

# Was Life Good in Communist Czechoslovakia? An Empirical Test of Halbwachs's Theory of Collective Memory<sup>1</sup>

Pat Lyons<sup>2</sup> – Aleš Kudrnáč<sup>3</sup>

Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Praha

**Was Life Good in Communist Czechoslovakia? An Empirical Test of Halbwachs's Theory of Collective Memory.** How do Czech high school students aged 15-20 years evaluate life in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989? As Czechs (and Slovaks) born after the Velvet Revolution do not have direct experience of life under communism, the evaluations they have about this period of contemporary history must be based on indirect evidence coming from older family members, school, the media, museums, etc. Using a theory of collective memory developed by French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs (1877 – 1945) combined with empirical (mass survey) evidence from 2014 this paper shows that young Czechs' evaluations of the past differ on the basis of social group membership and that evaluations of the past are strongly associated with present conditions. Specifically, this study reveals that females, students in less academic schools, and those living outside Prague have more positive collective memories; and hence evaluations of life under communism. Moreover, the past is evaluated in terms of the present where students least satisfied with contemporary life have the most positive evaluations of life under communism. This study concludes by illustrating how Halbwach's theory of collective memory matches with some of the key findings of contemporary studies of Czechoslovak communism. *Sociológia* 2018, Vol. 50 (No. 3: 289-310)

**Key words:** *Communism; post-communism; Czechoslovakia; Halbwachs; collective memory; evaluations of the past and present; youth*

Studies of the post-communist transition process in the 1990s were often concerned with the possibility that nostalgia for life under communism might undermine the development of a liberal multiparty democracy. (Mischler – Rose 1996: 575) Specifically, it was feared that those who were frustrated or not successful in the transition process might conclude that life had been better under communism. Here the emphasis was on nostalgia for communism by those who had experience of two regime types. There is some evidence for this conjecture among those who were already adults when communism collapsed. (Prusik – Lewicka 2016) The evaluations of contemporary youth, born after 1989, of life under communism are especially interesting because this group's perception of the past cannot, by definition, be direct.

The goal of this paper is to try to explain, using Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, why a minority (24 %) of Czech high school students

---

<sup>1</sup> Research for this article was kindly provided by the Czech National Science Foundation within the framework for the project 'Protestors in Context: An Integrated and Comparative Analysis of Democratic Citizenship in the Czech Republic' (GA ČR grant number GA13-29032S).

<sup>2</sup> Address: Pat Lyons, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Jilská 1, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic. E-mail: pat.lyons@soc.cas.cz

<sup>3</sup> Address: Mgr. Aleš Kudrnáč, Ph.D., Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Jilská 1, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic. E-mail: ales.kudrnac@soc.cas.cz

agreed in a national survey in 2014 that life under communism was better than contemporary life. For reasons of brevity, this article will neither deal with the related concepts of historical consciousness, historical memory and collective consciousness, nor provide comparison with previous theoretical and empirical studies of Czechs adults' perceptions of their history undertaken by Šubrt et al. in a series of publications.

### **Halbwachs's Theory of Collective Memory**

Within sociology, Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory provides one means of understanding how evaluations of contemporary history (not always directly experienced) are created, how these evaluations differ, and why this is the case. In the following pages the primary reference text will be Halbwachs's *The Collective Memory* (1980). This theory of collective memory is based on the notion of "lived history" in contrast to academic written history. (Halbwachs 1980: 64)

It is important here to stress that there is debate about how Halbwachs defined collective memory. His theory indicates that collective memory may exist at two levels (a) individually as the social or shared component of a person's memory and (b) the collective memory of a social group. (Olick 1999: 336) Halbwachs addressed this level of analysis issue in his sole American Journal of Sociology article where he concluded in the following way.

"... the collective mind, revolving about men in association, about groups and their complex organization, gives the human consciousness access to all that has been achieved in the way of thought and feeling, attitudes and mental dispositions, in the diverse social groups in which it has its being". (Halbwachs 1939: 822)

Therefore, Halbwachs felt that (a) and (b) above could be reconciled within his theory of collective memory. In this paper, the emphasis will be on the first conceptualisation as the empirical testing involves the statistical analysis of individual-level data.

#### *Individual and collective memory*

Maurice Halbwachs (1877 – 1945), as a student of Emile Durkheim (1858 – 1917), emphasised the social component in an individual's life. Just as the personal act of committing suicide has social characteristics, human memory is also seen to have a group component. Individual memories are "collective" in the sense that a group's influence is always present in a person's mind. (Halbwachs 1980: 23-24) Halbwachs's stressed that group membership determines the content of individual memory through influencing what is remembered, and how, through a process of social interaction.

Consequently, individual memory is a social construct grounded in group membership where memory is “ninety-nine percent reconstruction and one percent true evocation”. (Halbwachs 1980: 31, 35) Moreover, the influence of social groups on individual memory is mainly unconscious where a person holds memories whose true origins are collective. (Halbwachs 1980: 45) Halbwachs (1980: 48) emphasised that “While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of the people, it is individuals as group members who remember”.

In highlighting the interrelated nature of individual and collective memory, Halbwachs’s argued that the origins of individual memory are not always direct experience where a person remembers events “only from newspapers or the testimony of those directly involved”. These borrowed memories are important for the following reason: “[They have] ... deeply influenced national thought, not only because they have altered institutions but also because their tradition endures, very much alive, in region, province, political party, occupation, class, even certain families or persons who experienced them first hand”. (Halbwachs 1980: 51)

Consequently, Halbwachs distinguishes between “autobiographical” and “historical” memory and makes the vivid point that history “resembles a crowded cemetery, where room must constantly be made for new tombstones”. Here it is stressed that individual “memory rests not on learned history but on lived history”. (Halbwachs 1980: 52, 57) One possible criticism of the collective memory concept is that the individual has no autonomy and verbalises the memories given to them by a social group. Halbwachs deals with this social determinism concern in the following way.

