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Dedicated to all young and promising researchers.

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Editor-in-Chief's Foreword

Dear Readers,

We present the second issue of GIRN with joy and gratitude. Although our journal was founded primarily as a forum for doctoral students, we are delighted that established professors, associate professors and independent researchers have also found their way to it – as authors, faithful readers, conscientious reviewers and supporters. We thank them all. It is precisely this intergenerational encounter that gives the journal its meaning.

The five studies in this issue reflect the breadth of our scope.

Robin Dub (Miami), in How Negative Is Too Negative? Modeling the Trust Dynamics of Deinfluencing, *develops a sociological and formal account of influencer credibility. He shows that negative recommendations can signal independence, but only up to a point: the resulting credibility function is single-peaked – an independence benefit with diminishing returns offset by the accelerating cost of habitual negativity. A three-type Bayesian model – promotional, independent, contrarian – provides a probabilistic foundation.*

Muhammad Usman of Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, in Spatial Structure of Commerce in Pakistan*, maps trading premises across 135 districts on the basis of the 2023/24 Economic Census. He sets this stock beside the SECP company register as a measure of formal entry and satellite night-time lights as a measure of activity growth. The result is a four-type typology – commercial cores, mixed industrial-commercial districts, populous but shop-thin districts, and a sparse periphery – and a reading of formalisation as a thin overlay on a vast micro-enterprise base.*

My study, Totalitarianism in the Long Time. Literature as a Seismograph*, proposes a dynamic model of totalitarianism as a life-cycle – incubation, seizure of power, terror, normalization, erosion and memory – and a method for reading literature as a seismograph, including nine principles for its blind spots. The model is tested on the Czech sequence Kafka – Čapek – Petiška, with Hungarian and Polish points of triangulation.*

The study on comparative statistics of Czech and Polish legal acts of Ewa Michalska (Bielsko-Biała) offers a valuable methodological contribution to the comparative measurement of legislative production in two Central European legal cultures.

And Štěpán Turčín (Prague), in The Course of the Šik Reform and Its Possible Final Form*, Part II, continues the discussion opened in the first volume on the reform endeavour of the 1960s in Czechoslovakia. Focusing on Ota Šik, he examines the intended institutional shape of the reform after January 1968, enterprise autonomy, and the gradual rollback after the invasion.*

We wish you a stimulating read.

On behalf of the editors

Robin Dub

How Negative Is Too Negative? Modeling the Trust Dynamics of Deinfluencing

Abstract: Negative recommendations can increase perceived influencer credibility by signaling independence from promotional incentives, yet that benefit need not increase indefinitely with the frequency of criticism. This article develops a sociological and formal account of deinfluencing in which audiences infer latent communicator types—promotional, independently evaluative, or contrarian—from the observed rate of negative judgments. The resulting credibility function is single-peaked: an independence benefit with diminishing returns is offset by an accelerating reputational cost of habitual or strategic negativity.

Keywords: deinfluencing; influencer marketing; credibility; trust; signaling; Bayesian inference; confirmation bias; strategic contrarianism

1. Introduction

Influencer credibility has traditionally been treated as a function of perceived expertise, authenticity, relatability, and trustworthiness, yet the conditions under which these perceptions are formed are considered through relatively static comparisons rather than as the outcome of repeated evaluative behaviour over time. Deinfluencing has emerged as a useful problem for understanding how credibility is produced in influencer marketing. Recent research suggests that negative recommendations can increase perceived trustworthiness by reducing skepticism about an influencer's motives. An influencer who discourages consumption demonstrates a willingness to withhold endorsement, which gives audiences evidence that commercial incentives do not fully determine their judgments. In this application, the informative value of negativity becomes the conveyed signal of independence or willingness to go against the expected action.

This article approaches that problem through two related questions. The first concerns the direction and social meaning of the effect itself: under what conditions does negative evaluation increase perceived independence, honesty, or credibility, and through what sociological processes does this occur? The second concerns the graphable form of that effect: if the frequency of negative judgments is treated as a continuous variable (as opposed to a simple contrast), what functional relationship should we expect between negativity and credibility, and why should that relationship be nonlinear rather than monotonic? These questions are necessarily connected, because the relationship cannot be justified independently of the social interpretations that generate it, while the sociological account remains incomplete unless it specifies how those interpretations are likely to change as the frequency of negative behaviour changes.

The starting assumption is that negative evaluation can function as a signal of independence because it is, under ordinary circumstances, less compatible with the image of an indiscriminately promotional communicator. An influencer who recommends every product encountered offers the audience limited grounds on which to distinguish genuine enthusiasm from commercial

convenience, whereas an influencer who occasionally rejects products, discourages purchases, or challenges prevailing preferences demonstrates at least some willingness to incur the social or commercial costs associated with disagreement. The first instances of such disagreement may therefore possess considerable diagnostic value, since they provide evidence against the hypothesis that positive judgments are produced primarily by promotional incentives. However, this same logic does not imply that increasing negativity should produce indefinitely increasing credibility. Once negative judgment becomes sufficiently frequent, it may cease to signify selectivity and instead support alternative interpretations, including chronic dissatisfaction, cynicism, strategic differentiation, performative skepticism, or contrarianism, each of which alters the meaning of negativity from evidence of independent judgment into evidence of a stable disposition or calculated public persona.

The central hypothesis developed here is therefore that the relationship between the frequency of deinfluencing and perceived credibility is likely to be nonlinear, and more specifically that it should, under plausible social assumptions, approximate an inverted-U or otherwise single-peaked function. At low levels of negativity, the marginal credibility benefit of additional negative judgments is expected to be positive because these judgments increase the perceived probability that the influencer exercises independent evaluation rather than simply reproducing promotional incentives. As negativity becomes more common, however, the informational value of each additional negative judgment should diminish, because the audience has already received sufficient evidence that the influencer is willing to disagree, while the reputational costs associated with frequent negativity may begin to increase as the behaviour becomes more compatible with contrarian or strategically differentiated identities.

This formulation also requires a distinction between different forms of trust; an influencer may be regarded as honest while simultaneously being regarded as mistaken, poorly informed, aesthetically incompatible, or socially distant from the observer, and this becomes particularly important when negative evaluations concern products, brands, or practices with which the audience is already positively aligned. Specifically, confirmation bias, prior preference, and identity attachment can alter the interpretation (or functional impact)

of deinfluencing without necessarily eliminating its credibility effect. A negative judgment directed toward a product for which the observer has little prior commitment may be processed primarily as useful information, whereas a negative judgment directed toward an object that is strongly associated with taste, status, community, or self-conception may be experienced not simply as a criticism of the product but as an implicit criticism of the observer's own judgment. Under such conditions, the same act of deinfluencing may increase perceived honesty while reducing perceived expertise, affinity, or benevolence, suggesting that the social consequences of negativity operate in more than one direction and cannot be represented adequately by a single undifferentiated measure of trust.

A universal optimal percentage of negative content is likely to be difficult to predict, as such a value would depend on empirical parameters that are likely to vary across audiences, categories, and influencer roles. The article proposes a formal structure for understanding why an interior optimum should exist at all, why its location should shift across social contexts, and why the point at which negativity maximizes perceived honesty may differ from the point at which it maximizes overall persuasive influence.

2. Inference and Interpretation Mechanisms

The effect of deinfluencing on credibility depends on an interpretive process in which audiences infer latent motives, dispositions, and evaluative standards from observable communication. Influencer communication is useful to consider as a problem of imperfect inference: the audience observes a sequence of recommendations, rejections, qualifications, and endorsements, while the underlying causes of those judgments remain unavailable for direct inspection. A positive recommendation may reflect genuine enthusiasm, commercial incentive, social affiliation, habitual positivity, or some combination of these, and a negative recommendation may similarly arise from independent evaluation, disappointment, status competition, strategic differentiation, or a cultivated contrarian identity. The audience must consequently estimate which explanation is most plausible from the pattern of judgments that it encounters over time.

