

## POLITICAL GRAFFITI IN PRAGUE AS A REACTION TO THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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With 8 figures

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**Summary:** In February 2022, the Russian army attacked Ukraine, which aroused resistance across Europe. The aim of the paper is to analyse spatial concentration and the meaning of associated political graffiti in Prague, Czechia, reflecting reactions to this geopolitical shift. Our approach focuses on the spatial aspect of the socio-semiotic analysis, revealing how urban symbolism shapes graffiti placement, modes, and interpretation. We have mapped it in the areas where we previously had noted a concentration of political graffiti in 2019 and 2020. Thanks to these timelines, we follow the development of political graffiti before and after the invasion and verify if the political symbolic space based on political relations between inhabitants and objects in the urban space influence variations in political graffiti prevalence. We have discovered what opinions resonated in the Czech society and how the meaning of graffiti signs was changing over time, in the space, and among objects of reference.

**Keywords:** Political graffiti, Russian invasion of Ukraine, urban space, political symbolic space, socio-semiotic analysis, Czechia

### 1 Introduction

On the 24 February 2022, the Russian army attacked the sovereign state of Ukraine shocking the democratic world. This unprecedented, international-law-violating move (VARAKI 2022) aroused resistance across Europe in the form of massive protests. It is necessary to study such political expressions because in some European countries they supported government contra-actions, especially in economic sanctions and arms supplies for Ukrainian defence (e.g. in Germany). Political crises of this nature are precisely the critical moments when the most political graffiti appears in democratic urban space (ALONSO 1998, CAMPOS 2016). It is important to pay attention to this kind of graffiti not only because it influences and mobilises public opinion, but because it can give clues to what resonates with a society (KALANTZIS 2015, VOGEL et al. 2020) or what is marginalised or excluded from traditional political dialogue (IVESON 2009, HANAUER 2011, BUSH 2013, ZAIMAKIS 2015, CAMPOS 2016, VOGEL et al. 2020), such as manifestations of Russia's support.

As far as historical context is concerned, Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union between 1922 and 1991. In these years, several events took place that have been affecting Ukrainian-Russian relations until these days, such as the assassina-

tion of Ukrainian intellectuals and the politically motivated famine in Ukraine in 1930s, the forced relocation and work migration of Russians to eastern Ukraine (GRIGAS 2016), and the allocation of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954. After the declaration of independence, the so-called Budapest Memorandum was signed in 1994, by which Russia provided Ukraine with a guarantee of political independence and territorial integrity in exchange for the renunciation of nuclear missiles (WILSON 2014). However, Ukraine's politics was continuously influenced by Russia until several revolutions shifted its direction towards the European Union and NATO. In a hardly controversial narrative, Ukraine is perceived as one of Russian historical lands (GRIGAS 2016), therefore, when Russia was gradually losing its influence, it decided to support the separatist aspirations of eastern Ukrainian regions and annex Crimea (the first annexation in Europe after 1945, WILSON 2014), which led to the outbreak of war in 2014 (WILSON 2014, GRIGAS 2016), culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

There are several contexts as to why political graffiti in Czechia offers interesting findings. Firstly, there is a pre-invasion context (for more detail, see Chapter 3); Czech historical experience with communism is closely associated with Russia and the similar Soviet army invasion of 1968. It



also includes the negative attitude of part of Czech society towards Russia in recent years, associated with the deterioration of mutual relations due to the inclusion of Czechia in the list of enemy countries with the United States. Secondly, there is a post-invasion context based on the argument that some Central-European countries, including Czechia, can be considered major European actors in this crisis (TALLIS 2022). Among the most distinctive reasons, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala was in the first delegation of European statesmen (including the representatives of Poland and Slovenia) who came to support the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv. Czechia also held the presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2022. It is a new member of the United Nations Human Rights Council which has replaced Russia after its suspension due to the invasion. In addition, the Czech government has been among the most active in the supply of military equipment to Ukraine (IFW 2024), just as Czech society collected considerable charity funds (WILLOUGHBY 2022). Ukrainians have been the largest group of immigrants in Czechia in 2017 (VALENTA & DRBOHLAV 2018) which has been the highest (per 1000 inhabitants in 2021) in the EU, followed closely by Poland, Lithuania, and Estonia (EUROSTAT 2022). It resulted in a strong war refugee flow to Czechia (UNHCR 2022) and a positive and proactive attitude of Czech government and society. Immediately after the start of the invasion, almost 90 percent of Czechs agreed with the designation of the Russian invasion as an 'indefensible act of aggression' (MEDIAN 2022). The amount and content of political graffiti in Czechia can be a manifestation of this connection with Ukrainians, the long-lasting frustration of Czech society with Russian politics, and negative historical experience which is common to most Central European countries with an unappreciated communist past (with some Slovak and Hungarian deviations in Flash Eurobarometer 506; EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022).

Political graffiti and street art are aesthetic creations that their creators contribute to public urban space with a certain message (based on WACLAWEK 2011) in a publicly accessible place highlighting political understanding, social commentary, criticism, protest, rejection, or agreement with social changes (ZAIMAKIS 2015). There are many definitions separating graffiti from street art, which can differ in design, content, or legality, thinking of street art only as permissible creations (ROSS 2016). Nevertheless, the motivation for creating political graffiti is not

very different from the motivation for creating political street art, incl. posters and stickers. In both forms, creators express political opinions by these means and their choice of the way of creation may be motivated by the possibilities of visual or text expression, speed, and simplicity of creation (KRESLEHNER 2023), but by legislation on the penalties as well (see Chapter 4). Moreover, we cannot distinguish the meaning or the effect of their message on the audience between them (HÁNA & ŠEL 2022) because public may or may not be inclined to this whole mode of public expression which influences one's openness to the political opinions contained. Therefore, it is more appropriate to examine them together as a fluid category (RANDVIIR 2011) hereinafter referred to as political graffiti (similar approach in VOGEL et al. 2020).

The aim of this paper is to analyse the spatial concentration and meaning of political graffiti associated with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 in politically important areas of Prague, the capital city of Czechia, where we have previously noted a concentration of political graffiti in 2019 and 2020 associated with the differentiation of political symbolic space (ŠEL & HÁNA 2021, HÁNA & ŠEL 2022). Therefore, in the social, political (see Chapter 3), and spatial symbolic context, we can also compare the development of the spatiality and semiotics of political graffiti before and after the invasion. Chapter 2 presents the relationship between the symbolism of urban space and the semiotics of local signs, which are further analysed (see methodological Chapter 4) with two sub-objectives. At first, we may use spatial analysis to verify the assumption of graffiti concentration associated with the Russian invasion in the same symbolic localities where different political graffiti was concentrated in 2019/2020. Therefore, we tried to verify the previously identified (HÁNA & ŠEL 2022) importance of political symbolic space for graffiti creators in the selection of sites for their creation. Second, we also monitored changes in the number, content and presentation of anti-Russian, pro-Ukrainian, and pacifist graffiti in the research areas compared to 2019/2020 using the socio-semiotic analysis. In this way, we try to find out how the creators of political graffiti perceive the crisis and how the perception of Russia and Ukraine has changed due to the invasion. An important element is the synthesis of both directions, thanks to which we discovered how the modes and meaning of the signs differs depending on the place within the political symbolic space.