“The group memory faithfully registers everything that it can about each member, because these facts react on this small society and help change it. In such milieus all persons think and remember in common. Each has his own perspective, but each is connected so closely to everyone else, if his remembrances become distorted, he need only place himself in the viewpoint of others to rectify them”. (Halbwachs 1980: 78)

#### *Intergenerational foundations of collective memory*

One important feature of the theory of collective memory for this study is the transfer of memories between grandparents and grandchildren. Here Halbwachs (1980: 63) explains that “both are, for different reasons, uninterested in contemporary events that engross the parents”. Consequently, grandparents influence their grandchildren through the facts they impart and “attitudes and ways of thinking from the past” (Halbwachs 1980: 64).

Halbwachs in his first book on collective memory entitled *The Social Frameworks of Memory* (1925) argued that it was the social function of the

elderly to recollect and reconstruct the past. (Halbwachs – Coser 1992: 48) Within this theoretical framework collective memory is viewed as a dynamic process where both groups and remembrances emerge, exert influence for a time, and finally die. Halbwachs emphasises this point in the following poignant way.

“Groups that develop the reigning conceptions and mentalities of a society during a certain period fade away in time, making room for others, who in turn command the sway of custom and fashion opinion from new models. The world we shared so deeply with our grandparents may suddenly have vanished”. (Halbwachs 1980: 65)

From the perspective of grandchildren, their parents and grandparents represent “two distinct and clearly separated periods” (Halbwachs 1980: 67). By growing up in a family the child acquires a set of remembrances that allow contact with a past “stretching back some distance ... Later on, his memory will ground itself on this lived past, much more than on any past learned from written history” (Halbwachs 1980: 68). More specifically, Halbwachs (1980: 86) estimated that collective memory (in contrast to formal history) has a duration “not exceeding, and most often shorter than, the average duration of a human life”.

*Presentism: Interpreting the past through the present*

Halbwachs (1980: 69) contended that memory “is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered”. This ‘presentist’ facet of Halbwachs’s theory of collective memory is important in highlighting the essentially social nature of the collective memory of an individual. There has been criticism of Halbwachs’s concept of presentism because it suggests that history is at a fundamental level fragmented (Coser 1992: 370-371 and Schwartz 1982: 376-377)

One implication of this criticism of presentism is that evaluations of the past and present have such a high association that they are nothing more than projections of the present into the past. Other scholars have rejected this criticism by noting that “Halbwachs was clearly aware of historical continuity and of the particular mix of past traditions and present concerns that shape collective memory”. (Vromen 1993: 512) Specifically, Halbwachs proposed that the relationship between the past and present is one of being interrelated and interconnected rather than of one causing the other as the following quotation makes clear.

“As soon as each person and each historical fact has permeated [...] memory, it is transposed into a teaching, a notion, or a symbol and takes on

a meaning. It becomes an element of the society's system of ideas. This explains why traditions and present-day ideas can exist side by side. In reality present-day ideas are also traditions, and both refer at the same time and with the same right to an ancient or recent social life from which they in some way took their point of departure". (Halbwachs – Coser 1992: 188)

*Definition of a social group in collective memory theory*

Halbwachs's basis for defining a social group is particular in being based on a shared sense of 'social time'. Social groups such as those with the same occupations experience (subjective or social) time in similar ways where the temporal framework for those working in agriculture, industry or the professions is distinct (see Halbwachs 1980: 116). In this respect, Halbwachs (1980: 107) stated "we must distinguish as many collective times as there are distinctive groups". Halbwachs (1980: 111) goes on to argue that while all social groups adhere to the same system of time there is no universal social time because "in reality, no unique and external calendar to which groups refer" exists.

In socio-economic terms, within this social time framework, Halbwachs (1980: 118, 119) defined a social group as something that has a "shared body of concerns and ideas ... [that] may be particularized and reflected to a certain extent through the personalities of group members". Therefore, Halbwachs's theory of collective memory adheres to a (Durkheimian) subjective definition of socio-economic status (or class) based on what might be term 'lifestyle' and 'consumption' patterns. In other words, social groups are not defined in terms of occupation or status (as Marx and Weber proposed), but on how they spend their time which in turn shapes their collective memories.

**Empirical Implications of Halbwachs's Theory of Collective Memory**

This paper aims to make a contribution to the empirical study of collective memory by demonstrating how statistical techniques may be used to explore individuals' remembrances of communism. Before outlining some testable implications of Halbwachs's theory it is important to highlight three assumptions made in this paper. First, evaluations of life under communism by those too young to have experienced it directly are assumed to be based primarily on collective memories. Second, the communist period spanning four decades is viewed in terms of collective memory and not academic history. Therefore, evaluations of life under communism is seen to have a broad similarity in collective memory rather than being composed of distinct phases as emphasised by historians and social scientists. Third, it is assumed that collective memories are key determinants of evaluations of the past and present.

*The family and collective memories of communism*

Application of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory involves exploring the remembrances of a specific social group where the focus is on episodic memory, i.e. memories of concrete life events. As the primary source of evidence in this study is the Czech High School Survey (hereafter, CHSS (2014)), a nationally representative survey of Czech students conducted in 2014 (see below for details) the primary social group examined is the family where the school context is controlled for. Specifically, it is the profile of each student's family that is of central interest. Halbwachs's theory of collective memory predicts that students coming from families with contrasting 'lifestyles' are likely to have different remembrances, and hence evaluations, of life under communism. Regrettably, in CHSS (2014) there are no measures of parental occupation or religion that would provide a more detailed testing of Halbwachs's theory. In this paper, within the framework of the family, three characteristics for collective memories are examined: sex (males versus female), type of school attended (degree of academic orientation), and place of residence (Prague versus the rest of the country).