This process gives individual evaluations meaning beyond their immediate informational content. A recommendation does communicate that a product is desirable, but at the same time it also provides evidence about the type of communicator producing the recommendation. Repeated positivity can gradually alter the interpretation of subsequent positive evaluations because the audience may become less certain that endorsement reflects selectivity. If nearly every product receives approval, the informational distinction between a product that genuinely exceeds the influencer's standards and one that merely appears within a promotional context becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. A negative judgment has greater inferential significance under these circumstances because it demonstrates that endorsement is not automatic, thereby supplying information about the existence of an evaluative threshold.

This argument can initially be expressed using a simple model of latent types. Suppose that an observer considers two broad explanations for an influencer's behaviour. Let I represent an independent evaluator whose recommendations arise primarily from product judgment, and let P represent a promoter whose evaluations are strongly affected by commercial incentives. Before observing any particular review, the audience holds prior beliefs $\Pr(I)$ and $\Pr(P)$. After observing a negative evaluation N, the probability that the influencer is an independent evaluator becomes

$$\Pr(I \mid N) = \frac{\Pr(N \mid I)\Pr(I)}{\Pr(N \mid I)\Pr(I) + \Pr(N \mid P)\Pr(P)}. \tag{1}$$

Whenever

$$\Pr(N \mid I) > \Pr(N \mid P), \tag{2}$$

a negative evaluation increases the posterior probability assigned to independence. The magnitude of that update depends on the relative likelihood of negativity under the competing explanations. If commercially motivated promoters are believed to issue negative recommendations only rarely, then even a small amount of observed negativity can produce a substantial revision of the audience's interpretation of the influencer.

The importance of this formulation lies less in the assumption that consumers literally perform Bayesian calculations than in the structure of the inference itself. Social judgment frequently operates through approximate

probabilistic reasoning in which observed behaviour is assessed according to how compatible it appears with alternative explanations. Audiences may therefore react to negativity by reducing the plausibility of one attribution and increasing the plausibility of another, even when this process is intuitive, affective, or only partially conscious. The relevant question concerns the relative explanatory fit of different social types, since the same observed behaviour can acquire different meanings depending on which latent type it most strongly implies.

A two-type model is useful for explaining why initial negativity can increase credibility, although it becomes insufficient once negativity itself becomes frequent. The interpretation problem then expands to include at least a third type, which can be described as the strategic or dispositional contrarian. Let C denote an influencer whose public identity, engagement strategy, or habitual disposition creates an unusually high probability of negative evaluation. The audience now distributes belief across three explanations,

$$\Pr(I \mid n), \qquad \Pr(P \mid n), \qquad \Pr(C \mid n), \tag{3}$$

where n represents the observed frequency of negative judgments across some relevant period or sequence of content. The critical implication is that increasing n need not continuously increase $\Pr(I \mid n)$. Low values of n may be most compatible with the promotional type, moderate values may be most compatible with the independent type, and very high values may become increasingly compatible with the contrarian type.

The interpretation of negativity can therefore be understood as a movement across attributional regions. When negative judgments are rare, their appearance may provide strong evidence that the influencer is capable of resisting promotional pressure and applying a genuine evaluative standard. When they become more common, their additional informational value declines because the audience has already established that the influencer is willing to reject products. At still higher frequencies, the same behaviour begins to support a different explanation in which negativity reflects a stable communicative style, an audience-positioning strategy, a source of engagement, or a broader disposition toward skepticism. The meaning of negativity changes as its frequency changes, since the observer is continually evaluating which latent

motive offers the most coherent explanation of the behavioural pattern as a whole.

This mechanism also introduces an important distinction between independence and unpredictability. A communicator does not necessarily appear independent merely because their evaluations are difficult to anticipate, since randomness itself provides little evidence of coherent judgment. What matters is the perception that evaluations vary in accordance with a stable standard that is not reducible to external promotional incentives. Occasional negativity can strengthen this perception because it implies that the influencer possesses criteria capable of generating both acceptance and rejection. Excessive negativity may weaken the same perception if the audience comes to believe that rejection has become the default outcome regardless of product quality. In this sense, credibility depends partly on whether positive and negative judgments appear to arise from discriminating evaluation rather than from a fixed directional tendency.

The audience's prior beliefs also have an effect on these inferences. An influencer operating in a highly commercialized category may require more negative evidence before audiences revise an initial expectation of promotional motivation, whereas an influencer with an established reputation for critical independence may require comparatively little. Similarly, the expected base rate of negativity differs across social roles. A professional critic, investigative journalist, luxury reviewer, lifestyle creator, technology commentator, or entertainment influencer enters the interaction with different normative expectations concerning how frequently criticism should occur—one negative-review rate may therefore imply independence in one role and habitual antagonism in another.

The mechanism is consequently sociological as well as cognitive, because the audience is interpreting behaviour through culturally available categories of motive and role. Deinfluencing produces an effect when it shifts the influencer from one of these categories toward another, and the direction of that shift depends on the existing social position of the influencer, the norms attached to the relevant category, and the audience's prior expectations concerning how a credible person in that role ought to behave.

This also explains why the effect cannot be represented adequately by treating each negative review as an independent and equally valuable contribution to trust. The informational value of a judgment depends on the sequence that precedes it. The first negative evaluation observed after a long series of positive endorsements may substantially revise beliefs about the influencer's independence, while another negative evaluation within an already highly critical pattern may add very little evidence of independence and may instead strengthen the alternative interpretation of habitual negativity. The credibility consequence of a negative judgment is conditional on the accumulated history of prior judgments, i.e., the relevant explanatory variable is the position of negativity within a broader distribution of evaluative behaviour.

3. Competing Interpretations and the Nonlinear Credibility Effect

The inferential mechanism described above implies that negativity should have two opposing effects on credibility, both of which arise from the audience's attempt to determine what repeated negative evaluation reveals about the influencer. At relatively low levels, negative judgments can strengthen the perception of independence because they demonstrate that endorsement is not automatic and that some evaluative threshold appears to govern the influencer's recommendations. As negativity becomes increasingly frequent, however, the same behavior can support a different interpretation in which criticism reflects a stable tendency toward rejection, strategic differentiation, or a cultivated contrarian identity. The expected relationship between negativity and credibility therefore depends on the changing balance between these interpretations rather than on negativity having a uniformly positive or negative effect.

Let $n \in [0, 1]$ denote the proportion of an influencer's evaluative content that is negative within some relevant observation period. The first component of the model represents the credibility gained through perceived independence. This benefit should increase with n, although its marginal value is unlikely to remain constant. The first few negative judgments provide relatively strong evidence that the influencer is capable of rejecting products and is therefore

not simply reproducing promotional incentives, whereas later negative judgments add progressively less information once independence has already been established. A convenient representation of this process is

$$I(n) = A\big(1 - e^{-kn}\big), \tag{4}$$

where $A > 0$ represents the upper limit of credibility that can be gained through independence signaling and $k > 0$ represents the rate at which audiences update their interpretation when negative evaluations begin to appear.

The marginal effect of negativity on perceived independence is then

$$I'(n) = Ak\, e^{-kn}, \tag{5}$$

which is positive for all n, while

$$I''(n) = -Ak^2 e^{-kn} < 0. \tag{6}$$

The substantive implication is that the credibility benefit of negativity exhibits diminishing returns. Moving from an entirely positive evaluation history to one containing occasional rejection may meaningfully change the audience's understanding of the influencer, because it establishes the existence of an evaluative boundary. Moving from an already mixed pattern of evaluations to a somewhat more negative pattern may produce a smaller revision, since the relevant inference—that the influencer is willing to disagree—has already been substantially supported.