## 2 Political graffiti as signs in political symbolic space refers to critical political events

The creation of political graffiti is a subcultural and political performance in public space with a strong and understandable political message (e.g. SNYDER 2009, ZAIMAKIS 2015, RAJAN 2021) which reacts to important political events and uses political symbolism of the place of creation (e.g. GOALWIN 2015, PUGH 2015, ZAIMAKIS 2015, GAGLIARDI 2020, HÁNA & ŠEL 2022). They are created especially at times of great social and political crises (ALONSO 1998, CAMPOS 2016), as seen in response to the Greek economic crisis (KALANTZIS 2015, ZAIMAKIS 2015, ALEXANDRAKIS 2016), the Argentinian economic crisis (KANE 2009), the religious conflict in Northern Ireland (BUSH 2013, GOALWIN 2013), Israeli-Palestinian relations (HANAUER 2011), and the Arab Spring (LEVINE 2015). Not only does the amount of graffiti change in these times; political graffiti commonly comes from the margins of society (IVESON 2009, HANAUER 2011, BUSH 2013, ZAIMAKIS 2015, CAMPOS 2016, VOGEL et al. 2020), but when a crisis arises, it broadly expresses a kind of resistance, which connects different groups of society with different political attitudes and interests (KALANTZIS 2015) but the same ‘fear of becoming’ (ALEXANDRAKIS 2016: 276). Political graffiti, thus, does not necessarily represent hidden corners of society, its role could instead be to express something more generally accepted and resonated in society, respectively something from a societal identity (GOALWIN 2013, VOGEL et al. 2020). However, even in times of crisis, such graffiti could include something too controversial to introduce publicly (HANAUER 2011, ZAIMAKIS 2015) and narratives that would legitimise the ideology of graffiti creators may be too strong for general societal acceptance (GOALWIN 2013). Political graffiti during crisis can also provoke opposition to the political-economic system (ALEXANDRAKIS 2016) represented by the narratives of the mass media or the government (ZAIMAKIS 2015). This provocation can mobilise society or international viewers to take action (HANAUER 2011, LEVINE 2015, ALEXANDRAKIS 2016). Political graffiti can be seen as ‘a multidimensional mirror of a society in crisis’ (ZAIMAKIS 2015: 392). It is made by creators with different positions in society and attitudes towards society (HANAUER 2011, ZAIMAKIS 2015) and has power because it is in accessible, public spaces (BUSH 2013) and out of government and mass-media control (LEVINE 2015). On the other hand, they may also be losing some of their power due to the controversy caused by the illegality of this act.

Urban space is politicised by this kind of political action (ZAIMAKIS 2015) and becomes part of the democratic political dialogue (PARKINSON 2012, VOGEL et al. 2020). Political space includes the action of creating political graffiti, the physical objects in an urban space on which it appears, and the intangible and informal relationships between inhabitants and specific places (see HANAUER 2011, PARKINSON 2012, HÁNA & ŠEL 2022). This may strongly affect political graffiti placement and meaning (FERRELL & WEIDE 2010, GOALWIN 2013, LEVINE 2015, VOGEL et al. 2020, HÁNA & ŠEL 2022). We can call it a political symbolic space (for its detailed discussion, conceptualization, aspects, and verification, see HÁNA & ŠEL 2022), a concept based on DAVID HARVEY’s (2006, 2009) relative space and HENRI LEFEBVRE’S (1991) representational space. It is created by the dynamic relationship between inhabitants and the perceived objects in their urban space (HARVEY 2006: 272–273). The lived experience of inhabitants interacting with the objects then produces a spatial system of non-verbal signs and symbols which lend meaning and symbolism to the urban space (LEFEBVRE 1991: 39). It can be described as ‘a “trialectical” process in which conceptions, perceptions and lived experiences of space interact’ (IVESON 2013: 944). In the multimodal socio-semiotics that focuses on the influence of the social (and equally spatial) context on the creation and interpretation of sign modes of communication that convey an overall meaning in their combinations (COBLEY & RANDVIIR 2009, RANDVIIR 2011, CHANDLER 2017, HUSSEIN & ALJAMILI 2020), we may understand this urban symbolism as an important aspect that shapes inhabitants’ perception of signs including spatial images and symbols which are closely associated with the symbolic spatial objects (LEFEBVRE 1991: 39).

Political graffiti, one of many aspects of political symbolic space, can be understood as signs (see IDDIGS et al. 2011, RANDVIIR 2011, FADHILAH 2018, VOGEL et al. 2020, RAJAN 2021). It is because graffiti is made of words, figures, and images (ROSS 2016) as well as signs that may take the form of words, images, actions, or objects when we can perceive their meaning (CHANDLER 2017). The meaning of political graffiti is based on a political and social message (ZAIMAKIS 2015) which should be easily comprehensible to the majority of society (IVESON 2009, McAULIFFE & IVESEN 2011). Most importantly, we should not see public space as an inert stage (KANE 2009). We must discuss its active role and the influence of its dynamic symbolism on the meaning of signs as well. Important aspects of understanding graffiti are the time of emergence (and the social context, VOGEL et

al. 2020; taking into account its evolution over time) and the place of occurrence (RANDVIIR 2011). This is because graffiti creators may use the symbolism of the place to attract attention (ALONSO 1998) and give their expressions greater weight (LEE et al. 2010). That is why creators often try to place their message near institutions they protest against (MEGLER et al. 2014) and why other politically symbolic places or even signposts to these buildings may replace their role if the institutions themselves are heavily monitored (HÁNA & ŠEL 2022). According to the concept of political symbolic space described through the mutual interaction between political graffiti and dynamic differentiation of symbolism (HÁNA & ŠEL 2022), even signs may contribute to a space's symbolic significance (in general, every political action changes an urban space, see also FLINT & TAYLOR 2018: 305) and a political symbolic space may affect the concentration and meaning of signs in urban space.

### 3 Increasing tension in Czech-Russian relations

The meaning of a sign arises only from its social interpretation (CHANDLER 2017: 35). To explain political graffiti responding to the Russian invasion, it is necessary to know the basic social context of the bilateral relations between Czechia and Russia. Although Czechia had always been part of the Western European cultural circle, based primarily on the Holy Roman Empire, in the 19th century it shifted toward the idea of Pan-Slavism that refers to the ideology advocating the political and cultural union of Slavic peoples, which was understood as a counterweight to the unifying Germany. Despite scepticism towards bolshevism and Russian imperialism, the conclusion of bilateral agreements and allied treaties followed. The allied relationship lasted until the 1940s when Soviet politicians, with the argument of creating a defence system, shifted towards the sphere of influence covering a large part of Central Europe after which it became, in the words of MILAN KUNDERA (2023), the 'Kidnapped West'. It culminated in the Czechoslovak communist coup d'état in 1948 and with the Soviet invasion after the democratisation process of the Prague Spring in 1968. Czechoslovakia stayed in the Soviet sphere until the democratic Velvet revolution in 1989 and its official detachment in 1990.

The following period was relatively quiet when political leaders launched an effort to forget historical grievances and normalised bilateral relations which were shaken again after the accession

of Czechia and other post-communist countries to NATO in 1999 and to the EU in 2004, which Russia considered a threat to its interests in the 'near abroad'. Nevertheless, the first fundamental change in bilateral relations came with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. This signified a definitive end to the improvement of bilateral relations and, above all, drew attention to the danger that Russia poses to its former satellites, including Czechia, by challenging its democratic and liberal establishment (BIS 2015). The blame of the Russian secret service, GRU, for the tragic explosion of the ammunition depot in Vrbětice, however, has ultimately taken the mutual relations to their lowest level since 1989 (HAVLÍČEK & SOUŠKOVÁ 2021). This, among other things, led to Czechia being declared one of two Russia's official enemies and the expulsion of 18 Russian embassy employees from Czechia. However, the populist-radical right part of the Czech (and Central European) political scene does not follow this tendency in mutual relations, reflecting 'new Pan-Slavic' political discourse that is quite open to Russian narratives (SUSLOV et al. 2023).

The Russian embassy surroundings in Czechia has lately become the space for expressing opposition to the Russian regime. These manifestations are often spontaneously initiated from the public, although they are supplemented by a few actions of local politicians. An example of this are longstanding disputes leading to the removal of the Konev Memorial in 2020 (statue of Soviet marshal, who took part in the liberation of Prague at the end of the Second World War, but also in the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, and the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968), followed by the official renaming of the square where the Russian embassy is located to 'Boris Nemtsov Square' (assassinated Russian opposition politician), and a promenade in the adjacent park to 'Promenade of Anna Politkovskaya' (assassinated Russian journalist) where there is also a location unofficially named 'Prospect of Alexei Navalny' (imprisoned and recently deceased Russian opposition politician). Similarly, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the address of the Russian embassy changed when a section of Korunovační (Coronation) street was officially renamed after Ukrainian heroes and the contiguous bridge after Vitalij Skakun, a killed Ukrainian soldier and hero. As a result, the Russian embassy is currently surrounded by 'opposition' names which can be understood as an expression of the Czech attitude towards the current Russian establishment.