*Sex differences:* Within the theory of collective memories, Halbwachs did not discuss potential sex differences in remembrances as he focussed on group-level characteristics. Collective memories are assumed to be the same for all members of a social groups regardless of sex. Halbwachs was aware of sex discrimination and the sex-based division of labour in households, and presumably their potential to be linked with specific collective memories. (Halbwachs 1938: 67, 71) This is a limitation of his theory that must be addressed in this paper as sex differences in evaluations of the past are clearly evident in preliminary analyses of the CHSS (2014) data. Previous research on the differential experiences of women and men during the post-communist transition process have highlighted that although the general standard of living for all increased in the Czech Republic after the fall of communism, men have done comparatively better than women. (Wolchik 1994, Chase 1995, Saxonberg – Szelewa 2007) Consequently, it might be argued that the collective memories of females toward life under communism, and hence their evaluations of the past, will be on average more positive than those of males. However, it must be stressed that much of the gender literature on life under communism argues that women's experience of state policies was mixed where it difficult to conclude that life was better pre-1989. (Havelková 1993)

*School differences:* Studies of educational stratification in Czech schools have highlighted that the main factor influencing attendance at an academic high school, i.e. gymnasium, is not academic ability but parents' socio-economic status and level of education. (Matějů et al. 2007, Matějů – Smith 2009, Buchmann – Park 2009) The type of high school attended by a Czech

student provides valuable information about the family's access to resources of all types, which in turn indicates the kind of collective memories toward life under communism and contemporary life. With the growth of wealth inequality since the fall of communism where the better educated and wealthier have experienced the greatest increase in standard of living the expectation is that students attending gymnasiums will have the most negative evaluations of life under communism.

*Residential differences:* Halbwachs's theory of collective memories highlights the differences in shared remembrances between those who live in urban and rural areas. Moreover, he proposed that subjective (social) time varies systematically between a fast paced urban life and the more sedate countryside due to the differences in work performed. This geographical basis for the social division of labour created different types of social groups (based in part on wealth) and collective memories (pp. 116-117). This is the key insight used here to explore why collective memories towards communism differ between the largest (capital) city in the Czech Republic, Prague, and the rest of the country. The fact that Prague is a 'primate city' whose population is disproportionately larger than all other Czech cities suggests that residence in Prague may have an impact on social interactions and groups and collective memories.

Within Czech society material wealth is not evenly distributed spatially. According to Eurostat statistics, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is considerably higher than the EU average in Prague (120 % approximately) and significantly lower (80 % approximately) in all other parts of the country. A similar pattern emerges for purchasing power parity. Concretely, these geographically-based wealth differences imply that those social groups (i.e. students and their families) living in Prague are on average wealthier and will have contrasting collective memories toward the past and present for this reason. The expectation here is that the collective memories of students raised in Prague will be less positive toward life under communism, and this will result in more negative evaluations. These three expectations may be summarised in the following hypothesis relating social group (family) characteristics and collective memories and evaluations of life under communism.

H.1: The collective memories of female students, pupils attending less academic schools and those not residing in Prague will be more positive than all others toward life under communism, and this will be indicated by higher evaluations.

*Source of collective memories and evaluations of life under communism*

Halbwachs emphasised the role of the family as a key social group source of an individual's collective memories (pp. 63-68). For reasons outlined above, the

importance of grandparents was emphasised in the theory of collective memory. For the purposes of this study it is expected that Czech high school students who reported having obtained information about life under communism from their grandparents are more likely to have adopted the collective memories of this older generation about the past. Evidence that there is a transmission of positive collective memories may be deduced from students' prioritising the social aspects of life under communism, e.g. low unemployment and high levels of social protection. In contrast, those students with negative evaluations of communism are likely to be based on collective memories that give precedence to political factors, e.g. lack of freedom, civic and political rights. These expectations may be summarised in the following hypothesis.

H.2: When the sources of collective memories about life under communism are grandparents, a high school student's own collective memories of this past will be positive, as will their evaluations of this period in Czech collective memory. In contrast, parents and schools as sources of information about life under communism will have no significant effect on evaluations of life between 1948 and 1989.

#### *Presentism and collective memories of life under communism*

One of the most influential features of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory was his insight that "our conceptions of the past are affected by the mental images we employ to solve present problems, so that collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present". (Halbwachs – Coser 1992: 372, note also Olick 2007: 42) Specifically, Halbwachs asserted that "the way we construct the past is largely dependent on the interpretive schemes of the present moment, which can derive from dominant ideology or deep-seated hegemony". (Halbwachs – Coser 1992: 50) This is an implication of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory that may be tested. In this paper, it is expected that there will be a negative association between Czech students' evaluations of life under communism and contemporary life (in 2014) for social and political reasons.

In this respect, it is reasonable to think that contrasting experiences of life during the transition process will be associated with different collective memories of life under communism. Specifically, those who think contemporary life is good because there are greater freedoms in contemporary Czech society are less likely to express positive evaluations of the communist past. In contrast, those who mainly remember the social aspects of life between 1948 and 1989 will have more positive collective memories of the past in comparison to a present with less extensive system of social welfare. These expectations may be summarised in the following hypothesis.



H.3: Evaluations of life under communism and contemporary life will be negatively correlated because of presentism. However, this association will be far from perfect. This is because collective memories are not solely influenced by present day concerns: the past matters in and of itself for a social group and its identity.

*Collective memory and subjective knowledge of history*

One of the defining features of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory is that the remembrances of social groups (such as the family) grounded in individual lived histories and formal history written by historians will be different. Moreover, collective memories will be characterised by multiplicity while academic histories tend to adhere to a unitary approach based on a common definition of key events and actors. Therefore, Czech young adults' collective memories of life under communism will be primarily based on learning about the past from grandparents (H.4) and not from the formal historical (factual) accounts of communism presented in books and the media. This leads to the final hypothesis to be tested.

H.4: Halbwachs highlighted that possession of collective memories is often independent from subjective knowledge of formal (written) historical. Therefore, subjective knowledge of history is expected to have no relationship with collective memories, and evaluations, of life under communism.

Although collective memories of the past and formal historical knowledge of the same period may have little or no association, subjective historical knowledge is likely to be linked to evaluations of contemporary life. This is because knowledge of historical facts forms a subset of general political knowledge which is known from previous research to be strongly linked with satisfaction with the present. (Delli Carpini – Keeter 1996) Since this specific relationship is not an empirical implication of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory it is not presented as a hypothesis in this paper, but will be discussed briefly below.

*Testing Halbwachs's theory of collective memory*

The empirically testable implications of Halbwachs's theory of collective memories summarised above in four hypotheses will be tested using individual-level data described below. In the data analysis and regression modelling presented below the focus will be on the Czech students' answers to two evaluation questions regarding "life for people in socialist Czechoslovakia" (E02) and "life in the current Czech Republic" (E03). Please see the appendix for the wording of these questions and all other survey items used in this paper.

