiš acquired MAFRA, the largest Czech media group, in 2013.

The Prime Minister himself, in response to questions from a public television journalist, denied any conscious collaboration with the secret police and added: "Please tell your colleagues that this doesn't interest anyone anymore."

Perhaps the Prime Minister is right. Even the historian from the Nation's Memory Institute who found Babiš's card was extraordinarily blasé about the whole affair. When interviewed by a popular internet television channel, he repeated several times that his speciality was socialist-era border guards and that the Babiš affair was of no particular interest to him. His only role in the story was to chance upon a card with the prime minister's name on it while going through a set of uncatalogued documents.

By mid-April, Czech media was engulfed in the news that two Russian military intelligence officers had allegedly been involved in the explosion of an ammunition depot in the Czech Republic. Babiš's "agent card" was swiftly forgotten.

How is it possible that rather convincing evidence of the collaboration between the current Prime Minister of a democratic country and the repressive apparatus of a dictatorial regime was no longer of interest to anyone? Answers must be sought in the changing significance of anti-communism as a driving force in Czech public discourses and the structure of Czech memory politics.

## Mnemonic Fatigue

The most immediate explanation is that, while offering yet further confirmation of Babiš's involvement with the secret police, the new archival discovery did not per se reveal any new information. Indeed, Babiš's codename, the date of his recruitment and other information from the statistical card were known from previous documents. That being said, the general disinterest in the new revelation had more to do with a general fatigue with mnemonic conflicts over the communist past in Czech society.

Andrej Babiš's quest to deny his collaboration with the communist secret police began in 2011, when the server Euro.cz published documents from the Nation's Memory Institute (ÚPN) in Slovakia suggesting that the then-businessman and owner of one of the Czech Republic's largest agricultural-chemical conglomerates, had become an StB informant in 1980 and an agent in 1982. Whether or not these documents were accurate, Babiš's biography undoubtedly put him in position to be a valuable source for the secret police. Born in Bratislava in 1954, Babiš spent parts of his childhood and adolescence in France and Switzerland thanks to his father's work in foreign trade. Babiš went on to study economics, launching his own career in foreign trade and spending the second half of the 1980s as a trade delegate in Morocco. Such elite foreign trade workers were of great interest to the secret police, as they could provide intelligence about foreign countries and the loyalty of other Czechoslovak personnel abroad. In the early 1990s, Babiš moved back to Czechoslovakia and eventually transferred his business activities to the Czech Republic, where he became one of the country's richest people through Agrofert, a conglomerate with over 250 subsidiary companies operating primarily in agriculture, the chemical industry, and the media.

In 2012, Babiš took the ÚPN to court. The lengthy trial dragged on well into Babiš's term as Finance Minister, a position he held from 2014 to 2017. Babiš consistently claimed that although the StB had shown interest in him, he never knowingly collaborated with the secret police. The Slovak court ruled that Babiš's name wrongly appeared as an agent in the StB files; this verdict was later overturned by the Constitutional Court of Slovakia. In 2019, the case was reopened, and Babiš even unsuccessfully took his case to the European Court for Human Rights.[3] In the meantime, he became Prime Minister of the Czech Republic in 2017.

Had he been elected before 2014, Babiš would have been forced to undergo lustration: a vetting process to exclude anyone who had collaborated with the secret police or held a senior position within the Communist Party from certain types of public office. At the time of the formation of the government in which Babiš served as Finance Minister, legislation was already in front of parliament releasing government ministers from the obligation to undergo lustration, and the president did not demand a lustration certificate from Babiš. There was thus no legal obstacle to Babiš's government appointment. Similarly, there seemed to be no moral obstacle for his numerous voters – after all, they had voted for Babiš at a time when his trial was well underway and the documents pointing to his involvement with the StB had been discussed in the media at length. Indeed, when Babiš's party ANO won the 2017 elections, he was not able to form a majority government only gaining support for his minority coalition through an agreement with the Communist Party.