The same increase in n also changes the plausibility of competing social explanations. As negative judgments become common, the audience may begin to infer that rejection itself is a relatively stable feature of the influencer's behavior. This may be interpreted as excessive skepticism, dispositional negativity, a preference for adversarial positioning, or a strategic attempt to gain attention and distinctiveness through criticism. These interpretations introduce a reputational cost that is initially weak, because occasional negativity is not sufficient to support them strongly, but which may increase more rapidly once criticism becomes habitual.

This second process can be represented as

$$C(n) = Bn^p, \tag{7}$$

where $B > 0$ captures the general sensitivity of credibility to excessive negativity and $p > 1$ allows the cost to accelerate as negative behavior becomes more frequent. Its marginal effect is

$$C'(n) = Bp\, n^{p-1}. \tag{8}$$

At low values of n, this term remains relatively small, because sparse criticism offers little basis for concluding that negativity is itself the influencer's dominant orientation. At higher values, each additional negative judgment becomes more consistent with the contrarian interpretation and therefore contributes more strongly to the reputational cost.

The two components can be combined into a single credibility function,

$$T(n) = T_0 + A\big(1 - e^{-kn}\big) - Bn^p, \tag{9}$$

where T_0 represents baseline credibility prior to considering the observed distribution of positive and negative evaluations. The derivative is

$$T'(n) = Ak\, e^{-kn} - Bp\, n^{p-1}. \tag{10}$$

This expression captures the central theoretical claim of the article. The effect of additional negativity depends on whether the marginal independence benefit exceeds the marginal contrarianism cost. At low levels of n, the first term is likely to dominate, so an increase in negativity raises credibility. As n increases, the independence term declines while the negativity cost increases, reducing the size of the credibility gain and eventually reversing its direction. The trust-maximizing level of negativity, denoted n^*, is therefore defined implicitly by

$$Ak\, e^{-kn^*} = Bp\, (n^*)^{p-1}. \tag{11}$$

At this point, the marginal credibility gained from additional evidence of independence is equal to the marginal credibility lost through increasingly negative attribution.

The significance of n^* is theoretical rather than numerical. No universal value is implied, because the parameters A, k, B, and p depend on the audience, influencer, category, and social context in which evaluation occurs. The model

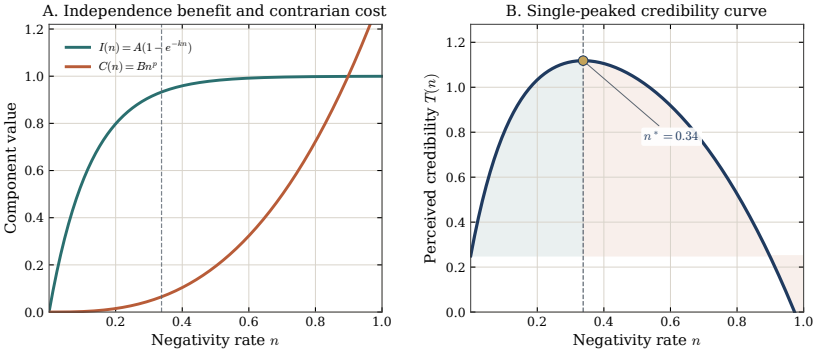

Figure 1: Illustrative credibility function $T(n) = T_0 + I(n) - C(n)$, with $I(n) = A(1 - e^{-kn})$ and $C(n) = Bn^p$. Panel A shows the saturating independence benefit and the accelerating contrarian cost. Panel B plots their combination. The marker is the interior optimum n^*, at which $T'(n^*) = 0$, equivalently $I'(n^*) = C'(n^*)$. Parameterization: $T_0 = 0.25$, $A = 1$, $k = 8$, $B = 1.35$, $p = 2.8$. The numerical location of n^* is illustrative, not a universal recommendation.

instead proposes that, where both processes are present, an interior maximum becomes plausible and empirically estimable.

This formulation also clarifies why the expected nonlinearity is sociologically meaningful. The changing slope of the function corresponds to a changing interpretation of the influencer's behavior. At very low levels of negativity, the dominant question concerns whether the influencer is capable of independent rejection at all. Moderate negativity provides evidence that positive recommendations are selective and therefore potentially more diagnostic. As negative judgments become increasingly common, the relevant interpretive problem changes, because the audience begins to ask whether rejection itself has become predictable. The same observable behavior can therefore move from being evidence against commercial dependence to being evidence for another kind of behavioral regularity.

The distinction can be expressed in terms of competing latent attributions. Let P, I, and C represent promotional, independent, and contrarian interpretations respectively. Increasing negativity is expected to reduce $\Pr(P \mid n)$ initially, increase $\Pr(I \mid n)$ over an intermediate range, and eventually increase $\Pr(C \mid n)$ as the observed rate of rejection becomes more compatible

with systematic negativity. The proposed credibility curve is therefore closely connected to a shift in the relative likelihood assigned to these interpretations:

$$P \longrightarrow I \longrightarrow C. \tag{12}$$

This progression should be understood probabilistically rather than as a set of sharply separated categories. Audiences may assign some probability to all three interpretations simultaneously, and the credibility effect depends on their relative weights. A moderately negative influencer may still be perceived as commercially motivated to some degree, while a highly negative influencer may still be regarded as genuinely independent. What changes with n is the balance among these explanations and, consequently, the meaning attached to additional negative behavior.

There is also an important reflexive element in this process. As deinfluencing becomes more widely recognized as a credibility-enhancing strategy, the inferential value of negativity may itself change. A behavior that initially functions as evidence against commercial motivation can become strategically attractive precisely because audiences treat it as such evidence. Influencers and marketers who understand the credibility value of criticism may therefore have incentives to produce selective negativity for reputational purposes, which introduces a second-order problem in which the audience must consider whether apparently costly dissent is itself being used instrumentally. In formal terms, an increase in the perceived strategic use of deinfluencing would be expected to reduce A, increase B, or alter the rate parameter k, since the same negative judgment would carry less information about genuine independence and more information about deliberate credibility management.

4. The Credibility Curve

The preceding model suggests that the relationship between negativity and credibility can be represented as the interaction of a diminishing independence benefit and an increasing reputational cost, producing the general function

$$T(n) = T_0 + A\big(1 - e^{-kn}\big) - Bn^p, \tag{13}$$

where $n \in [0, 1]$ denotes the observed proportion of negative evaluations, T_0 represents baseline credibility, A describes the maximum credibility that

can be gained through perceived independence, k determines how rapidly this benefit is realized, B represents the strength of the reputational cost associated with frequent negativity, and $p > 1$ determines how sharply that cost accelerates. The value of the function lies primarily in the relationships among these parameters, because the model is intended to describe a family of possible credibility curves whose shapes depend on social conditions.

At the lower end of the distribution, the curve is expected to rise relatively quickly because an initial departure from uniformly positive evaluation carries substantial inferential weight. Where n is close to zero, audiences possess relatively little behavioral evidence that the influencer is willing to reject products, and the introduction of even occasional criticism may therefore produce a considerable change in the perceived probability of independent judgment. This is reflected in the marginal independence term,

$$I'(n) = Ak\, e^{-kn}, \tag{14}$$

which reaches its highest value when negativity is scarce and declines continuously as negativity becomes more common. In sociological terms, the early portion of the curve represents a period in which dissent is unusual enough to remain diagnostic: negative judgment distinguishes the influencer from the behavioral pattern expected of an indiscriminate promoter and consequently changes how subsequent positive recommendations are interpreted.