The CHSS (2014) questionnaire first asked a comparison of the communist past and present question, and then inquired about specific evaluations of the past and the present as shown in Table 1. Halbwachs highlighted that comparing collective memories on either side of a key historical event, such as the Velvet Revolution of 1989, is problematic because such remembrances are “impermeable to one another” (p. 124). This implies the evidence generated by requesting students to compare their evaluations (grounded in their family-based collective memories) of life in 2014 and between 1948 and 1989 may not be easy to interpret.

**Table 1: Czech adolescents’ evaluations of the past, present and comparison of the past and present, per cent**

<i>Coded response options</i>	<i>E01: Life under socialism (1948-1989) compared to life today (2014)</i>	<i>E02: Life in socialist Czechoslovakia (1948-1989)</i>	<i>E03: Life today in the Czech Republic (2014)</i>
Very positive (++)	4	2	2
Positive (+)	20	21	44
Same	16	-	-
Negative (-)	35	36	33
Very Negative (- -)	24	17	13
Don't know, no answer	0	25	8
Total %	100	100	100
<i>Correlations</i>	E01	E02	E03
E01: comparison item	1.00		
E02: past item	+0.71	1.00	
E03: present item	-0.48	-0.39	1.00

Source: CHSS (2014), n=1,107, data weighted, questions E01-E03.

Note the response options are coded to reflect level of positivity (+ or ++) and negativity (- or --). The option for the “same” was only offered to respondents in question E01. See the appendix for the exact question wordings and response options. The correlations are Pearson product moment estimates and all statistically significant at the  $p \leq .001$  level.

There are indications of problems because the correlation between answers to the comparison question (E01, see appendix) and evaluation of life under communism (E02) is strong ( $r = +.71$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ), see the bottom of Table 1, suggesting that many students may have treated both questions as being the same. From a survey methodology perspective this could be considered evidence of a question-ordering effect. (Tourangeau et al. 2000) Moreover, by asking students to compare life under two different political regimes it is possible that the criteria for answering this question was government type (formal history) and not people’s lives (i.e. lifestyle and subjective standard of living and hence collective memory). For these theoretical and methodological

reasons, only the direct (and simpler) questions relating to evaluations of people's life under communism (1948 – 1989) and in 2014 will be considered in this paper.

## **Data**

The individual-level data used in this paper to test the empirical implications of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory is the Czech High School Survey (CHSS, 2014). The main sponsor of the CHSS (2014) study was People in Need (Člověk v tísni, o.p.s.), an NGO that implemented a school-based programme entitled 'One World in Schools' (Jeden svět na školách). The questions on students' views and knowledge of life under communism are one of the few youth survey datasets in post-communist Europe for exploring contemporary young adults' collective memory towards communism.

CHSS (2014) is a quota sample of both schools and respondents aged 15 to 20 years. From a list of all high schools in the Czech Republic, an initial sample of 164 schools were selected to be nationally representative on the basis of four criteria: (1) type of school: gymnasium, secondary (SOŠ) and vocational (SOÚ), (2) region: Bohemia and Moravia, and (3) size of community: ≤5 000, 5 000-99 999, 100 000 inhabitants. From this initial sample of schools, 64 school directors agreed to allow CHSS to be undertaken in their institution. The CHSS (2014) dataset is weighted to be nationally representative of all those aged 15 to 20 years in terms of key socio-demographics (age and sex), region, and type of school attended.

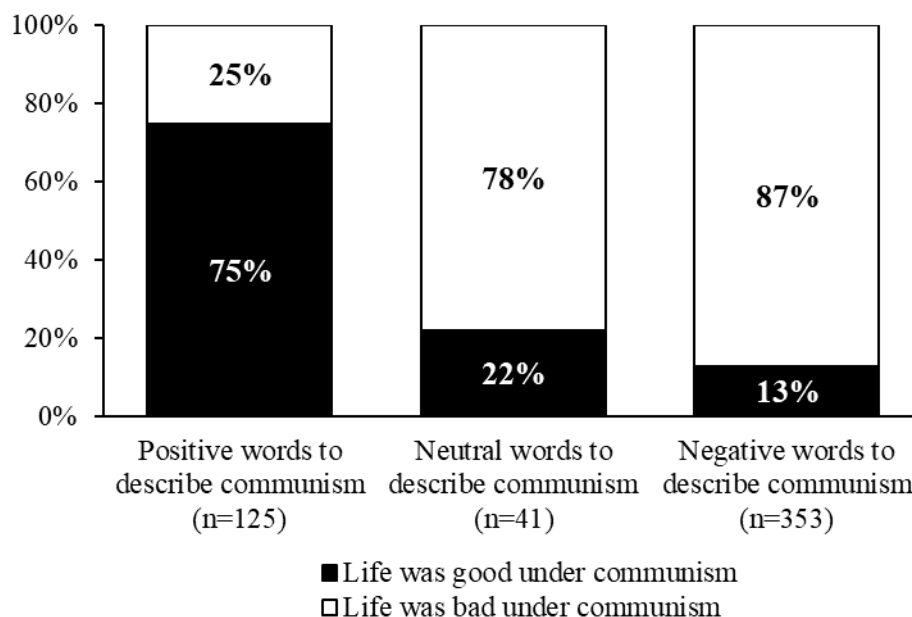
Only one classroom per school participated in this study. Classrooms in schools were selected to be representative of the 15 to 20 age cohort. On average 17 paper and pencil questionnaires were distributed to each class (min=5, max=30) and this research was undertaken during April and May 2014. The completion of questionnaires was supervised by a social studies teacher who explained the purpose of the research and ensured that each questionnaire was completed independently. Questionnaires that were completed with the help of others and those with a high level of question non-response (25 % or greater) were removed from the final dataset. The final sample size has 1,109 students based in 64 classrooms.

## **Data Analysis and Modelling Results**

It is important, as a first step, to consider the evidence regarding the content of collective memories toward life under communism. Fortunately, an open-ended question measured which ideas were associated with life in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989 (see question E04 in the appendix). This question facilitates understanding what criteria the Czech students used when evaluating

life under communism. The verbatim responses were coded into three categories. Lists of the positive, neutral and negative categories are given at the bottom of Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Comparison of young Czechs' evaluations of life under communism and tone of words used to describe the 1948 – 1989 period**



Source: CHSS (2014), n=519, data weighted, questions E02 & E04.