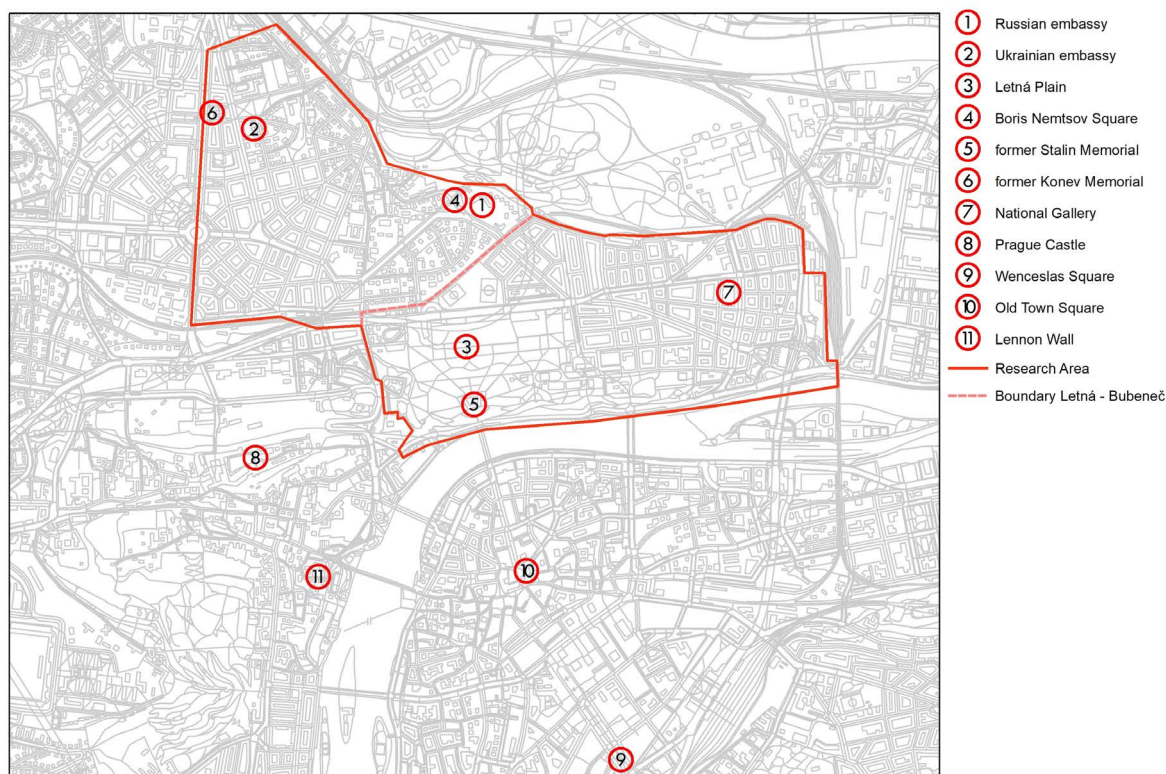


#### 4 Research area and methods

The field survey was conducted in the Czech capital, Prague. In Czechia, graffiti started to be public after the fall of the communist regime in 1989 (OVERSTREET 2006), even though some political inscriptions with anti-Soviet statements were written during communism in 1968 (KOUDELKA 2008) and anti-regime ones in 1989 (POSPÉCH 2019). First years of retrieved democratic regime were associated with a zero-tolerance policy, i.e. municipalities were removing every single graffiti in their streets immediately which led to the overproduction of simple and unaesthetic forms of graffiti (exactly as presented in the spot theory by FERRELL & WEIDE 2010). However, the last few decades have been associated with an open-mindedness of city officials. Legal walls for free creation have been established widely and commissioned murals have been created all over the city (mainly in neglected areas) also thanks to a positive reception of these legal creations by the public. On the contrary, the law punishing unauthorized spray painting has become stricter, considering this act as a criminal offence regardless of the degree of dam-

age to the property. In contrast, stickers and posters pasting is assessed as a misdemeanour, which has led to the progress of this form of expression. For these reasons, this kind of political dialogue takes place frequently in Prague, which in times of relatively calm political development tends to be rather varied, including several topics from many hierarchical levels and plenty of perspectives (HÁNA & ŠEL 2022).

The research area in Prague (see location and symbolic objects in Fig 1) was selected on the basis of previous research, in which we found a concentration of political graffiti in Letná (HÁNA & ŠEL 2022) and in the southern part of the Bubeneč district (ŠEL & HÁNA 2021). Letná is one of the most politically important areas in Prague. Its symbolic history begins in the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) when the Letná Plain (western part of Letná) was chosen as the location of the new government district and the Parliament building. Even this plan, which was never implemented due to many reasons (BRŮHOVÁ 2017), had a symbolic aspect because it was being prepared for an area elevated above the city centre and in sight of Prague Castle, the residence of the Czechoslovak (now Czech) president.



**Fig. 1: Localization of the research area and the symbolically important objects**

Note: The territory of Letná (on the right side), which is an informalized toponym, does not have a precise delimitation. Bubeneč (on the left) is a district with a clearly defined boundary of the cadastre, which in the south-eastern part extends into Letná and is influenced by the symbolism of the neighbouring Letná Plain. Therefore, a railway line, as a natural barrier, was chosen as the border between the two units.

These roots of symbolism were then exploited by the communist regime with their May Day and military parades, which were held at Letná Plain to consolidate the totalitarian regime, and with the Stalin Memorial, which was erected in 1955 in the place where the Parliamentary building was planned. During the Velvet Revolution in 1989, parades were replaced by mass protest against the communist regime and the pedestal of the memorial (destroyed by the Communists themselves in 1962) was used for the Metronome Memorial in 1991 as a reminder of the place's history and the democratic revolution (KOBÍŽKOVÁ & HÁNA 2022). Nowadays, the plain (along with Wenceslas Square) is used for the most massive demonstrations and events, such as the support of Ukraine in 2022. At the site of the memorial, there is a popular subcultural centre and a famous DIY skatepark 'Stalin Square'. The remains of the original symbolism are now used in a different way (see KOBÍŽKOVÁ & HÁNA 2022) and cause a high concentration of graffiti as a form of symbolic and subcultural expression (HÁNA & ŠEL 2022, see IVESON 2009, TAYLOR & MARAIS 2011).

The political importance of Bubeneč lies in it being the neighbourhood of the Letná Plain, but also the home of many embassies, including the Russian and Ukrainian ones. The localisation of the Russian embassy and renaming the square of its site after Boris Nemtsov have been strongly symbolic to this area and have made it the main centre of political graffiti in the Bubeneč district (ŠEL & HÁNA 2021). If we perceive Letná as one of the centres of Prague's political symbolic space with a nationwide overlap, then we can perceive Boris Nemcov Square and its surroundings as a kind of sub-centre focused on anti-Russian political attitudes. This district also shows symbolic importance through other Russian institutions and many memorials, among which the former Konev Memorial stood out due to its strongly conflicting nature (KOBÍŽKOVÁ & HÁNA 2022). Close localisation of the Ukrainian embassy adds to its symbolic meaning.

All the graffiti found associated with the Russian invasion of Ukraine was mapped and photographed (on the methodological approach by HÁNA & ŠEL 2022) over two weeks between 16 and 29 March 2022, a month after the launch of the attacks when there was a high probability of new graffiti and no decrease in social tension against Russia, which could, in turn, cause a decline in graffiti creation. The field research reached a time when the first delegation of statesmen went to Kyiv, including the Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, which reso-

nated in Czech society as well. At this time, Russian troops had reached the borders of Kyiv's suburbs and made their first massive attacks on civilians, including the hiding children in the Mariupol theatre. On the contrary, graffiti creators did not yet know about the Russian withdrawal from northern Ukraine and the massacres of civilians in Bucha.

All forms of graffiti creation were included, such as those created by spray (incl. stencil graffiti), chalk, crayon, paint, stickers, posters, and glued or otherwise attached objects (see justification for this methodological approach in Chapter 1). On the other hand, we omitted graffiti on objects that were directly intended for movement (e.g. public transport and other vehicles, unanchored mobile fencing) and in private spaces (typically plenty of Ukrainian flags in apartment and shop windows). Their geographical research would have to be based on a completely different methodology. For example, hoisting the flags depends on the decision of the owner or tenant of a particular realty (c.f. PARRAVANO et al. 2015), as opposed to political graffiti, where we examine the factors of choosing the place where the creators leave their message.