The importance of this early increase extends beyond the negative evaluations themselves, because the introduction of rejection can retrospectively affect the credibility of positive endorsement. Once an audience has observed that the influencer is capable of saying no, a later positive recommendation can be understood as having passed through a selective process whose alternative outcome was genuine rejection. The value of negativity is partly relational. Its presence changes the meaning of positivity by demonstrating that approval is contingent, and the credibility benefit produced by deinfluencing may consequently appear not only in audience responses to negative content but also in the greater diagnostic value assigned to later endorsements.

As n enters an intermediate range, the curve should begin to flatten because much of the available evidence concerning independence has already been obtained. An audience that has repeatedly observed the influencer rejecting

products no longer requires each subsequent negative judgment to establish that rejection is possible, and additional criticism therefore produces progressively smaller revisions in perceived independence. This region is important because it is likely to contain the point at which the influencer is most clearly interpreted as selective: positive and negative judgments both occur often enough that neither appears predetermined, allowing the pattern as a whole to be attributed to discrimination among alternatives.

The intuitive meaning of this region can be expressed through the concept of evaluative entropy. If the influencer's judgments are almost always positive, the outcome of the next evaluation is highly predictable; if the judgments are almost always negative, the same problem reappears in the opposite direction. Somewhere between these extremes, the audience faces greater uncertainty concerning whether the next product will be accepted or rejected, and this uncertainty can support the inference that the judgment depends on characteristics of the object being evaluated rather than on a fixed directional tendency of the evaluator. The relationship between unpredictability and credibility is not necessarily direct, since random or incoherent judgment would not be expected to generate trust, although a degree of outcome variability is required if audiences are to infer that evaluation is genuinely discriminating.

The curve reaches its maximum at the point n^* satisfying

$$T'(n) = Ak\,e^{-kn} - Bp\,n^{p-1} = 0, \tag{15}$$

or equivalently,

$$Ak\,e^{-kn^*} = Bp\,(n^*)^{p-1}. \tag{16}$$

This equality gives the optimum a more precise interpretation than the informal claim that audiences prefer "some negativity." At n^*, an additional negative judgment would contribute as much credibility through its remaining independence value as it would remove through the increasing plausibility of excessive or strategic negativity. Below this point, further negativity has a positive net effect on credibility; above it, the marginal reputational cost exceeds the remaining informational benefit. The optimum is therefore generated by an equality of marginal social interpretations rather than by an intrinsic preference for moderation.

The position of n^* depends strongly on the parameters of the model. A larger value of A raises the potential return from demonstrating independence and should generally permit a higher level of negativity before the reputational cost becomes dominant. A larger k, by contrast, means that audiences infer independence quickly, so relatively little negativity is required before the informational benefit begins to saturate. A larger B shifts the optimum toward lower values of n, since audiences impose a stronger reputational penalty on frequent criticism, while a larger p produces a cost that remains relatively weak at moderate levels and then rises more sharply once negativity becomes common. The location of the optimum therefore contains information about the social environment in which evaluation occurs.

This dependence is important because there is little reason to assume that two audiences observing the same influencer would necessarily possess the same credibility curve. An audience that begins with strong suspicion of commercial influence may assign substantial value to early negative judgments, increasing A or altering k, whereas an audience already convinced of the influencer's independence may gain comparatively little from further evidence of rejection. An audience accustomed to highly critical commentary may impose only a modest cost on frequent negativity, effectively lowering B, while an audience that expects aspirational or supportive content may penalize the same pattern considerably more strongly. The curve can therefore shift horizontally and vertically without any change in the influencer's actual review distribution.

Baseline credibility T_0 introduces another distinction. Two influencers may possess essentially identical marginal responses to negativity while occupying very different absolute levels of trust because one enters the interaction with an established reputation and the other does not. In the simplest form of the model, T_0 shifts the curve vertically without changing the value of n^*, although this assumption may become unrealistic when prior reputation also alters how audiences interpret subsequent behavior. A highly trusted influencer may require less negative evidence to establish independence, while a distrusted influencer may encounter a more difficult problem in which negative reviews themselves are interpreted as strategic attempts at reputation repair.

In an extended model, T_0 may therefore interact with A, k, or B, making the effect of negativity path-dependent.

The model is similarly sensitive to the time horizon over which n is evaluated. Negativity observed across five recent posts may carry a different meaning from the same numerical proportion observed across several years of content, since audiences do not necessarily weight all historical evaluations equally. A more realistic specification could therefore replace the simple proportion n with a weighted negativity measure,

$$n_t = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{m} w_j N_j}{\sum_{j=1}^{m} w_j}, \tag{17}$$

where $N_j \in \{0, 1\}$ indicates whether evaluation j was negative and w_j represents the salience or recency of that observation. If recent evaluations receive greater weight, then an influencer can move along the perceived credibility curve without changing their lifetime distribution of positive and negative judgments. This allows the model to incorporate shifts in persona, temporary periods of unusually critical content, and the possibility that audiences update their understanding of an influencer more rapidly than a simple historical average would imply.

The same framework also suggests that the curve may be asymmetric around its maximum. There is no theoretical requirement that being ten percentage points below n^* should have the same credibility consequence as being ten percentage points above it. The independence benefit approaches saturation gradually, while the contrarianism cost may emerge relatively slowly and then accelerate, producing a curve whose rise and decline differ substantially in steepness. In some social settings, audiences may forgive excessive positivity more readily than excessive negativity, while in others a commercially saturated environment may make constant endorsement especially damaging and allow relatively high levels of criticism before credibility deteriorates.

It is also possible that the observed function contains a relatively broad plateau rather than a sharply defined peak. If the marginal independence benefit and marginal negativity cost remain similar across a substantial interval, multiple negativity rates may produce approximately equivalent levels of perceived credibility. This possibility is theoretically useful because social

judgment is unlikely to discriminate perfectly between, for example, an influencer who rejects 25 percent of products and one who rejects 30 percent. In such cases it may be more appropriate to speak of an optimal region of dissent, N^*, rather than a single optimum:

$$N^* = \{n : T(n) \geq T_{\max} - \varepsilon\}, \tag{18}$$

where ε represents some substantively negligible difference in credibility. Such a formulation avoids assigning artificial precision to a social process that may in practice tolerate a range of evaluative patterns.

The curve should also be interpreted dynamically, because successful deinfluencing may alter the conditions that initially made it credible. If audiences increasingly learn that occasional negativity is useful for signaling authenticity or independence, then negative recommendations become less costly as signals and potentially more attractive as strategic behavior. In the language of the model, the credibility benefit associated with independence may weaken as the audience becomes more skeptical about the motive underlying the negative judgment, while the cost associated with strategic contrarianism may emerge at lower levels of n. The credibility curve can therefore evolve culturally: a level of negativity that appeared unusually candid when deinfluencing was uncommon may later appear calculated once the practice becomes established as a recognizable marketing technique.

For this reason, n^* should not be interpreted as a stable behavioral prescription for influencers. It is better understood as an equilibrium generated by current audience expectations regarding promotion, independence, criticism, and strategic self-presentation, all of which can change as communicative practices diffuse. The form of the effect is consequently both an outcome of social interpretation and a potential cause of further social adaptation, because once actors recognize that audiences reward selective dissent, they may alter their behavior in ways that subsequently change the audience's interpretation of dissent itself. The curve is therefore reflexive: social expectations determine its form, behavior responds to those expectations, and repeated strategic behavior can modify the expectations from which the curve originally emerged.

5. There Is No Universal Optimum

The credibility curve implies the existence of an interior optimum under a given set of social conditions, although it does not imply that there is a single optimal level of negativity that applies across influencers, audiences, categories, or periods of time. The value n^* is determined by the parameters governing the credibility benefit of independence and the reputational cost of excessive negativity, and those parameters are themselves products of audience expectations, category norms, prior beliefs, perceived role obligations, and the broader cultural meaning attached to criticism. The model therefore predicts a family of credibility curves rather than one fixed function, with each social context generating a different balance between the value of dissent and the cost of appearing habitually negative.