List of positive statement categories:

People had work / there was work / no unemployment; Better than today; Peace, order; Low crime, morality, order; Good interpersonal relationships / togetherness; Justice, equality; Positive assessment; Low prices, salaries; Social security (housing, etc.); Having enough; Development; Freedom; Hope; Without racism; No corruption; Better education.

List of neutral statement categories:

Communism / communists; Order, uniqueness, organization, rigor; Cannot answer / no experience / do not remember; Centralised economy / bad economy; Positive and negative evaluations.

List of negative statement categories:

No freedom / limited freedom / oppression / control / injustice; Totalitarianism / dictatorship / fear / uncertainty; Poor, poverty; Censorship, lack of information; Lack of goods / food; Tough times / hard regime; Could not leave the country / could not travel / isolation; Negative evaluation; Backwardness, without modern technology; Helplessness; Unemployment; Boredom, routine; Bad interpersonal relationships / dislocation; Less options; No private property / nationalization; Propaganda; Uniformity; Corruption; Suppression of human rights; Racism.

The main pattern evident in Figure 1 is that Czech students who reported that life under communism was good also tended to use positive words to describe the 1948 – 1989 period, and more specifically mentioned social safety

net and material equality topics. In contrast, those who were most critical of life under communism mentioned political criteria such as lack of individual legal and political rights. Those who used neutral tone words or phrases tended to evaluate life under communism as being bad.

**Table 2: Sources of information about the communism among Czech high school students aged 15-20 years**

<i>Sources of information about the 1948 – 1989 period in Czechoslovak history</i>	<i>E06: Any mention</i>		<i>E07: Main source</i>		<i>Female vs male</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Diff</i>
School	67	737	29	321	+5.8
Parents	59	653	22	246	-4.3
Grandparents	51	566	20	226	-0.7
Films and television series	40	441	7	75	+1.1
Internet (servers, social network blogs, etc.)	26	287	7	79	-2.1
Books	16	172	2	25	+1.1
Traditional media (TV, print, radio)	13	146	2	19	-0.1
Friends and acquaintances	9	102	1	13	<0.1
Elsewhere	6	61	1	15	-2.6
Nowhere - have almost no information	4	49	3	32	-0.7
Don't know, no answer	0	0	5	56	
Total	NA	1,107	100	1,107	1,053

Source: CHSS (2014), n=1,107, data weighted, questions E06 & E07.

Note these data are based on a pair of questions. The first question (any mention) asked if the student for each source list above if they got information about communism. These data do not sum to one hundred percent because of multiple mentions. The second item (main source) inquired about the main source of material about the communist era. By combining the parent and grandparent categories into a 'family' one, then the family is the source of information most frequently mentioned by pupils. The final column explores differences between females and males using a chi-square test. Specifically, an adjusted standardised residual (difference between the observed and expected divided by the standard error) greater than 1.9 is statistically significant at a  $p \leq .05$  level. Positive values indicate more use of a source by females than males and negative ones vice versa.

A second step involves understanding where Czechs born after 1989 got (in 2014) their information about life under communism: this represents a core task in testing Halbwachs's theory of collective memory. The CHSS (2014) questionnaire contained a pair of items on this topic; and the results are shown in Table 2 (see the appendix for the question wordings). The first (any mention, E06) question mapped out the sources of information used by Czech students. The second (main source, E07) item inquired about the source used most frequently. The first two columns on the left of Table 2 reveal that it is direct interpersonal sources of information about the past that are most important. This fits with Halbwachs's emphasis on the social nature of collective memories. Turning now to the middle two columns of Table 2, it is evident that

school is the single main source of information. However, by combining the parent and grandparent categories into a single ‘family’ one, then the family (44 %) is the ‘main source’ (E07) of information most frequently mentioned by pupils with school (29 %) coming second.

These data fit with the empirical implications of Halbwachs’s theory that the family is a core source of collective memories. The final column reveals that females reported getting more information about communism in school than males; and conversely, males obtained more knowledge about life before 1989 from parents, the internet, and other miscellaneous sources. The reasons for these sex differences are not clear. Finally, one might expect that grandparents would be mentioned more often than parents as a source of knowledge about communism, but this is not the case. Table 2 indicates that both parents and grandparents are mentioned a similar number of times. However, these data do not give a sense of the relative impact of parents, grandparents and school on Czech adolescents’ evaluations of life under communism. Here multivariate modelling is more appropriate for exploring these types of relationships.

#### *Models of evaluations of past and present*

The individual-level regressions models estimated to test the four hypotheses outlined earlier must take account of particular features of the CHSS (2014) data set. First, these survey data are hierarchical in structure because the students were surveyed in classrooms. Preliminary analysis reveals important design effects ( $DE \geq 2$ ) for all models estimated. This means that a multilevel modelling approach is required where the clustering in answers among pupils from the same class/school must be taken into account. Second, the models for the past and present are linked due to presentism; and this has the important statistical implication that the error terms (residuals) in the two models estimated are correlated. Again, this must be taken into account in order to have reliable and accurate parameter estimates. Consequently, this paper uses a conditional (recursive) mixed process estimating (CMP) procedure. (Roodman, 2011) Technically speaking, this flexible simultaneous equations approach allows for multiple equations to be estimated simultaneously where account is taken of random effects due to the hierarchical characteristics of the data analysed.

It is important to stress, that the estimation of complex CMP multilevel models requires that the explanatory variables are not strongly correlated, i.e. collinear. Therefore, additional variables such as the subjective income of the household or the education levels of parents were excluded from the final models estimated because of ‘ill conditioning’: this is a technical problem where it is difficult to estimate final parameter estimates in regression matrices.

Halbwachs was aware of similar collinearity (and related inference) problems in his own statistical studies of suicide.

Turning now to evaluation of the four hypotheses developed on the basis of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory. H.3 correctly predicts that there should be a negative association in answers to evaluations of the present (2014) and the past (1948 – 1989). The bottom part of Table 3 reveals that there are strong negative correlations between the error terms for the models evaluations of the past and present ( $r = -.51$ ,  $se = .07$  at the individual level;  $r = -.47$ ,  $se = .05$  for the multilevel model). The results provide support Halbwachs' proposal that collective memories of the past are linked with evaluations of the present, i.e. presentism. The expectations for the remaining three hypotheses (H.1, H.2 and H.4) are also confirmed.