The previous research in 2019/2020 was conducted using the same database collection methodology, which allows us to compare the development of spatial patterns and graffiti content in 2022 to 2019 in the case of Letná and 2020 in the case of Bubeneč to find out the dynamics of political symbolic space by verifying that this space is politically symbolic in the long term and will attract creators responding to current international situation. Old graffiti (proven by comparison with our photographic databases from research in 2019/2020) were removed from the database for 2022 because they did not reflect the present situation but were included in the analyses of 2019/2020. Graffiti that was overwritten or crossed out, stickers and posters that were torn down were included as well with the information in the database. The final typology of the monitored graffiti includes four categories:

- 1) Anti-Russian – the expression of a negative attitude towards the aggressor in the conflict (including specific names and historical experience with communism associated with Russia)
- 2) Pro-Ukrainian – expressing the support for the victim of the conflict (including specific names)
- 3) Pacifist – a general expression of an anti-war attitude
- 4) Others (e.g. pro-Russian, a combination of previous categories, or related, but not possible to evaluate the author's intention, like pro-communist)

Spatial analysis, which aims to present the spatial patterns and their development compared to 2019/2020, was based on the methodological approach of local scale analysis by HAWORTH et al. (2013) and HÁNA & ŠEL (2022). The grid function of ArcGIS software was used to calculate the number of graffiti cases occurring in equally large 100x100m square areas. We use the socio-semiotic analysis (e.g. HUSSEIN & ALJAMILI 2020) to analyse from the geographical perspective what modes of communication (or ways of creation) political graffiti creators use in different parts of the city with different political symbolism and how these modes communicate specific political meanings that may differ among these parts of the city. This improved spatial analysis then studies signs and their meaning in the social and spatial context (Czech-Russian relations in the first case, localisation of symbolic places in the second).

The category of anti-Russian graffiti is the broadest in its focus, which stems from the fact that these signs refer to an object that is being protested against. Thus, for socio-semiotic analysis, it was appropriate to divide it into three sub-categories according to the degree of political attitude and the ideological content of the message (according to ZAIMAKIS 2015; applied at the international level):

- 1) Protest graffiti (refers to the crisis, criticises the actions of the countries involved, encourages people from other countries to protest and express a certain attitude) – anything against Putin, the Russian government and army
- 2) Revolt graffiti (anti-system graffiti, encourages people from the countries involved to show civil disobedience and mass uprisings against the current system) – calls on Russians to change the Russian regime or to remove Putin
- 3) Conflict graffiti (deals with issues of political and ideological conflicts, dialogue of different political views) – raising questions for Russia, anti-communist attitudes of creators, critique of (mostly) former pro-Russian attitudes of Czech politicians (more general than the previous categories)

In addition to the graffiti analysis from 2022, we also focused on comparing the development of signs and their meaning to those from 2019/2020. The validity of the socio-semiotic analysis was ensured by a triangulation of data interpretation that was cross-checked by two independently working researchers. The language of political graffiti is usually chosen according to the expected target group (LEVINE 2015, VOGEL et al. 2020), so a basic knowledge of Ukrainian and Russian Cyrillic was also an important aspect of the research.

## 5 Political graffiti about the Russian invasion of Ukraine in Prague

As KANE (2009: 11) mentioned “through [graffiti] one can learn about local culture and politics [... and] the active role of place in the making of meaning”. This chapter thus presents spatial patterns and the influence of a political symbolic space on their formation, which also makes the spatial context for the subsequent socio-semiotic analysis. From the meanings of political graffiti, we can then learn more about attitudes resonating in Czech society in response to the behaviour of the Russian establishment.

### 5.1 Spatial analysis

In Figure 2, there are several areas of political graffiti concentration, mainly the area of the Russian embassy as the centre of protests and the former Stalin memorial (see Fig. 1), between which we may see a certain connecting graffiti strip. Similarly, the high amount is in a relatively large area in the streets of Letná from the Vltavská metro station (in the lower right corner) to the Russian embassy. In Bubeneč, political graffiti is generally concentrated near the main Russian institutions (Embassy, Russian Centre of Science and Culture, Russian Trade Representative Office, Russian secondary school, etc.). Only a few cases are reported elsewhere. This is an interesting contrast to Letná, where political graffiti is more spread out (see also Fig. 3).

An explanation of this difference may be within political symbolism which can be best described when compared to 2019/2020 (Fig. 3). Letná was the main centre of (all) political graffiti in these years which was spread throughout the area, in Bubeneč there were only a few instances of graffiti focusing on Czech-Russian relations (of which there were not many at the time). After the Russian invasion, we have noticed a stronger occurrence of political graffiti in the second location where there are key related institutions that play a major symbolic role. Therefore, Bubeneč has become the most important centre in terms of concentration. However, Letná retains its role as a traditional, politically symbolic site, so political graffiti is still largely represented here and is spread because of the symbolic importance of the whole area.

In more detail, we can see in Figure 3 that political graffiti from 2019/2020, on themes which are included in our research, is distributed rather



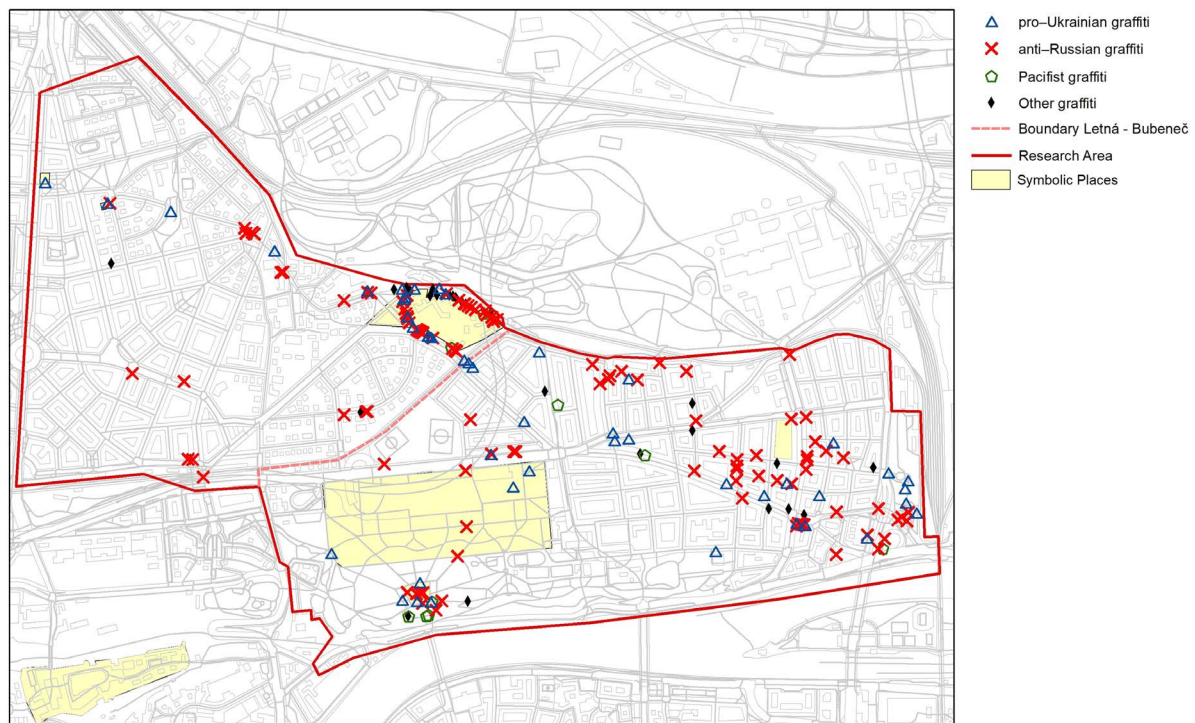


Fig. 2: The localization of political graffiti referring to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the symbolically important objects within the research area (2022)

randomly, with a slight concentration near the Russian embassy. That has changed fundamentally in 2022, when it was dominated by anti-Russian graffiti, followed by pro-Ukrainian graffiti (which is less than half the number of anti-Russian, see Fig. 4), only slightly supplemented by pacifist graffiti. The spatial pattern of anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian graffiti is quite similar, although we may see a greater concentration of anti-Russian ones

which are focused more on the places connected with the object of their protest. The outburst of resistance in 2022 was so strong that the creators, regardless of the consequences, even focus directly on the institutions they protested against, which is a difference compared to the years 2019/2020 when graffiti occurred at a respectful distance from them or on signposts to the controlled institution buildings.