## The Changing Dynamics of Anti-Communism

When the communist regime collapsed in Czechoslovakia in 1989, the public discourse was taken over by a certain 'agentmania'. The nascent democratic regime needed legitimation mechanisms that would unambiguously differentiate it from the pre-1989 order. One such mechanism was lustration. While the first lustration law was passed in 1991, information on individuals named in the StB files as informants or agents was not made public, to the frustration of certain segments of society, especially the radical anti-communists, who believed that a sweeping banishment of individuals associated with the StB from public life was the only way to truly come to terms with the past and de-communizing society. To this end, activist Petr Cibulka published an unverified list of former StB collaborators in the spring of 1992. This act stirred the Czech public and led to a number of court cases, as alleged collaborators claimed that their name appeared erroneously in the StB files. Errors were, however, inevitable, as the

Parliamentary Committee for investigating the events of November 17, 1989 decided that the mere presence of a person's name in the StB registries was enough to disqualify them from receiving a negative lustration certificate. No questions were asked as to why a name appeared in these files, despite multiple issues that compromised their veracity: whether the person in question had collaborated willingly or had been coerced; whether a name appeared because the StB was interested in recruiting them as an agent, but never managed to do so; whether false information had been included by the StB in order to fulfil ideological requirements; and last but not least, whether the files were complete, considering the mass shredding of files after 1989. The blanket criterion of simply checking the registry thus unavoidably led to many grievances.[4] As a result, the registry of files, according to historian Adéla Gjuričová, "took the place that was meant to belong to the effort of society to understand how the communist dictatorship worked and to reflect on every individual's contribution to sustaining it."[5]

Lustration inescapably generated political disagreements. Famously, Václav Havel's initial idea was to seal off the StB files and only allow access to them after thirty or fifty years. Yet the logic of lustration fit within the broad anti-communist consensus that coalesced in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Civic Forum umbrella movement in 1991, across the plethora of new, largely right-wing conservative and economically liberal, political parties. Anti-communism became part and parcel of the grand narrative of the post-communist era of a "return to democracy" through casting the communist past as totalitarian. Instead of any discussion of the usefulness or aptness of totalitarianism itself, conflicts erupted over the intensity of de-communization measures. Yet simultaneously, business interests, regarded by the logic of the liberal market transformation as a domain of absolute freedom, were not in any way regulated by lustration measures. Those who had held high office within the communist apparatus or had connections to the StB could easily find a safe haven in the business world, where memory politics played little role. Former foreign trade officials such as Babiš soon became the new business elites of the 1990s: their international contacts and knowledge of foreign markets allowed them to identify demand and effectively fill supply gaps in a rapidly growing market economy.

Arguably, the structure of anti-communism began to change at the turn of the new millennium and more specifically, as political scientist Ondřej Slačálek has argued, after 2003.[6] While the 1990s were marked by a benevolent tolerance of the continued existence of the Communist Party under the premise that no democratic political force would willingly collaborate with them, this maxim of Czech politics came to an end with the 2003 election of Václav Klaus as president. At that time, presidents were elected by parliament, and Klaus won by courting the votes of the Communists. Czech politics entered a new pragmatic era during which it was no longer unacceptable for democratic parties to use the Communists for their own strategic goals. With the force of anti-communism blunted in the political arena, civil society and cultural elites took up anti-communist rhetoric with renewed force, launching a series of petitions such as "One Does Not Speak with Communists" (2003) or "Let's Ban the Communists" (2005).

This development must be interpreted in the context of the wider rise of conservative historical politics in Central and Eastern Europe. Segments of the Czech conservative right, similarly to their counterparts in Poland, Hungary and Romania, interpreted 1989 as an "unfinished revolution" that did not spark sufficient de-communization in Czech society. In the Czech case, this struggle to "finish" the revolution took place primarily over the opening up of the archives of the communist security to the public. This element of the conservative right, clustered around the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), was active in the initiative to found the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (ÚSTR) in 2007 (the Czech equivalent of the Slovak ÚPN), but was not as dominant in Czech memory politics as in neighbouring countries. Significantly, unlike more radical actors across the region, they never positioned themselves

outside of the mainstream framework of the 'liberal-conservative consensus' of the 1990s.[7]

## Who Is Interested in Memory Politics?

The structure of the Czech memory of the communist past, where it has remained the domain of both the liberal and conservative right, thus differs in comparison to that of neighbouring countries, where parties labelled as radical or populist, such as Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland or the Alternative for Germany (AfD), are most often the drivers of mnemonic conflicts. Whereas anti-communism has waned in the face of political constellations requiring Communist parliamentary support to pass key legislation, anti-communist sentiment continues to mobilize opposition politicians on issues of public history – such as the removal of monuments.[8] Conversely, anti-systemic or anti-elite political actors also reject the traditional discourse of anti-communism, since it constituted one of the cornerstones of the 1990s political consensus against which they are attempting to define themselves.