With regard to H.1, the model results in Table 3 reveal that being female, attendance at a less academic high school, and living outside Prague are all linked with positive collective memories, and hence evaluations, of life under communism; and negative evaluations of contemporary life. In short, there is evidence in support of Halbwachs's theory that collective memory has a social group basis that may be empirically defined in terms of sex, education and residence.

The expectation that the main source of information about life under communism for the Czech high school students in 2014 was their grandparents (H.2) is also confirmed. The grandparent-grandchild interaction mechanism highlighted by Halbwachs for creating collective memories is, as Table 3 shows, stronger than either parental or school factors. Finally, the failure to find a statistically significant ( $p \leq .05$ ) relationship between subjective historical knowledge and evaluations of life under communism (H.4) lends credence to Halbwach's view that awareness of formal history written by historians and the collective memories created by social groups may not be strongly interrelated.

One of the main patterns in Table 3 is that the parameter estimates for evaluations of the past (EQ1) and present (EQ2) often have opposite signs. This may be interpreted as support for the presentism hypothesis, H.3, in the sense that positive evaluations of the past are associated with negative assessments of the present among Czech pupils in 2014. This implies that presentism in young Czechs' collective memories of life under communism is grounded in an 'opposition' between the past and present: a possibility not explicitly explored in Halbwachs's theory. The evidence shown in Table 3 also suggests that those in social groups with socio-economic advantages in contemporary Czech society (i.e. attending the most academic schools, residing in Prague, and believe they know enough about communist Czechoslovakia) view life in the communist past most critically (primarily in terms of political criteria as shown earlier in Figure 1) and the present most positively.

**Table 3: Models of evaluations that life under communism (1948 – 1989) and contemporary life (2014) were “good” among Czech high school students**

<i>Explanations, hypotheses and indicators</i>	<i>Life under communism was good (EQ1)</i>				<i>Contemporary life is good (EQ2)</i>			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>AME</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>AME</i>
<i>Social group characteristics (H.1):</i>								
Sex (female)	.26	.13	.055	+.26	-.14	.14	.319	-.14
School type attended (academic)	-.38	.07	<.001	-.38	.21	.08	.008	+.20
Resides in Prague	-.48	.23	.034	-.48	.55	.22	.012	+.54
<i>Sources of information about past (H.2):</i>								
Parents	.21	.19	.267	+.21	-.15	.20	.431	-.15
Grandparents	.46	.18	.011	+.46	-.13	.20	.523	-.13
School	-.01	.18	.959	-.01	-.08	.18	.656	-.08
<i>Factual knowledge (H.4):</i>								
Subjective knowledge of history	.02	.15	.891	+.02	.29	.15	.063	+.29
Intercept	-1.78	.25	<.001	na	.30	.25	.228	na
<i>Models error terms (H.3):</i>								
Error variance EQ1, individual level	-1.01	.20	<.001					
Error variance EQ1, school level	-.85	.15	<.001					
Correlation error variance EQ1&2, individual level	-1.36	.50	.007					
Correlation error variance EQ1&2	-.51	.07	<.001					
<i>Random effects parameters:</i>								
Level: School								
EQ1 intercept (SD)	.36	.07						
EQ2 intercept (SD)	.43	.07						
Cross-equation correlation (H.3)	-.88	.12						
Level: Residuals (H.3)								
EQ1 intercept (SD)*	1.00	na						
EQ2 intercept (SD)*	1.00	na						
Cross-equation correlation (H.3)	-.47	.05						
<i>Model fit statistics, null &amp; full models:</i>								
Log-likelihood (negative)	1228	1191						
AIC	2468	2422						
BIC	2498	2522						



Source: CHSS (2014), n=1,109, data unweighted.

\* Constrained to be unity in order for the model to be identified and hence estimated.

Note that the two correlated dependent variables (Spearman's  $r=.31$ ,  $p\leq.001$ ) are dichotomised to reflect evaluations of contemporary life and that under communism that are either "good" or not. The models are probits estimated within the conditional mixed process (CMP) framework where evaluations of the present and past are assumed to be correlated. These models also have a multilevel (pupils in schools) structure.

SD refers to standard deviation. Estimates that are 'not applicable' are indicated by 'na'. The two models estimated are conditional mixed process multilevel probit regressions. The estimates in the AME columns (as described in the text below) present average marginal effects (probabilities) for each of the explanatory variables. The error variance and correlation estimates for the error terms are transformations, i.e. Fisher's z scores logged for the variances and hypergeometric arc tangents for the correlations. These transformations are necessary for statistical reasons.

As a final step, the modelling results presented in Table 3 also show average marginal effects (AMEs). The model parameters presented in Table 3 are probit coefficients. These are difficult to interpret because they are on a nonlinear scale and depend on the values of the other explanatory variables. Consequently, it is standard practice to convert the probit coefficients into probability estimates. An AME represents the expected difference in outcome probability associated with a 1-unit increase in the predictor, adjusted to the sample distributions of all the other predictor variables in the model. If the AME is positive (negative) this implies that the probability increases (decreases) with a 1-unit increase (decrease) in the predictor. With nominal-level variables such as sex, the AME represents the predicted values at predictor values that differ by 1 and takes their difference. For continuous variables, such as type of school attended (which is scaled in terms of level of vocation versus academic orientation), the AMEs are the first partial derivative of the probability with respect to a predictor.

For the "life under communism was good" (EQ1) model, Table 3 reveals that having grandparents as a source of information about life pre-1989 increases the probability of agreeing life under communism was good by 46 %, while living in Prague and attending a more academic school reduces it (-48 % and -38 % respectively). In contrast, school as a source of information about communism and self-belief about historical knowledge have small AMEs (1-2 %). For the EQ2 model, the AME estimates presented on the far right of Table 3 indicate that living in Prague (+54 %) and belief about knowing enough about the communist past (+29 %) have positive associations with thinking that life in 2014 was good. All of the other explanatory variables (i.e. female and all sources of information about communism) have much lower negative probabilities.