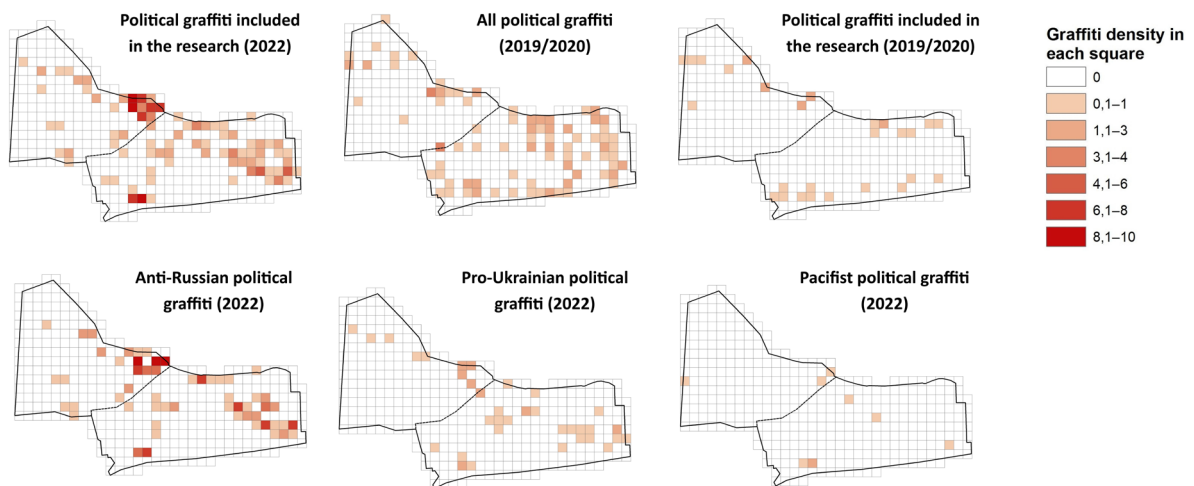


Fig. 3: Spatial density of political graffiti regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine within the research area (2019/2020, 2022).



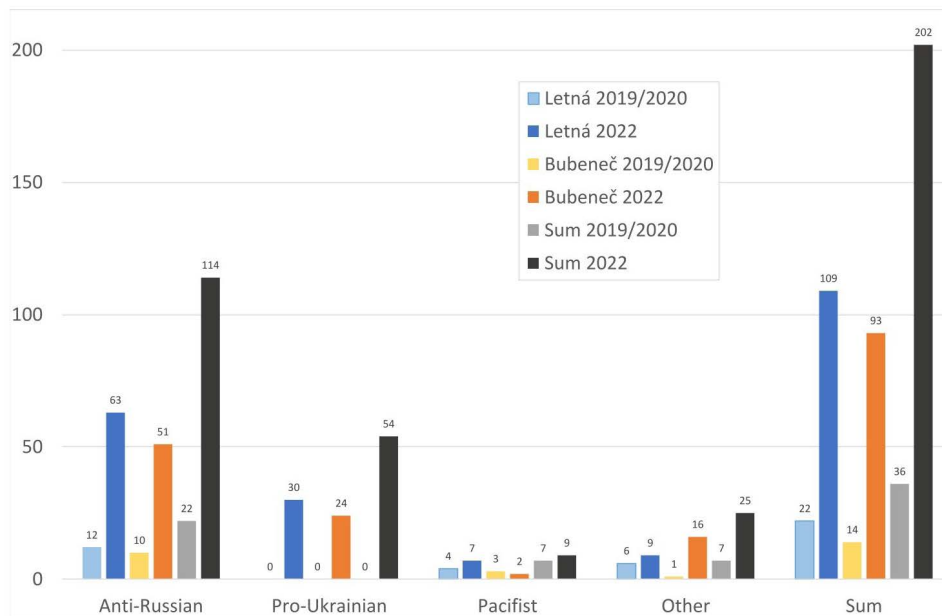


Fig. 4: Types of political graffiti referring to the Russian invasion of Ukraine within the research area (2019/2020, 2022).

In the huge increase of almost every type of political graffiti in 2022 (see Fig. 4), we can see how the crisis situation supports the creation of this kind of political expression. In the development of the anti-Russian graffiti between 2019/2020 and 2022, we can see that certain anti-Russian sentiments caused by tensions in Czech-Russian relations (see Chapter 3) were latent, sometimes slightly manifested, already before the invasion. On the contrary, until 2022, Ukraine has been considered rather neutrally as a source of cheap labour, therefore, it does not appear as a political graffiti theme in 2019/2020. In the number of current graffiti cases, it can be seen that the identification of Czechs with Ukrainians (based on their similar experience) was relatively quick and smooth. Spatially, the difference in the number of political graffiti cases between Letná and Bubeneč is, interestingly, still the same. Thus, although the main core of concentration moved to Bubeneč to the Russian embassy, Letná still dominates in the amount of political graffiti, which supports its symbolic significance.

## 5.2 Socio-semiotic analysis

At first, we will briefly comment on the modes of communication – the forms in which political graffiti are created. In 2022, spray creation (97) and stickers/

posters (72) dominate, chalk creation is significantly less represented (20); others almost do not occur. Although Letná is dominated by stickers/posters (60) compared to spray (39), in the case of Bubeneč, there is the opposite proportion (stickers/posters 12, even exceeded by 13 chalk creations, spray 58, incl. only one found stencil graffiti). The anti-Russian type of political graffiti has a slight dominance in spray (55, stickers/posters 45), while pro-Ukrainian instances are quite balanced between spray (19) and stickers/posters (20). These spatial and thematic differences may be caused by the fact that the spray can be used quickly and more flexibly to respond to actual development. In addition, the creation is more immediate, does not require long preparation and the message goes more ‘from the heart’, which could be associated with highly expressive phrases. Moreover, the use of red spray and other expressive colours is more emphatic and more likely to mobilise society. Letná is an area of some kind of long-term political dialogue, so it requires more preparation of visually interesting and original stickers/posters to attract attention and to pass in this varied environment. Bubeneč with the Russian embassy and other institutions, however, needs greater emphasis through the use of spray. Similarly, in the years 2019/2020, of all political graffiti at the time, stickers and posters dominated (82) followed by spray painting (54, incl. 10 stencil graffiti); other types were completely negligible. In the case of the political graf-

fiti included in the research, the difference was similar (stickers/posters 22, spray 13, incl. 4 stencil graffiti). Less use of spray indicates a calmer time. Increase in the use of chalk in 2022 may point to the involvement of a larger circle of people for whom the illegal use of sprays or posters/stickers may be unacceptable or less accessible.

This chapter is further structured according to the object to which the sign relates. Anti-Russian graffiti is divided (as described in Chapter 4) using the adapted typology by ZAIMAKIS (2015). The division into three categories of protest, revolt, and conflict graffiti is shown in Figure 5.

Protest graffiti clearly dominates in sum. But Letná has more revolt graffiti that calls on Russians to change their regime, while Bubeneč, contrarily, is more focused on protest graffiti expressing resistance against the Russian establishment, represented by the Russian embassy. In terms of time, revolt graffiti did not occur in 2019/2020. Criticism of Russia was not accompanied by a call for change because of a kind of restraint and respect for the democratic principle of election until the Russian authoritarian regime revealed itself and became a danger. Moreover, most anti-Russian graffiti in 2019/2020 concerned Czech politicians and their pro-Russian (or communist) attitudes, ties, or past. A certain umbrella symbol of the time were the red shorts (BBC 2015), which express, among other things, criticism of President Zeman's populist pro-Russian politics which is an accepted secondary meaning that

is not naturally related to its form but is understandable to the society. There was a decrease in conflict graffiti in 2022, compared to 2019/2020, indicating a lower tendency towards dialogue of different political perspectives during the crisis.