Andrej Babiš and his ANO party certainly belong to this new wave of political constellations. While PiS in Poland or Fidesz in Hungary, for instance, have embarked on deliberate and large-scale projects to redefine their historical memories in order to bolster nationalist sentiment and cast the current ruling elites as the natural heirs of the anti-communist opposition, this is not the case in the Czech Republic. To use Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik's typology of memory politics, Babiš is a 'memory abnegator'[9] – someone who is simply not interested in generating conflict about the past. Memory politics play little to no role in Babiš's claim to power. The motivations of memory abnegators are varied: they may be active in a political culture with a broadly shared and consensual vision of the past; they do not find memory politics useful for their particular purposes; or, as Bernhard and Kubik note, they may be engaged in "a politics of convenient or purposive forgetting—chosen, for example, by actors who directly or indirectly (via their political precursors) may be held responsible for the past social traumas—may also underlay a stance of abnegation."[10] The last possibility would seem to fit Babiš's situation.

On the thirtieth anniversary of the 1989 Velvet Revolution that brought down the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, Babiš delivered a speech in which he, uncharacteristically, but also somewhat inevitably given the occasion, addressed the past. He treaded very carefully, seeking not to antagonise any particular group. For instance, he mentioned Václav Havel, the first post-89 president, by saying: "His courage during communism and the Velvet Revolution was admirable. Even though opinions about him differ, as is the case with all distinctive personalities." Babiš added that he "is not proud" to have been a member of the Communist Party before 1989. That was as far as his personal reflection went. The overall message nonetheless remained rather conciliatory: in a democratic society, people with all kinds of opinions coexist.

Clearly, Babiš's voters are also not particularly stirred by the past. Instead, the comments section in any of the major dailies of any article about Babiš's StB record demonstrates a new centre of conflict. Though internet commentators are by no means a representative sample, a recurring theme of their comments was the question as to why one should be interested in something that happened more than thirty years ago when there are plenty of current unsolved political problems.

The alleged StB past of the prime minister functioned as a mobilizing force primarily for the oppositional movement Milion chvilek pro demokracii (One Million Moments for Democracy), which has campaigned since 2018 for Babiš's resignation and organized a series of protests, the largest of which, in June 2019, attracted around 250,000 participants, making it the largest demonstration in the Czech Republic since

1989. One of the protest movement's main demands was for the government not to be led by someone who appeared as an agent in the secret police registries. One Million Moment's relentless emphasis on Babiš's StB past is perhaps surprising given the other main objection to his tenure as prime minister, namely Babiš's massive conflict of interest as the owner of numerous companies claiming EU subsidies, which arguably has had a much more direct bearing upon contemporary Czech politics. With such vested interests, it is questionable how Babiš can guarantee that EU funds are distributed appropriately in the Czech Republic, even if he no longer is the owner of Agrofert, having placed his shares into a trust fund in 2017. His business activities have been the subject of a criminal investigation and an EU audit, which concluded in April 2021 that Babiš was indeed embroiled in a conflict of interest, as he continues to control Agrofert and its subsidiary companies.