Finally, to answer the question posed in the title of this paper, a minority of Czech high school students agreed in 2014 that life was good in communist Czechoslovakia. The existence of rival perceptions about life pre-1989 fits with a collective memory explanation of contrasting views of the past. Moreover, using insights from Halbwachs's theory it is possible to explain why there are

different evaluations of the past (and the present). More generally, this case study has demonstrated that there is merit in using individual-level survey data for examining collective memories using Halbwachs's influential theory, which has to date been mostly tested with qualitative (interview) evidence.

### **Conclusion**

The puzzle of why some young Czechs have a positive view of life under communism, despite the fact that the official historical narrative is primarily negative, can be explained using Halbwachs's theory of collective memory. In this study, four hypotheses derived from Halbwachs's theory have been tested. This empirical investigation has shown that young Czechs' views on life under communism are indeed associated with (1) social group membership characteristics [H.1], (2) differential access to information about the past [H.2], (3) linkage between views of the present and past or presentism [H.3], and (4) views of the past that are often not linked strongly with expert (written) historical accounts.

In sum, this paper has shown that contemporary perceptions of life under communism can be fruitfully explained in terms of collective memory; and Halbwachs's theory offers important (and often counter-intuitive) insights into why there are a plurality of views about the past: a pattern which contrasts sharply with the consensus evident among most historians and public intellectuals in the media that nothing of real importance was good about life under communism.

As a final step, it is essential in this study to complete two concluding tasks: (a) critically appraise the science that lies underneath a theory of human memory that is close to a century old, and (b) evaluate the extent to which a collective memory perspective has informed contemporary social science scholarship about life under communism in Czechoslovakia.

#### *Critical appraisal of the science in Halbwachs's theory*

A critic might argue that Halbwachs's theory of collective memory is outdated as the science of human memory has made great progress since the 1930s. In defence of Halbwachs, current research shows that many of his theoretical assumptions of how human memory works are still considered to be valid. (e.g. Hirst – Manier 2008, Legrand et al. 2015) Accepting that Halbwachs's theory of collective memory is scientifically valid, are some of Halbwachs's insights evident in research on the legacy of Czechoslovak communism? In answering this question reference will be made to three influential books about how the communist past is interpreted in contemporary Czech society.

*Evaluation of the contemporary influence of a collective memory perspective*

Françoise Mayer's (2004) influential historical and sociological study of Czechs and their attitudes toward communism highlights that many ardent anti-communist Czech politicians in the 1990s were strategic rather than sincere in their motivations. This is because many members of the post-communist elite had also been part of the elite pre-1989. (Mayer 2004) One limitation of Mayer's study is that she uses a Halbwachsian perspective to explore the collective memories of a small number of social groups (i.e. communists, former dissidents, political prisoners, and historians) and the general population is ignored. (Mayer 2004: 15) However, one intriguing implication stemming from Mayer's work is that the positive association observed between higher education and expressing negative views about the communist past among Czech pupils in 2014 may be evidence of family-based collective memories that reflect the promotion of an anti-communist reputation during the 1990s.

One of the most interesting, and controversial, books about contemporary interpretations of life under communism is Michal Pullmann's (2011) study of Czechoslovakia in the late 1980s. He argues against a simple dichotomisation of life under communism as being composed of a "good" society that was repressed by a "bad" regime. (Pullmann 2011) Pullmann stresses that Czechoslovak communism in the late 1980s had a plurality of beliefs and behaviours where social consensus was grounded in popular support for the communist government because it ensured stability and a lifestyle that was acceptable, although imperfect. Like Mayer's (2004) study, Pullmann's (2011) book deals primarily with an elite discourse: there is no systematic analysis of collective memory within society more generally.

Most recently, the collective memory of ordinary Czechs has been systematically studied by oral history researchers. An excellent example of this work is Miroslav Vaněk's and Pavel Mücke's (2016) study of Czechs' remembrances of the Velvet Revolution which is based primarily on 300 individual interviews of those born between 1935 and 1955. This cohort contains the grandparents of the pupils who participated in the CHSS (2014) research examined in this article. A key conclusion from Vaněk and Mücke's (2016) book, entitled *Velvet Revolutions*, is the existence of a plurality of remembrances about life under communism. The fact that there is a multiplicity of collective memories fits with Halbwachs' view that remembrances are rarely unitary. Finally, it is important to note that the emergence of oral history as an accepted subfield within historical scholarship suggests that the distinction that Halbwachs made between oral collective memory and written academic history may be weakening.

By way of conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that there is value in using the theoretical insights of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory with individual-level survey data. While this survey-based approach to testing collective memory theory lacks the empirical richness of qualitative data, the fact that core hypotheses derived from collective memory theory have been successfully tested in this study highlights the advantage representative survey data offer in investigating the collective memories of national populations – something not possible using small-N studies.

*Pat Lyons is a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Political Sociology, Institute of Sociology the Czech Academy of Sciences. His main areas of research are public opinion, political attitudes and behaviour.*

*Aleš Kudrnáč is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Political Sociology, Institute of Sociology the Czech Academy of Sciences. His research focuses mainly on political attitudes, values and behaviour of youth. His articles appeared in journals such as Journal of Youth Studies or Political Studies.*

#### REFERENCES

- BUCHMANN, C. – HYUNJOON, P., 2009: Stratification and the Formation of Expectations in Highly Differentiated Educational Systems. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 27, No. 4, pp. 245-267.
- CHASE, R. S., 1995: Women's Labor Force Participation During and After Communism: A Case Study of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Economic Growth Center Discussion Paper, No. 768, Yale University, USA, available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/160672>
- COSER, L. A., 1992: The Revival of the Sociology of Culture: The Case of Collective Memory. *Sociological Forum*, 7, No. 2, pp. 365-373.
- DELLI CARPINI, M. X. – KEETER, S., 1996: What Americans Know about Politics and why it Matters. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
- HALBWACHS, M., 1938: *Esquisse d'une psychologie des classes sociales*. Paris: Librairie Marcel Rivière et Cie.
- HALBWACHS, M., 1939: Individual Consciousness and Collective Mind. *American Journal of Sociology*, 44, No. 6, pp. 812-822.
- HALBWACHS, M. – DOUGLAS, M. (intro.) – DITTER, JNR., F. J. – DITTER, V. Y., (trans.) 1980: *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper & Row.
- HALBWACHS, M. – COSER, L. A., (trans. & intro.), 1992: *On Collective Memory*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- HAVELKOVÁ, H., 1993: "Patriarchy" in Czech Society. *Hypatia*, 8, No. 4, pp. 89-96.
- HIRST, W. – MANIER, D., 2008: Towards a psychology of collective memory. *Memory*, 16, No. 3, pp. 183-200.