This can be expressed by allowing the optimum to depend on a vector of contextual variables X,

$$n^* = f(X), \tag{19}$$

where X may contain audience characteristics, category expectations, influencer role, prior reputation, perceived commercialization, and the historical prevalence of deinfluencing within the relevant media environment. In a more explicit form, the underlying credibility function can be written as

$$T(n \mid X) = T_0(X) + A(X)\big(1 - e^{-k(X)n}\big) - B(X)\, n^{p(X)}. \tag{20}$$

The implication is that the same observed negativity rate can occupy very different positions on the credibility curve depending on the context in which it is interpreted. A value of $n = .30$, for example, may fall below the optimum for an audience that expects strong critical scrutiny, close to the optimum for an audience that values selective disagreement, and above the optimum for an audience that interprets repeated criticism as hostile or strategically performative. The observed behavioral rate is therefore insufficient on its own to predict credibility, because its meaning depends on the social expectations against which it is compared.

One important source of variation is the expected role of the communicator. Audiences approach different influencer types with different assumptions about the appropriate distribution of positive and negative judgments. A professional

critic is expected to discriminate strongly among alternatives, and a relatively high rejection rate may therefore provide little evidence of unusual negativity. An aspirational lifestyle influencer, by comparison, may occupy a role in which enthusiasm, recommendation, and positive identification are more strongly expected, causing the same rejection rate to appear unusually critical. These role expectations effectively alter the cost parameter B, since the reputational penalty associated with negativity depends partly on whether the behavior violates the normative expectations attached to the communicator's position.

The expected base rate of criticism within a category should operate similarly. Product categories differ in the extent to which selective rejection appears reasonable or excessive. A consumer may expect a specialist reviewing expensive technical products to reject a substantial proportion of available options, because high standards and detailed comparison are part of the presumed evaluative role. In categories organized more heavily around lifestyle identification, entertainment, or symbolic consumption, repeated rejection may be interpreted less as technical discrimination and more as an expression of taste, temperament, or group alignment. Consequently, the same amount of deinfluencing may produce different credibility effects even when the influencer's underlying motives remain unchanged.

Audience priors create another source of heterogeneity. Suppose two observers encounter the same influencer with different initial beliefs about commercial motivation. One begins with substantial skepticism and assigns a relatively high prior probability to the promotional explanation, while the other already regards the influencer as independent. The first observer has more room to update in response to negative evidence, so an early instance of deinfluencing may generate a comparatively large credibility gain. For the second observer, the same negative judgment provides less new information because independence was already considered likely. In the terms of the model, prior skepticism may affect both the potential magnitude A of the independence benefit and the rate k at which that benefit is realized.

This produces an important distinction between the optimum for an individual and the optimum observed at the population level. If audience members

possess different parameter values, then each observer i can be represented as having an individual credibility function

$$T_i(n) = T_{0i} + A_i\big(1 - e^{-k_i n}\big) - B_i\, n^{p_i}, \tag{21}$$

with an associated optimum

$$n_i^* = \arg\max_n T_i(n). \tag{22}$$

The aggregate response observed in empirical research is then some distribution of these individual curves rather than a single homogeneous response. An apparent population-level optimum may therefore conceal substantial disagreement among audience members, with some observers continuing to gain trust from additional negativity while others have already entered the declining portion of their own credibility curve.

The population average can be represented as

$$\bar{T}(n) = E\big[T_i(n)\big], \tag{23}$$

although maximizing the average,

$$n_{\text{avg}}^* = \arg\max_n \bar{T}(n), \tag{24}$$

does not imply that n_{avg}^* is optimal for any particular audience member. This distinction matters when interpreting empirical estimates, because an aggregate inverted-U may emerge from multiple heterogeneous response functions, and the location of its maximum may provide only limited information about the underlying social process unless the relevant sources of heterogeneity are also modeled.

Cultural context should also affect the shape and location of the curve. Norms concerning politeness, skepticism, criticism, expertise, commercial endorsement, and public disagreement vary across social environments, and these differences influence the meaning assigned to negative evaluation. In settings where skepticism toward advertising is widespread and criticism is associated with sophistication or consumer competence, a higher negativity rate may be tolerated before contrarian attribution becomes dominant. In environments where public criticism is more strongly associated with antagonism,

disloyalty, or interpersonal conflict, the reputational cost may emerge earlier. The value of n^* is partly a cultural variable, even when the psychological mechanisms of inference remain broadly similar.

The same logic applies temporally. The meaning of deinfluencing in a media environment where the practice is unusual should differ from its meaning after audiences become familiar with it as an established content strategy. Early adopters may benefit from a relatively large independence signal because negative recommendations violate the dominant expectation of promotional positivity. As deinfluencing becomes normalized, its novelty and diagnosticity decline, while awareness of its strategic value may increase skepticism concerning the motive behind the behavior. A culturally successful credibility strategy can therefore modify the conditions that made the strategy effective in the first place.

This introduces a reflexive relationship between the credibility curve and influencer behavior. If creators learn that moderate negativity increases trust, they may strategically adjust their content toward the estimated credibility-maximizing region. As this pattern becomes visible, audiences may update their beliefs about the probability that negativity is itself commercially or reputationally motivated. The resulting change in audience interpretation may reduce the value of the original strategy, shifting the curve and producing a new optimum. What appears to be an optimal behavioral rate at one moment may become suboptimal after the practice is widely imitated.

The absence of a universal optimum therefore follows directly from the social nature of the mechanism. The model does not assume that people possess an intrinsic preference for some fixed proportion of negative information. It assumes that they interpret patterns of evaluation in relation to expectations about how different types of communicators are likely to behave, and those expectations vary across people and contexts. The relevant theoretical object is accordingly not a universal value of n^*, but the set of variables that determine its location and the direction in which changes in those variables shift the curve. This distinction also limits the normative interpretation of the model—even if an empirical study were to estimate a particular negativity rate as credibility-maximizing within one sample, category, and period, that estimate should not be treated as a general recommendation for influencer

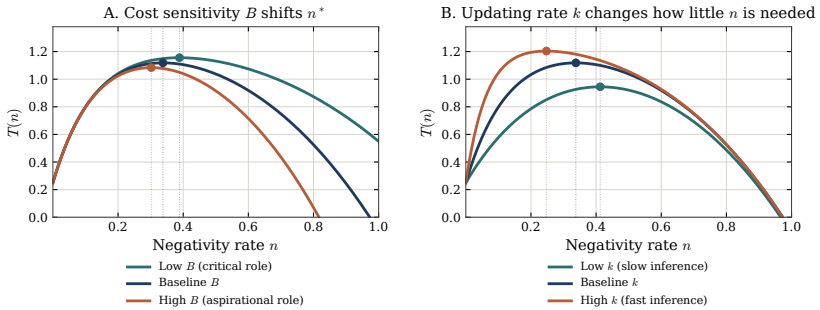

Figure 2: Comparative statics of the credibility curve. Panel A varies the reputational-cost parameter B: a critical or already skeptical audience (low B) tolerates more negativity before the peak; an aspirational role (high B) moves n^* leftward. Panel B varies the updating rate k: when audiences infer independence quickly, little negativity is required before the independence term saturates. Markers indicate each curve's maximum. Values are illustrative.

behavior. Its substantive value would lie in identifying the parameters and conditions that generated the optimum, because those conditions determine whether the result can plausibly transfer elsewhere.