We also noticed a few cases of pro-Russian graffiti in Bubeneč (category other in Fig. 4). They are very inconspicuous, in design and colour as well. The inscription 'Russia Welcome' on the police tape around the Russian embassy is one of the smallest and most easily overlooked graffiti from the entire sample. But this is the only example where we can be sure of supporting Russia. Another hard-to-see sign on a billboard swearing at NATO and adding a swastika following Russian narratives was later rewritten by 'Free Ukraine'.

### 5.2.1 'Embassy of Hell' – Anti-Russian protest graffiti

This category largely represents Russian President Putin. We may identify various messages to him (10 in total, 3 in Letná, 7 in Bubeneč) and graffiti disgracing him (33 in total, 15 in Letná, 18 in Bubeneč). There is a bit more of this graffiti in Bubeneč which houses Russian institutions than in Letná. The structure is similar between the two areas, and in both cases, denigration dominates. However, there is a difference between Letná and Bubeneč in diversity. Firstly, there is only graffiti say-

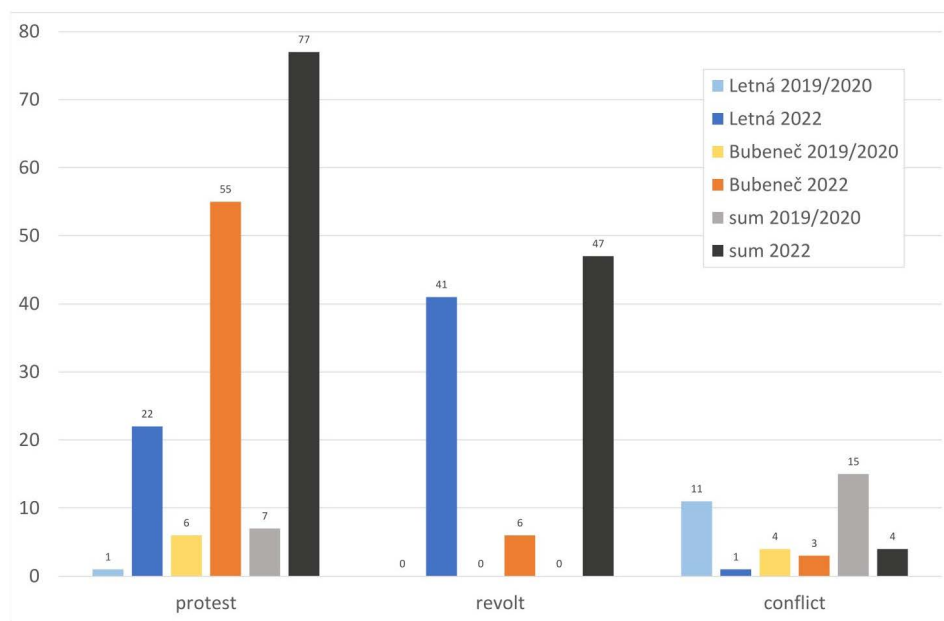


Fig. 5: Types of anti-Russian political graffiti meaning in the research area (2019/2020, 2022)

ing something to Putin as a person in Letná (with one exception on a former branch of the Russian bank near the Vltavská metro station), in Bubeneč we also encounter graffiti that relates more generally to the Russian establishment. Secondly, a simple ‘Fuck Putin’ (including variations in English) clearly dominates in Letná, in contrast with a wider range in Bubeneč. In addition, the closer to the embassy, the rougher and more expressive the meaning of protest graffiti. This shows the importance of the Russian embassy as a symbolic place where the strongest statements are concentrated.

The frequent comparisons of Putin to the negative persons of Voldemort (from Harry Potter, Fig. 6-A) or, in a stronger version, to Hitler corresponds to other inscriptions comparing Russia to hell, the Nazi state, swine, or murders (all in Fig. 6-A, B, C). The motif of Nazi comparison shows a perception of similarity in practices and rhetoric between Nazis and contemporary Russia (which is in direct opposition to Russian narrative which on the contrary presents itself as a fighter against ‘Ukrainian neo-Nazism’) and appears in several variations. An example is an instance of graffiti at an



Fig. 6: Examples of anti-Russian protest graffiti in the research area (2022). Photos: David Hána & Alexandra Dresler.



unused Russian secondary school (Fig. 6-C), which Prague officials were trying to take over to use for educating the children of Ukrainian refugees. It is the symbolism of such a proposal we can see behind the inscription 'Denazified March 24', which refers to the mentioned rhetoric of Russia against Ukraine and the date when the council decided on the proposal, which has not been accepted by the national government. This inscription is supplemented by the text 'Enrolment 1.4.', referring to the date when enrolment in schools begins in Czechia, which comes with an emphatic statement that it is a done deal. It is the most distinctive inscription, probably due to less control compared to the embassy and other institutions (although a security camera is directly above the graffiti, see Fig. 6-C). Nevertheless, it seems as if the expression is aimed at this sensitive place of school with the symbolic connection to children, rather than formal institutions (we can also discuss the connection with the Russian attack on children in Mariupol). Moreover, there is one of the most expressive inscriptions, which compares Russia to the USSR and the Nazis by their symbols and announces that their fate in hell is obvious ('Hell awaits').

Red colour is often used for protest purposes, either in the form of a spray or paint splashing the place (like the Russian embassy in Fig. 6-D). It is a common symbol of blood, and therefore a protest against Russian criminal behaviour towards innocent Ukrainians (or directly their murders). This colour is therefore used on institutions that are somehow connected with the Russian regime, which are most common in Bubeneč. In Letná, it is only a former branch of the Russian bank, which has become a small centre for expressing those anti-Russian attitudes criticising the possible financing of the war from the profits of this bank.

An interesting inscription 'Putin should go to the therapy instead of Ukraine' in Letná (Fig. 6-E) is a complex message pointing out several meanings: it is a call to Putin (a more complex and expressive version of the frequent 'Putin go home'), an insult (Putin is a lunatic), expression of opinion (Russians must leave Ukraine and Putin does mad things) and a call on the Russians to get rid of the mad head of their state (thus going beyond the next category of revolt graffiti). There is also the well-known phrase 'Russian warship go fuck yourself' in Bubeneč on the wall of the Russian embassy (Fig. 6-F), which becomes a sign of determination, heroism and at the same time a symbol of contempt for Russian politics and their actions thanks to the narrative of

the unrelenting Snake Island under attack. There is no need for further explanation as everyone understands the meaning.

Some inscriptions found are written in Cyrillic. They are concentrated at the Russian embassy and their other institutions and, therefore, are clearly aimed at the Russian establishment. Some of them were probably not written by either a Russian or Ukrainian, because it includes characters that are not in either alphabet. So, the non-native speaker tried to say something directly to the offenders.

Protest graffiti in 2019/2020 was rather undressed or milder in nature. The main form of protest against Putin was the sticker 'Putin – the slave of lies', which was very impersonal; Putin was not portrayed as an actor, but as someone who was himself tormented by lies. Other anti-Russian inscriptions were emphatic, but quite unaddressed, which deprives them of strength: 'Freedom for political prisoners' and 'They have the largest country in the world, so why are they stuffing themselves here?'. The inscription 'Shame' near the Konev Memorial was specific; unaddressed, but in connection with the statue of this Soviet Marshal it was gaining in importance and strength referring to the existence of this controversial statue. In fact, these were the first manifestations of what erupted in full force after the invasion. Interestingly, they were concentrated on the statue, which at the time was a target of an international political disputes between Czechia and Russia, and after the invasion, on the contrary, there is practically nothing at its former site compared to the embassy (where there was not as much earlier).