- LEGRAND, N. – GAGNEPAIN, P. – PESCHANSKI, D. – EUSTACHE, F., 2015: Neurosciences et Mémoires Collectives: les Schémas entre Cerveau, Sociétés et Cultures. *Biologie Aujourd'hui*, 209, No. 3, pp. 273-286.
- MATĚJŮ, P. – SMITH, M. L., 2009: The Perceived Value of Education and Educational Aspirations in the Czech Republic: Changes in the Determination of Educational Aspirations between 1989 and 2003. *Comparative Education Review*, 53, No. 1, pp.13-39.
- MATĚJŮ, P. – SIMONOVÁ, N. – ŘEHÁKOVÁ, B., 2007: Structural growth of inequality in access to higher education in the Czech Republic. In: Shavit, Y. – Arum, R. – Gamoran, A., (eds.) *Stratification in Higher Education: A Comparative Study*. p. 374-399. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- MAYER, F., 2004: *Les Tchèques et leur communisme. Memoire et identités politiques*. Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS).
- MISHLER, W. – ROSE, R., 1996: Trajectories of Fear and Hope: Support for Democracy in Post-Communist Europe. *Comparative Political Studies*, 28, No. 4, pp. 553-581.
- OLICK, J. K., 1999: Collective Memory: The Two Cultures. *Sociological Theory*, 17, No. 3, pp. 333-348.
- OLICK, J. K., 2007: Collective Memory and Nonpublic Opinion: A Historical Note on a Methodological Controversy about a Political Problem. *Symbolic Interaction*, 30, No. 1, pp. 41-55.
- PULLMANN, M., 2011: *Konec experimentu: Přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu*. Praha: Scriptorium.
- PRUSIK, M. – LEWICKA, M., 2016: Nostalgia for Communist Times and Autobiographical Memory: Negative Present or Positive Past? *Political Psychology*, 37, No. 5, pp. 677-693.
- ROODMAN, D., 2011: Fitting Fully Observed Recursive Mixed-process Models with CMP. *The Stata Journal*, 11, No. 2, pp. 159-206.
- SAXONBERG, S. – SZELEWA, D., 2007: The Continuing Legacy of the Communist Legacy? The development of family policies in Poland and the Czech Republic. *Social Politics*, 4, No. 3, pp. 351-379.
- SCHWARTZ, B., 1982: The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory. *Social Forces*, 61, No. 2, pp. 374-397.
- TOURANGEAU, R. – RIPS, L. J. – RASINSKI, K., 2000: *The Psychology of the Survey Response*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- VANĚK, M. – MŮCKE, P., 2016. *Velvet Revolutions. An Oral History of Czech Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- VROMEN, S., 1993: Review: Maurice Halbwachs on Collective Memory by Lewis A. Coser. *American Journal of Sociology*, 99, No. 2, pp. 510-512.
- WOLCHIK, S. L., 1994: Women in Transition in the Czech and Slovak Republics: The First Three Years. *Journal of Women's History*, 5, No. 3, pp. 100-107.

## Appendix

### Question wordings from CHSS (2014)

#### *Comparison of past and present (1948 – 1989 vs 2014)*

E01: Do you think that life in socialist Czechoslovakia (1948 – 1989) was in comparison to the current one ... (1) much better, (2) rather better, (3) the same, (4) rather worse, (5) much worse, (6) don't know / no answer?

#### *Evaluation of the communist past (1948 – 1989)*

E02: In your opinion, life for people in socialist Czechoslovakia was ... (1) very good, (2) rather good, (3) rather bad, (4) somewhat bad, and (5) don't know / no answer?

#### *Evaluation of contemporary life (2014)*

E03: In your opinion, life for people in the current Czech Republic is ... (1) very good, (2) rather good, (3) rather bad, (4) somewhat bad, and (5) don't know / no answer?

#### *Content of information about life under communism*

E04: Think now about your knowledge and feelings regarding Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989. If you had to characterise these [thoughts and feelings] in three words or phrases, what words or phrases would you use? These verbatim responses were coded as positive, negative or neutral by the survey fieldwork company (Median s.r.o.).

#### *Subjective historical knowledge*

E05: For Czechoslovakia (1948 – 1989) I think that I know ... (1) Enough, (2) Little, (3) Almost nothing, or (4) I cannot judge.

#### *Sources of information about life under communism*

E06: Where do you learn about life in Czechoslovakia (1948 – 1989)?

E07: Which source of information (list from E06) do you use most often?

(a) Parents, (b) Grandparents, (c) Friends and acquaintances, (d) School, (e) Internet (servers, social network blogs, etc.), (f) Traditional media (TV, print, radio), (g) Films and television series, (h) Books, (i) Elsewhere, (j) Nowhere – have almost no information.

#### *Sex*

H04: I am ..? (a) Male, (b) Female.

#### *School type*

H05: My class belongs to the following type of school? (1) Gymnasium, (2) Secondary school, (3) Vocational school with graduation, (4) Vocational school without graduation.

#### *Place of residence*

H07: I live in the region ..? (1) Prague (Praha), (2) Central Bohemia (Středočeský kraj), (3) Pilsen (Plzeňský kraj), (4) Karlovy Vary (Karlovarský kraj), (5) Ústí nad Labem (Ústecký kraj), (6) Liberec (Liberecký kraj), (7) Hradec Králové (Královéhradecký kraj), (8) Pardubice (Pardubický kraj), (9) Vysočina (Kraj Vysočina), (10) South Moravia (Jihomoravský kraj), (11) South Bohemia (Jihočeský kraj), (12) Zlín (Zlínský kraj), (13) Olomouc (Olomoucký kraj), (14) Moravia-Silesia (Moravskoslezský kraj).