6. Preference Alignment and Confirmation Bias

The credibility curve developed above treats negativity as a property of the influencer's evaluative behavior, yet the effect of any particular negative judgment also depends on the audience's prior relationship to the object being criticized. A negative evaluation directed toward a product for which the observer has little prior preference can be processed primarily as new information, whereas criticism of a product, brand, practice, or cultural object toward which the observer is already favorably disposed creates a more complicated interpretive problem. In such cases, deinfluencing does not merely provide evidence about the influencer; it also conflicts with an existing judgment held by the audience, and the resulting response is shaped by the strength of that prior belief and by the extent to which the object has become connected to the observer's identity, taste, or social position.

Let q_j represent the observer's prior evaluation of object j, and let r_j represent the influencer's evaluation of the same object. A simple measure of disagreement can be written as

$$d_j = |q_j - r_j|. \tag{25}$$

The magnitude of d_j provides an initial indication of evaluative distance, although disagreement alone does not determine its social significance. An observer who mildly prefers a particular household product may encounter a strongly negative review without experiencing substantial threat to their own judgment, while an equally strong disagreement concerning a brand, cultural object, or practice that contributes to self-definition may be interpreted much more personally. It is therefore useful to introduce an identity-salience parameter s_j, where higher values indicate that the object is more closely associated with the observer's sense of taste, status, affiliation, or self-conception. The socially relevant disagreement cost can then be represented provisionally as

$$D_j = \lambda s_j \, d_j^{\gamma}, \tag{26}$$

where $\lambda > 0$ captures sensitivity to disagreement and $\gamma \geq 1$ allows the effect of disagreement to increase nonlinearly as evaluative distance becomes more pronounced.

This formulation is closely related to confirmation bias because prior beliefs influence both the acceptance of new information and the evaluation of the person supplying it. When an influencer's judgment is broadly consistent with the observer's existing preference, the negative or positive recommendation can be assimilated relatively easily into the observer's current understanding. When the judgment is inconsistent with a strongly held preference, the observer faces several possible responses: revising the original belief, discounting the evidence, questioning the influencer's expertise, interpreting the disagreement as evidence of incompatible taste, or attributing the position to some strategic or dispositional motive. Confirmation bias thus operates partly through selective updating of the object-level belief and partly through selective updating of beliefs about the source.

This distinction makes it advantageous to treat credibility as multidimensional within the present section, since disagreement may affect separate

judgments in different directions. At minimum, the audience can distinguish between perceived honesty or integrity H, perceived expertise or quality of judgment E, and perceived benevolence or social affinity B_v. Overall credibility can be represented in simplified form as

$$T = w_H H + w_E E + w_B B_v, \tag{27}$$

where the weights reflect the relative importance of each dimension in a given context. A preference-incongruent act of deinfluencing may increase H, because the influencer appears willing to state a genuine and potentially unpopular judgment, while simultaneously decreasing E, because the observer interprets the disagreement as evidence of inferior judgment, and it may also decrease B_v when the criticism is experienced as socially distancing or hostile. The resulting credibility effect can therefore be ambiguous even when the audience becomes more convinced that the influencer is sincere.

This possibility is important because trust and agreement are often treated too closely in studies of persuasive communication. An observer may regard an influencer as honest while considering their conclusions unreliable, and may therefore become more certain about the influencer's motives while becoming less willing to follow their recommendations. Deinfluencing can thus produce a divergence between moral or motivational credibility and epistemic credibility. The former concerns whether the influencer is believed to communicate sincerely and independently, while the latter concerns whether the influencer is believed to possess sound judgment. Preference alignment is particularly relevant to the second component because persistent disagreement can gradually transform the audience's interpretation from "this person is candid" to "this person's evaluative standards do not correspond to mine."

The interaction becomes stronger when the object being criticized carries symbolic or identity value. Consumer objects frequently serve functions that exceed their immediate utility, including the communication of status, belonging, taste, morality, expertise, or cultural affiliation. Under these conditions, a negative evaluation can be interpreted as indirectly evaluating the people who choose or value the object. The criticism of the product may therefore

be translated into an inference concerning the consumer's own competence or identity:

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{negative evaluation of object} \\ &\quad \longrightarrow \text{ negative implication for chooser} \\ &\quad \longrightarrow \text{ identity-relevant disagreement.} \end{aligned} \tag{28}$$

This process need not be consciously articulated for it to affect the evaluation of the influencer. An observer can experience a reduction in affinity, openness, or perceived expertise simply because the influencer's judgment threatens a preference that has become socially or personally meaningful.

The implications for the credibility curve are substantial. The earlier function,

$$T(n) = T_0 + A\big(1 - e^{-kn}\big) - Bn^p, \tag{29}$$

assumes that negative judgments contribute to credibility according to their frequency and the attributions they generate, yet the effective value of a negative judgment may also depend on whether it confirms or contradicts the audience's prior preferences. A more complete specification might therefore allow the marginal benefit and cost terms to depend on alignment,

$$T(n, a) = T_0 + A(a)\big(1 - e^{-k(a)n}\big) - B(a)\, n^{p(a)}, \tag{30}$$

where a represents audience–influencer preference alignment. High alignment may allow the influencer to sustain a larger amount of negativity without suffering a substantial decline in perceived judgment, because the criticism generally confirms the observer's own evaluative standards. Low alignment may produce the opposite result, causing contrarian or incompetence attributions to arise at lower levels of n.

This gives preference alignment a role in determining the location of the optimum. If $n^*(a)$ denotes the negativity rate that maximizes credibility for an observer with alignment level a, then it is plausible that

$$\frac{\partial n^*}{\partial a} > 0 \tag{31}$$

over at least part of the relevant domain, meaning that greater alignment permits a higher level of observed negativity before credibility begins to decline.

The same logic also produces an asymmetry in confirmation bias. Positive evaluations of objects already favored by the observer are likely to reinforce both product belief and source affinity, while negative evaluations of those objects force a choice between revising the product belief and revising the source evaluation. Where prior attachment is weak, updating the product belief may be relatively inexpensive. Where attachment is strong, discounting the influencer may become psychologically and socially less costly than abandoning the existing preference. The effect of deinfluencing therefore depends partly on where the audience places the burden of error: the product may be judged less favorably, or the influencer may be judged less competent, less similar, or less relevant.

This interaction suggests that the credibility-maximizing level of negativity cannot be estimated independently of the distribution of audience preferences. An influencer whose negative judgments tend to coincide with those of the audience may appear discerning across a relatively broad range of n, while an influencer who repeatedly rejects objects valued by the audience may move into the declining region of the credibility curve much earlier. The same nominal negativity rate can consequently produce different social interpretations because the audience is evaluating both the frequency of dissent and the direction of that dissent relative to its own beliefs.

6.1 Deinfluencing as Symbolic Conflict

Preference disagreement becomes more consequential when the object under evaluation carries symbolic meaning beyond its immediate functional qualities. Consumers frequently use brands, products, aesthetic choices, and consumption practices as markers of taste, affiliation, status, morality, competence, or cultural belonging, and criticism directed toward such objects can therefore be interpreted as extending indirectly toward the people who value them. Under these conditions, deinfluencing may cease to operate solely as marketplace information and begin to function as a form of symbolic conflict.

This process can be represented as an escalation in the meaning assigned to disagreement. A negative judgment initially concerns the object itself, although the audience may subsequently infer an evaluation of the kind of person who chooses that object, particularly when the influencer's criticism invokes

taste, intelligence, morality, social awareness, or group membership. The interpretive sequence can therefore be expressed as

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{negative evaluation of object} \\ &\quad \longrightarrow \text{ negative implication for chooser} \\ &\quad \longrightarrow \text{ identity-relevant disagreement.} \end{aligned} \tag{32}$$

The strength of this transition should depend on the symbolic salience of the object. If s_j represents the degree to which object j is incorporated into the observer's identity or social positioning, then higher values of s_j increase the likelihood that disagreement is interpreted personally rather than informationally. In such cases, the credibility consequences of deinfluencing may become more severe because the observer is no longer deciding only whether the influencer is correct about a product, but also whether the influencer's evaluative framework is compatible with the observer's own social identity.