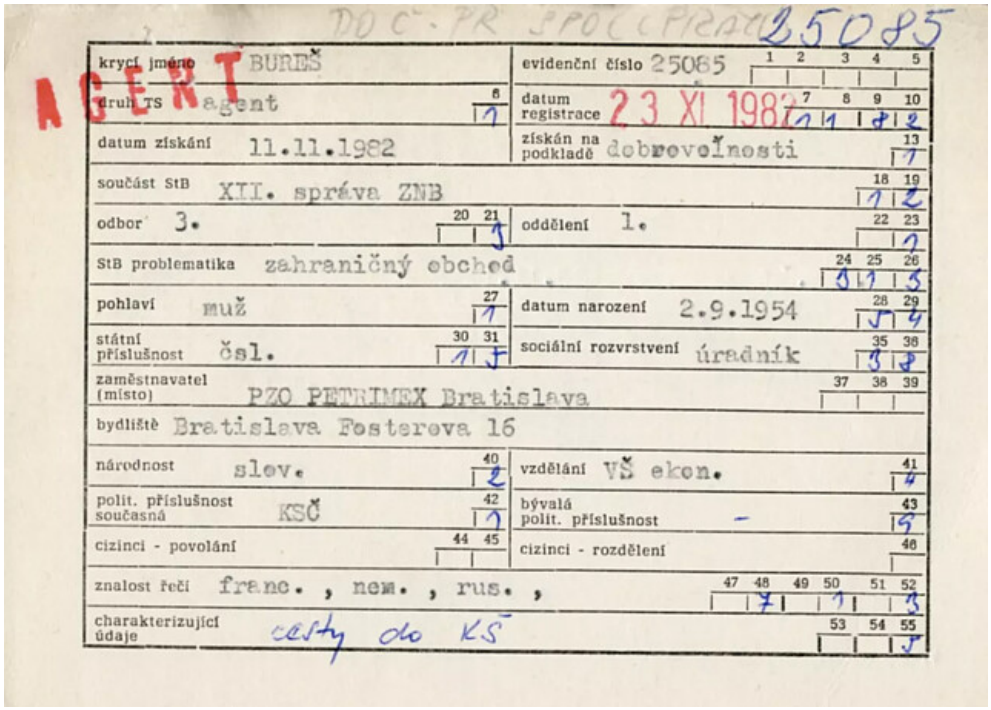
## Conclusion

The opposition attempts to use Babiš's "agent past" as a means of inflaming cultural conflict is running out of steam. In comparison with neighbouring countries, the situation around Babiš's past reveals a peculiarity of Czech memory politics, while also pointing to the gross oversimplification of labelling Babiš as a "populist" akin to Jarosław Kaczyński or Viktor Orbán. While the Polish and Hungarian leaders are in positions of power and have stirred up culture wars through their (ab)use of history and memory (among other methods), it is rather the liberal and conservative Czech opposition that has attempted to do the same. Indeed, in particular it is the culture war rhetoric of the Czech conservative right, mainly segments of the ODS and the Catholic church, that most resembles the discourse in Poland. They compare, for example, a number of progressive political causes, such as LGBT+ rights or climate activism, to "communist totalitarianism".[11]

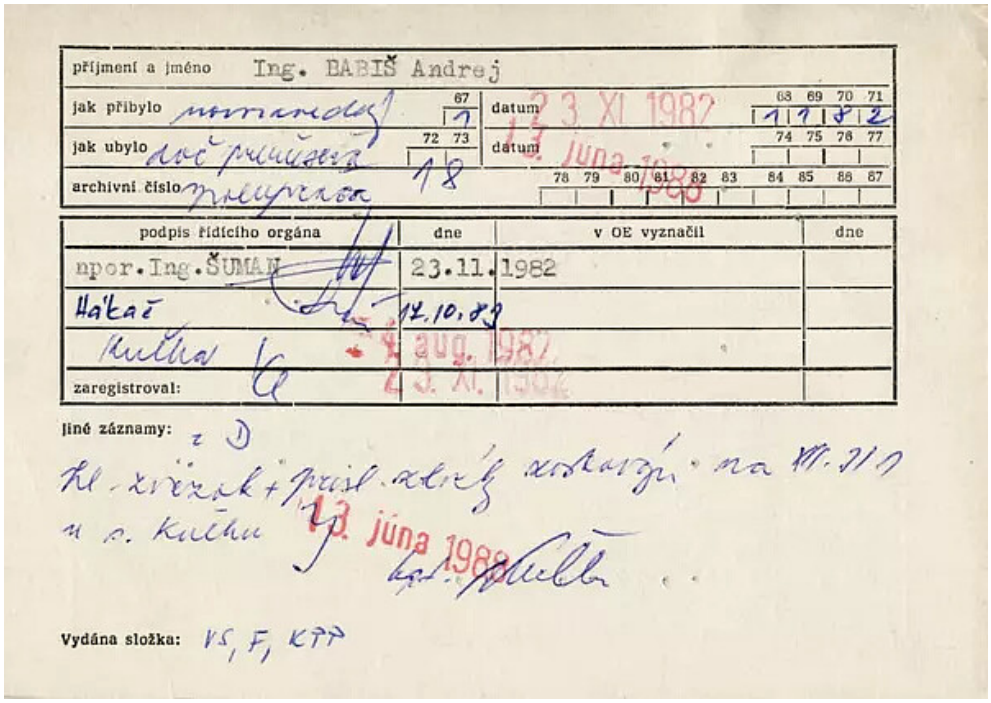
Babiš, on the other hand, has steered clear of such antagonisms. Where he has attempted to engage in memory politics, he has not turned to the period of communist rule, but rather to the interwar First Republic, styling himself as an heir to the entrepreneurial spirit of Jan Antonín Baťa, owner of a successful shoe empire in the town of Zlín. He has also correctly identified a certain fatigue within the electorate with the anti-communist tone of public discourse, which dominated Czech politics and the media throughout the 1990s and 2000s – and indeed continues to be strongly represented in the media landscape even today. As the locus of the mnemonic conflict shifts in the Czech Republic from the communist past to the 1990s, perhaps the more salient question for the opposition to Babiš is how exactly he built his vast business empire after 1989.