### 5.2.2 'Hey Russians, wake up!' – Anti-Russian revolt graffiti

The category of anti-Russian revolt graffiti is the second most represented, mainly due to the occurrence in Letná. However, it is not very diverse. The main symbol of this type in Letná is a poster (Fig. 7-A) with the inscription 'Hey Russians wake up!' in English and Russian accompanied by images of police dispersing a demonstration (points to the suppression of Russian protests against the invasion) and a person standing in front of a tank (points to protests by Ukrainians, often ethnic Russians, against the troops in their towns being invaded). It addresses mainly the Russian audience, presents facts about the behaviour of their state (known in Czechia, probably not in Russia) and calls for a change of regime. The posters are most often made in blue and yel-



**Fig. 7:** Examples of anti-Russian revolt, conflict, and pacifist graffiti in the research area (2022). Photos: David Hána & Alexandra Dresler.

low referring to the Ukrainian bicolour visible from afar. The reason may be that it is often in the busiest places (where the colours draw attention), compared to other graffiti that are more often hidden on side streets. The posters are sometimes torn off (Fig. 7-B, on the right side of the building), which may indicate a disagreement with the content or with the form of illegal posting itself.

Only one other inscription 'No Putin No War' was found in Letná (Fig. 7-C), on the former branch of the Russian bank, which is similar to the revolt

graffiti in Bubeneč. This is a call for regime change and perhaps a message to the bank why it has become a centre of further graffiti protests. In Bubeneč, on the most common inscriptions, Putin is placed in direct connection with the war, and Russians are called upon to overthrow him ('Depose Putin!', 'Russia, Wake up!', see Fig. 7-D, behind a tree). Revolt graffiti, compared to protest graffiti, is characterised by a more conciliatory tone, without threats or swearing, even if they are against Putin. It sounds like a rational request and a call for action, or a cessation of

Russian actions. The audience is obviously not the Russian regime itself, because, in contrast to other categories, revolt graffiti appears in Bubeneč mostly elsewhere than near Russian institutions.

### 5.2.3 ‘Why?’ – Anti-Russian conflict graffiti

In 2022, this type is only represented by stickers with the Ukrainian and Czech flags, the years 2022 and 1968 (occupation of Czechoslovakia) and the question ‘Why?’ in Russian and Czech (Fig. 7-E). We can understand it on two levels. First, as an effort to start a dialogue with Russia, where the author asks what leads them to such acts. The second aspect points to the shared experience, which may be the basis of such strong Czech support for Ukraine. It can be a comparison for the domestic audience, assurance for Ukrainians that they are not alone, or an expression for the Russian regime stating that Czechs still remember what they did to them (it is near the Russian embassy).

In 2019/2020, this type of political graffiti was more frequent, but not more diverse. It was mostly represented by the stickers of red shorts, supplemented by stickers near the former Konev Memorial ‘Mašín brothers – better dead than red’ which referred to controversial fighters against communism from the 1950s. The creator thus expressively opposed the regime that has still strongly been associated with Russia.

### 5.2.4 ‘Slava Ukrajini!’ – Pro-Ukrainian graffiti

Political graffiti has a completely different nature when expressing support for the victim of a conflict. Ukrainian flags, or the blue/yellow bicolour, are clear, simple, and strong, and, thus, the most frequently used symbol of support. There are many variations throughout Letná: a glued flag (sometimes made up of just two adhesive tapes in Ukrainian colours), a bicolour heart, or simply painted concrete.

However, a few exceptionally different examples have been found. The first one, a huge flag mounted under the former Stalin memorial (Fig. 8-A), is eminent due to its size. There is excellent visibility from the city centre, and its connection to a strongly symbolic place strengthens its emphasis and points to a shared experience. According to a nearby residing tenant (cultural centre where we attempted to obtain only this significant information), the flag

was hung by the maintenance company hired by the municipality. Similarly, there is the railing on the Skakun Bridge near the Russian embassy, which was painted in Ukrainian colours by the municipality (Fig. 8-B, information from the municipal press), and the panels around the former Konev Memorial in Ukrainian colours and with information in Czech and English by the governmental Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (Fig. 8-C). It could be called a sort of ‘official street art’, which has a similar character as street art and is not only ordered, but also realised by official institutions. In terms of graffiti studies, there is another interesting example of a piece in Ukrainian colours (Fig. 8-D) through which the creator expresses political support emphasised by a vulgar message to Putin. It is the incorporation of political information into a type of graffiti that usually does not contain it. In Bubeneč, we encounter this combination of types of graffiti when political support is expressed by the blue colour of a tag to which the Ukrainian flag is attached.

We also documented the slogan ‘Stand with Ukraine’ in several variations (in Czech and English), which is some kind of international sign expressing support, and ‘Slava Ukrajini!’ means ‘Glory to Ukraine!’ (in variations of Czech and Ukrainian language, among which even the Italian version of ‘Forza Ukraine’ appeared), which has become a sign expressing heroism and resistance of the Ukrainian army and citizens. A more complex pro-Ukrainian inscription (in a less frequented unmaintained park above the Vltavská metro station) is ‘Unlimited freedom for Ukraine!’, which supports a Ukraine free from Russia’s crimes which are expressed by red ‘bloody’ hands (Fig. 8-E).

Also, in Bubeneč, the dominant element of graffiti that expresses support for Ukraine is the bicolour motif in classic flags, the heart symbol, or paint thrown on the wall of the Russian embassy. The motto ‘Glory to Ukraine’ also often appears. The chalk creations in front of the Ukrainian embassy (see Fig. 8-F) can be understood as peaceful, washable graffiti or maybe as ‘children’s street art’ as it is made in a children’s style but still contains a distinct, political aspect (e.g. flags, hearts, stars, hands, slogans in Ukrainian colours and language). Based on form, language, and site, it is very likely that these inscriptions have been created by the children of Ukrainian refugees in support of their parents fighting in Ukraine. This type is the only one located near the Ukrainian embassy. Generally, pro-Ukrainian graffiti in Bubeneč is more concentrated than in Letná.





Fig. 8: Examples of pro-Ukrainian graffiti in the research area (2022). Photos: David Hána & Alexandra Dresler.

### 5.2.5 'Stop the war right now!' – Pacifist graffiti

The creators of pacifist graffiti often use older slogans associated with protests against the Vietnam War ('Drop acid not bombs', 'Make love not war'), a classic hippie peace symbol, but also unencumbered ones, which either openly call for an end to the war ('Stop the War Right Now', see Fig. 7-F) or to 'Peace'. So, they are both negative and positive messages, while the negative ones are more expressive. These inscriptions occur frequently near the skateparks on the former Stalin memorial and close to the Vltavská

metro station. Therefore, the question is whether it has anything to do with the skateboard subculture. To some extent, this contrasts with the pacifist graffiti of 2019/2020, where hippie symbols appeared most often, sometimes supplemented by a general text such as 'Love each other!'. None responded to any wars, which were probably more anonymous for the creators (due to the historical experience and their localisation outside Europe).

We also witness an interesting example of pacifist graffiti at the Russian embassy (see Fig. 7-D). It is a heart with flowers and the flags of Russia, Ukraine,

and the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The author expresses the hope for friendly coexistence of the opposing sides but, at the same time, mentions both separatist territories on the same level as the states despite their status was the trigger of the current conflict. It is the only example of political graffiti that directly mentions these regions; other creators respect the territory of Ukraine in its entire sovereignty verbally, visually, symbolically, and ideologically.

## 6 Summary and discussion

First, it is worth pointing out that, there has been a massive increase in political graffiti in the researched area of Prague referring to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This confirms that times of great social and political crisis cause a rise in political graffiti (ALONSO 1998, CAMPOS 2016) which has already been described in many other cases (KANE 2009, HANAUER 2011, BUSH 2013, GOALWIN 2013, LEVINE 2015, ZAIMAKIS 2015, ALEXANDRAKIS 2016). Prague is full of various forms of graffiti, although state and municipal institutions are trying to fight against illegal graffiti creation continuously like in other European cities. Nevertheless, the number of political graffiti that appeared after the invasion shows the impossibility of preventing such a rise in the need for political expression or tendency to be more tolerant of this creation (many political graffiti appeared even in places usually controlled by the police or places in the frame of security cameras, e.g. in front of the Russian embassy or on the Russian school).

The assumption that this increase is concentrated in the same symbolic localities as before the crisis has been verified. It is due to long-term spatial relations between inhabitants and specific places (HANAUER 2011, PARKINSON 2012, HÁNA & ŠEL 2022) which affect political graffiti placement (FERRELL & WEIDE 2010, GOALWIN 2013, LEVINE 2015, VOGEL et al. 2020, HÁNA & ŠEL 2022). Due to the change in concentration and stability in the amount of political graffiti between the two districts, we can label Letná as a major, politically symbolic site which attracts political graffiti creators for any expression and Bubeneč as a symbolic sub-centre focused on one specific issue of Czech-Russian relations because of the presence of key related institutions (MEGLER et al. 2014). Thus, we proved the importance of a political symbolic space for graffiti creators in the selection of sites (HÁNA & ŠEL 2022) and we may assume that any future appearance of political graffiti in Prague will be based on similar spatial principles.