This helps explain why identical levels of negativity may produce sharply different responses across categories. Criticism of a low-involvement functional purchase may invite relatively detached updating, while criticism of a favored fashion label, technology ecosystem, cultural product, political consumption practice, or status-signaling brand may provoke defensive interpretation even when the influencer is regarded as sincere. The resulting response can preserve perceived honesty while reducing affinity, benevolence, or epistemic trust, particularly where the observer experiences the criticism as implying poor judgment on the part of people like themselves. As the identity relevance of the criticized object increases, the social cost of preference-incongruent deinfluencing should rise, moving the credibility curve downward or moving its optimum toward a lower level of negativity for affected audience segments. The same act of dissent can consequently function as evidence of independence for one observer and as a socially threatening judgment for another, depending on whether the criticized object is treated as a neutral consumption choice or as part of the observer's symbolic self-definition.

7. A Bayesian Model with Three Influencer Types

The preceding sections describe the credibility effect as the product of competing social interpretations, and a Bayesian framework provides a useful way of formalizing how those interpretations may change as the observed frequency of negativity increases. The purpose of the model is not to claim that audiences perform explicit probabilistic calculations when evaluating influencers, but to represent the inferential structure of the problem: observers encounter a sequence of positive and negative judgments and gradually update their beliefs about what type of communicator could plausibly have produced that sequence.

A two-type model, distinguishing an independent evaluator from a commercially motivated promoter, is sufficient to explain why initial acts of deinfluencing may increase perceived credibility. It becomes less satisfactory once negativity itself becomes common, because repeated rejection can then support a qualitatively different attribution. The model therefore introduces three latent influencer types:

$$P = \text{promotional type}, \tag{33}$$

$$I = \text{independent evaluative type}, \tag{34}$$

$$C = \text{contrarian type}. \tag{35}$$

The promotional type is characterized by a relatively low probability of issuing negative judgments, because its communication is assumed to be strongly shaped by commercial or reputational incentives favoring endorsement. The independent type is assumed to generate both positive and negative judgments according to some substantive evaluative standard, producing an intermediate rate of negativity. The contrarian type is characterized by a comparatively high probability of negative judgment, whether because criticism has become a stable disposition, an identity position, an engagement strategy, or a means of differentiation from mainstream promotional content.

Let

$$\theta_P,\ \theta_I,\ \theta_C \tag{36}$$

denote the expected probability of a negative judgment for each type, with the ordering

$$\theta_P < \theta_I < \theta_C. \tag{37}$$

This ordering is central to the model, because it allows the same observed behavior to carry different inferential implications depending on its frequency. A low rate of negativity is most compatible with the promotional type, a moderate rate is most compatible with the independent type, and a high rate increasingly supports the contrarian type. The model does not require the three types to be mutually exclusive in any psychological sense; they are better interpreted as stylized explanatory categories that audiences may use when making sense of repeated evaluative behavior.

Suppose that an observer has seen m evaluations from an influencer, of which x are negative. The observed negativity rate is

$$n = \frac{x}{m}. \tag{38}$$

Conditional on type $z \in \{P, I, C\}$, the simplest specification assumes that the number of negative evaluations follows a binomial distribution,

$$x \mid z \sim \text{Binomial}(m, \theta_z). \tag{39}$$

The likelihood of observing x negative evaluations from a given type is therefore

$$\Pr(x \mid z) = \binom{m}{x} \theta_z^x (1 - \theta_z)^{m-x}. \tag{40}$$

Given prior beliefs

$$\Pr(P), \qquad \Pr(I), \qquad \Pr(C), \tag{41}$$

the posterior probability assigned to type z becomes

$$\Pr(z \mid x) = \frac{\Pr(x \mid z)\Pr(z)}{\sum_{r \in \{P,I,C\}} \Pr(x \mid r)\Pr(r)}. \tag{42}$$

The combinatorial term $\binom{m}{x}$ is common to all three likelihoods and therefore cancels when the observer compares the relative plausibility of the competing

types. The posterior probabilities are determined by the extent to which the observed rate of negativity resembles the rate expected under each attribution, weighted by the audience's prior beliefs.

The substantive implication is that the posterior probability of independence need not increase monotonically with negativity. Beginning from a very low value of n, an increase in observed negative judgments may substantially reduce the probability assigned to the promotional explanation, because such behavior is relatively unlikely under θ_P. Over some intermediate range, the observed sequence becomes increasingly compatible with the independent type, causing

$$\Pr(I \mid x) \tag{43}$$

to rise. Once the negativity rate moves sufficiently far above the level expected from an independent evaluator, however, additional negative judgments become increasingly compatible with the contrarian type, and

$$\Pr(C \mid x) \tag{44}$$

begins to dominate. Figure **??** shows how those posteriors, and a credibility index built from them, move with n.

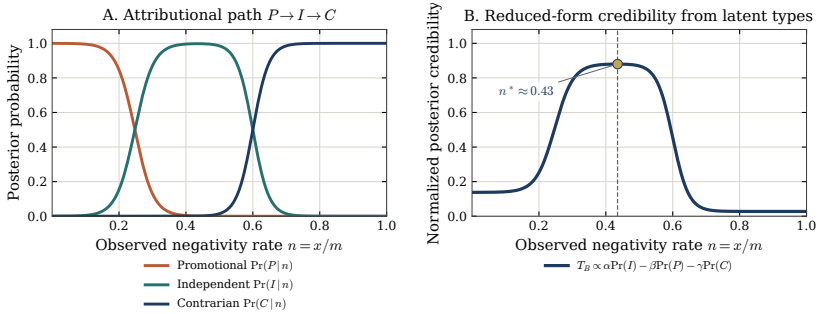

Figure 3: Three-type inference. Panel A shows posterior probabilities of the promotional (P), independent (I), and contrarian (C) types as the observed negativity rate $n = x/m$ rises ($\theta_P = 0.12$, $\theta_I = 0.38$, $\theta_C = 0.78$; $m = 24$; priors 0.50, 0.30, 0.20). Panel B plots a normalized credibility index $T_B = \alpha \Pr(I \mid x) - \beta \Pr(P \mid x) - \gamma \Pr(C \mid x)$. The reduced-form inverted U in Figure **??** approximates this attributional competition. The plotted n^* is an illustration for these parameters, not a general estimate.

The Bayesian model therefore produces the attributional progression proposed earlier:

$$P \longrightarrow I \longrightarrow C. \tag{45}$$

The important feature of this progression is that it arises from relative likelihood rather than from any inherent positive or negative meaning attached to criticism. Negativity increases credibility while it makes the independent explanation more plausible relative to its alternatives. Its credibility value declines once further negativity makes another explanation more plausible than independence. This gives the nonlinearity a probabilistic foundation: the same observable variable changes meaning because it moves the audience through different regions of the latent-type distribution.

The transition points between these regions can be derived directly from the model. Consider first the point at which the independent type becomes more probable than the promotional type. Ignoring the common binomial coefficient, the observer prefers I to P when

$$\Pr(x \mid I)\Pr(I) > \Pr(x \mid P)\Pr(P). \tag{46}$$

Taking logarithms gives

$$x \log\Big(\frac{\theta_I}{\theta_P}\Big) + (m - x)\log\Big(\frac{1-\theta_I}{1-\theta_P}\Big) + \log\Big(\frac{\Pr(I)}{\Pr(P)}\Big) > 0. \tag{47}$$

Since $x = mn$, this can be written in terms of the observed negativity rate as

$$mn \log\Big(\frac{\theta_I}{\theta_P}\Big) + m(1-n)\log\Big(\frac{1-\theta_I}{1-\theta_P}\Big) + \log\Big(\frac{\Pr(I)}{\Pr(P)}\Big) > 0. \tag{48}$$

An equivalent expression can be written for the crossover between the independent and contrarian types. These boundaries are useful because they formalize the idea that the same negativity rate can be interpreted differently under different priors. If an audience begins with a strong expectation that influencers are commercially motivated, the amount of negative evidence required to move from P toward I will differ from that required by an audience that already regards the communicator as relatively independent. Likewise, if the social environment makes strategic contrarianism appear common, the transition from I toward C can occur at a lower negativity rate.