## Footnotes

1. Tomáš Pergler, Nový důkaz o Babišově spolupráci s StB. Našla se karta agenta Bureše, Seznam Zprávy (9 April 2021), retrieved 7 July 2021.
2. Jan Puhl, Angestrengtes Leugnen. Stasi-Vorwürfe gegen tschechischen Premier, Der Spiegel (12 April 2021), retrieved 7 July 2021.
3. Ivana Svobodová, Babiš zůstane v registru agentů StB. Štrasburk odmítl jeho stížnost, Respekt (10 December 2018), retrieved 7 July 2021.
4. For a discussion of some of the more prominent cases, such as that of Zdena Salivarová, exile writer and publisher, who contested her appearance on the list of alleged StB collaborators in court, see Muriel Blaive, Zpřístupnění archivů komunistické politické policie: případ České republiky – od Zdeny Salivarové k Milanu Kunderovi, Souvislosti 4 (2009): 158-174.
5. Adéla Gjuričová, Historizace devadesátých let. Když je v dokumentech něco jiného, než jsme zažili, Host 34, no. 2 (2018): 25-28.
6. Ondřej Slačálek, Český antikomunismus jako pokus o obnovu hegemonie. Britské listy (22 June 2009), retrieved 5 July 2021.
7. While political scientists and historians have referred to the 'liberal consensus' of the 1990s, the term 'liberal-conservative consensus' more aptly captures the broad ideological foundation of post-1989 Czech politics, as employed by Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová and Ondřej Slačálek in their forthcoming book Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-Communism and Populism.
8. See Jakub Vrba, Monumental Conflict: Controversies Surrounding the Removal of the Marshal Konev Statue in Prague, Culture of History Forum (18 December 2020), DOI 10.25626/0123.
9. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, A Theory of the Politics of Memory, In Twenty Years after Communism, edited by Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 7-36.
10. Ibid., 14.
11. Representatives of this trend include Cardinal Dominik Duka or the deceased head of the Senate Jaroslav Kubera (ODS), who at a memorial event in the former Terezín Ghetto in 2019 compared totalitarianism to a number of other progressive political causes and claimed that today it is "cloaked in ecology, the environment, gender equality, political correctness and multiculturalism". See Milan Fendrych, Kubera v Terezíně: Ekologie a rovnost pohlaví hrozí totalitou. Nevkusné, nechápe nic, Aktuálně.cz (20 May 2019), retrieved 5 July 2021.




Front side of Andrej Babiš's personnel card detailing him as an agent of the StB.
Photo: StB; Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons




Back side of Andrej Babiš's personnel card detailing him as an agent of the StB.
Photo: StB; Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

Protest against Andrej Babiš in Letná, Prague, 23 June 2019.
Photo: Kenyh Cevarom | Wikimeida Commons CC BY 4.0