A change in content and presentation of anti-Russian, pro-Ukrainian, and pacifist graffiti was noticed as well. The content of political graffiti from 2019/2020 focused on Czech politicians and their pro-Russian (or communist) attitudes, ties, and/or past has changed by 2022, when political graffiti concentrated mainly on Russian politicians. In this graffiti, we may see a resistance coming from a society's 'fear of becoming' (ALEXANDRAKIS 2016: 276) and underlying long-term frustration from Russia's behaviour (which is common to many Central European countries, not only those with a communist past; EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022, FAGAN et al. 2023). It is manifested by a change in the tone of statements against Putin. Explicit messages to him strongly dominated in 2022, so graffiti has become an anonymous platform for expressing something too controversial to introduce publicly (HANAUER 2011, ZAIMAKIS 2015). Nevertheless, graffiti creators expressed what was generally accepted and resonated in society (KALANTZIS 2015) and what came from its identity (GOALWIN 2013, Vogel et al. 2020) that can be supported by public opinion research (MEDIAN 2022). This is an exceptional phenomenon, when political expressions in graffiti coincide with the opinions of the majority of society (not only those excluded from traditional political dialogues), which are probably present only in times of crises. However, we documented a strict effort to separate the architects of the current crisis and ordinary Russians (which is also evident in the Flash Eurobarometer 506 survey in question Q3\_10; EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022). The latter were called upon as potential drivers of regime change whose practices and rhetoric were compared to Nazism which primarily tries to shock and attract attention but can also be based on certain similarities (see the discussion about indications of Nazism and Fascism in the Russian state in SNYDER (2022) and about academic foundation of contemporary Russian neo-Fascist system in INGRAM 2001), subversion of Russian narratives (which are also directed against Czechia and other Central European countries), and Czech experience with the Nazi occupation in 1938-1945 (and contradicts the Soviet participation in the defeat of Nazism emphasized by the current Russian regime).

The crisis has led Czechs strongly relating to Ukrainians. The Ukrainian minority has long been the largest in Czechia, therefore, Czechs may not have felt a need to align themselves positively or negatively with Ukraine through political graffiti before the invasion. However, we may see strong support for



Ukraine in this situation which is sometimes likened to Czech historical experience of 1968 and 1938. It is this experience and recent events in Czech-Russian relations that may have caused such a positive reaction towards Ukraine. In other words, Czechs may see the war as a bit of their own struggle. As a result, it came to a positive attitude towards Ukrainian refugees. We have not noticed any anti-refugee graffiti in 2022 compared to 2019/2020 (in which different historical and cultural ties to the regions and countries of origin very probably also play an important role).

We found as well that political symbolic space affects the modes and meaning of political graffiti. Less unified and more expressive messages to Russian establishment dominated the proximity of Russian embassy in Bubeneč, while Letná was shaped by not very diverse but as numerous milder calls on the Russians to change the regime. Elsewhere in Prague, there were ones focused very similarly, but not as many as in researched districts (according to the authors' observations), so creators may use political symbolic space to attract attention (ALONSO 1998) and give their expressions greater weight (LEE et al. 2010). We can also see an effort to mobilise national or international viewers to action in political graffiti (HANAUER 2011, LEVINE 2015, ALEXANDRAKIS 2016). Thus, the use of Czech, English, Russian, or Ukrainian languages points to a mix of the intended (often international) targeted groups (LEVINE 2015, VOGEL et al. 2020). For example, one of the most common posters said 'Hey Russians Wake up!' in English and Russian, accompanied by images which can be understood as a visual narrative legitimising the anti-Russian ideology of graffiti creators (GOALWIN 2013).

On the contrary, we have not encountered direct opposition to the contemporary Czech political system. Whereas revolt graffiti is often associated with anti-systemic political discourses heading to a direct opposition with capitalist-state institutions (ZAIMAKIS 2015), in Czechia, they had different (only international) direction when call on Russian citizens to revolt against their authoritarian establishment. The reason may be that this is not a domestic crisis, but an international one that affects a sensitive part of Czech identity. The democratic political system is in opposition to the past communist regime based on Soviet/Russian imperialism (although contemporary political system of Russia is rather built on authoritarianism anchored in oligarchic capitalism), so the government and society mostly hold the same views. The original consequence of such a consensus may also be a specific kind of 'official street art' made by municipal institutions.

Nevertheless, it is worth considering the meaning of pacifist graffiti. Given the time of their creation, we can say that these graffiti also follow the social discourse of anti-Russian sentiment and support for Ukraine in terms of emphasising Russia to stop their war. However, this attitude would seem much more general against wars and against support for either side. Moreover, by using anti-war American slogans, it can also point to a certain leftist view that perceives the USA as an initiator of world crises of this nature which is, however, not so common in Czechia as in Western Europe and in the USA. These inscriptions may be roots of later calls to Western politicians to stop provision of arms to defending Ukraine and do everything possible to stop the war (regardless of the consequences towards Ukraine, the rest of Europe and the world). In this minor but not inconsiderable view, support of Ukraine army is perceived as an effort to prolong and deepen the war (regardless of Russia's presented war aims) not only in Czechia, but in other Central European countries as well, mostly in Slovak or Hungarian politics which are consistent with their social attitudes (in Flash Eurobarometer 506; EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022). We must also point out a few instances of direct pro-Russian graffiti that were very inconspicuous and may be an attempt to present a different view of the matter that is marginalised in a political dialogue (IVESON 2009, HANAUER 2011, BUSH 2013, ZAIMAKIS 2015, CAMPOS 2016, VOGEL et al. 2020). Therefore, we can say that such a major crisis probably may not be in favour of a dialogue between political views and leads to a rather temporary uniform political graffiti scene (with the difficult-to-interpret exception of pacifist graffiti). Beyond the scope of this study, however, we should mention that a few months later, political graffiti fights through overwriting oppositional messages even about this theme began to reappear.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented how Czech society had responded to the crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This event was significant for Czechia in terms of its historical experience, if not its identity. Therefore, it was strongly reflected in the rise of political graffiti and its target which followed the moods and concerns of Czech society. From an empirical point of view, the example of Czechia is prominent due to its role as an important actor in this crisis and its specif-



ic historical and present experience with Russia. However, it would be beneficial to compare this example to other countries from Central Europe or European regions that are not so exposed to this crisis or have a different view of Russia.

The placement and content of political graffiti are based on the relationships that inhabitants have with urban objects. This comes from shared ideas about the meaning and symbolism of certain places, called political symbolic space. The theoretical-methodological contribution of this article is that we have proven importance of its inclusion in interpretation for both graffiti studies and research of the political dimension of urban space in general. Socio-semiotic analysis applied to a database of political graffiti obtained by mapping a politically significant or symbolic part of the city can contribute to the study of its various aspects. In general, this method has some advantages and disadvantages in its application in studying graffiti. Considering positives, it gives us a clear and comprehensive picture of the graffiti scene of a particular city and the political views of a certain part of the country's society. The disadvantage is some difficulty in applying it to a city that the researcher is unfamiliar with. In terms of mapping data collection, it is impossible to map the entire city, so if the researcher does not have clear arguments for a research area selection, they must substitute this method with a procedure focused on collecting rather a representative sample of graffiti throughout the city (e.g. by place-based elicitation/observation method, see BLOCH 2018). Socio-semiotic analysis then assumes knowledge of the local context when interpreting graffiti meaning, which is necessary to avoid misinterpretations. At a minimum, therefore, collaboration with local experts and discussion of results with them is necessary.

In our research, we have found that political graffiti understood as modes of signs with a meaning corresponding to the spatial and social context is very different in all typological categories of the referred object, in spatial, and temporal view. Therefore, we have shown that political graffiti has wider connotations as well and its study can be very beneficial for understanding more general moods and trends in a society or in a particular segment of society.

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