The sample size m also matters. A negativity rate of $n = .50$ based on two observed reviews carries considerably less inferential weight than the same rate observed across one hundred reviews, because the larger sequence provides more evidence that the pattern reflects a stable behavioral tendency. The posterior distribution should therefore become more concentrated as m increases. This feature is important for influencer contexts, where audiences differ substantially in how much of a creator's history they have observed. A new viewer and a long-term follower may encounter the same current review while holding very different posterior beliefs because one evaluates it against a sparse (or no) history and the other against a much more extensive behavioral record.

This introduces a distinction between the observed negativity rate and confidence in the attribution derived from that rate. Two influencers can exhibit the same value of n, while the social certainty surrounding their perceived type differs according to the quantity and consistency of prior observations. In a fuller model, credibility may therefore depend on both the posterior probability of independence and the concentration of the posterior distribution. An audience that assigns probabilities of 0.40, 0.35, and 0.25 to the three types is considerably less certain about the influencer than an audience assigning 0.05, 0.90, and 0.05, even though the independent type is the modal interpretation in both cases.

One possible formalization is to let credibility depend on the posterior probability of the independent type,

$$T_B = \alpha \, \Pr(I \mid x), \tag{49}$$

where $\alpha > 0$ scales the contribution of inferred independence to perceived credibility. A richer specification can incorporate penalties associated with the competing interpretations,

$$T_B = \alpha \, \Pr(I \mid x) - \beta \, \Pr(P \mid x) - \gamma \, \Pr(C \mid x), \tag{50}$$

with $\beta, \gamma > 0$. This representation allows promotional and contrarian attributions to reduce credibility by different amounts, which is sociologically plausible because audiences may judge commercial dependence and habitual

contrarianism as distinct forms of unreliability. A promotional influencer may be considered socially pleasant yet motivationally compromised, while a contrarian influencer may be considered independent in motive but unreliable in judgment. The weights β and γ can therefore differ across audiences and contexts.

The Bayesian formulation also clarifies the relationship between the latent-type model and the continuous credibility curve developed earlier. The function

$$T(n) = T_0 + A\left(1 - e^{-kn}\right) - Bn^p \tag{51}$$

can be understood as a reduced-form approximation to a more detailed inferential process in which the posterior probability of independence first rises and later falls as the observed negativity rate moves from the region associated with promotion toward the region associated with contrarianism. The exponential independence term captures the diminishing informational benefit of evidence against the promotional explanation, while the accelerating cost term captures the increasing plausibility of the contrarian explanation. The earlier credibility function therefore summarizes, in continuous form, the same attributional competition represented explicitly by the three-type Bayesian model.

The three-type structure also provides a useful way to incorporate confirmation bias and preference alignment. The expected negativity rate associated with the independent type need not be interpreted identically by all observers, because disagreement with the audience may alter the perceived likelihood that the behavior reflects good-faith evaluation rather than poor judgment or oppositional disposition. If an influencer repeatedly criticizes products that the observer already dislikes, the audience may assign a relatively high likelihood to the independent type, because the evaluations appear consistent with its own standards. If the same influencer repeatedly criticizes highly valued objects, the observer may revise the perceived parameters of the latent types, effectively treating such behavior as more consistent with contrarianism. The likelihood functions are therefore partly socially constructed: the observer is estimating not only how often each type would be negative, but how each type would be expected to evaluate particular objects.

This can be represented by allowing the type-specific negativity probabilities to depend on preference alignment a,

$$\theta_z = \theta_z(a). \tag{52}$$

The posterior then becomes

$$\Pr(z \mid x, a) = \frac{\Pr(x \mid z, a)\Pr(z \mid a)}{\sum_r \Pr(x \mid r, a)\Pr(r \mid a)}. \tag{53}$$

Such an extension makes explicit that inference about influencer type is inseparable from the observer's own evaluative position. The same sequence of judgments may generate different posterior beliefs for different audience members because they possess different priors and different assumptions about what independent, promotional, or contrarian behavior would look like in relation to the objects being discussed.

A further implication concerns strategic adaptation. The model initially assumes that the latent types generate different characteristic rates of negativity, but those rates need not remain stable once creators understand how audiences interpret them. A promotional communicator who learns that occasional negative judgments increase the posterior probability of independence may strategically increase θ_P, thereby making the promotional type behaviorally more similar to the independent type. As the distributions overlap more strongly, negative judgments become less diagnostic. In probabilistic terms, the likelihood ratio

$$\frac{\Pr(N \mid I)}{\Pr(N \mid P)} \tag{54}$$

moves closer to one, reducing the amount of information contained in an observed negative recommendation.

The same process may occur at the upper end of the distribution. A creator who develops a successful identity around skepticism may strategically increase negativity because criticism itself attracts attention, producing behavior that becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from genuine high-selectivity evaluation. The three latent categories should therefore be understood as historically contingent distributions whose separation can change as influencer practices evolve. If deinfluencing becomes widely adopted as a credibility

strategy, the distinction between P and I narrows, while the boundary between I and C may also become increasingly difficult for audiences to determine.

This dynamic quality is central to the sociological interpretation of the Bayesian model. The observer is not estimating fixed natural types; the observer is interpreting actors who are themselves capable of anticipating how they will be interpreted. Influencers can modify their behavior in response to audience expectations, audiences can update their priors in response to widespread strategic behavior, and the informational value of negativity can consequently change over time. The credibility signal is therefore reflexive: its effectiveness influences its adoption, its adoption influences its diagnosticity, and changes in diagnosticity alter the posterior beliefs through which the signal originally generated credibility.

The three-type model consequently provides a probabilistic foundation for the broader theory of optimal dissent. Low negativity is comparatively compatible with promotional dependence, moderate negativity with selective independence, and high negativity with strategic or dispositional contrarianism, while the exact boundaries between these regions depend on priors, social role, audience alignment, observation history, and the historical prevalence of deinfluencing as a communication strategy. The central theoretical claim is therefore not that a fixed rate of criticism uniquely identifies a credible communicator, but that credibility emerges from the relative plausibility of competing explanations for observed evaluative behavior, and that the probability assigned to those explanations changes systematically as the pattern of negativity changes.

8. Effects of Strategic Contrarianism

The credibility value of deinfluencing creates an incentive for that behavior to be adopted strategically. Once influencers, agencies, and audiences become aware that selective negativity can signal independence, criticism is no longer interpretable only as evidence of genuine evaluative resistance. It also becomes a possible technique of credibility management. This introduces a second-order inference problem in which the audience must evaluate not only whether

the influencer is willing to criticize products, but whether that willingness itself has been incorporated into a broader strategy of self-presentation.

Strategic contrarianism can be understood as the deliberate use of disagreement, rejection, or skepticism in order to produce a desired social interpretation. In influencer contexts, this may involve criticizing some products to strengthen the credibility of later endorsements, adopting a generally skeptical persona in order to differentiate oneself from conventionally promotional creators, or selecting highly visible targets for criticism because negative positioning attracts attention and reinforces an identity built around independence. The resulting behavior may resemble genuine critical evaluation closely enough that the audience cannot infer motive directly from the negative judgment itself.

Within the three-type Bayesian model, the development of strategic contrarianism changes the expected behavioral distributions of the latent types. If the promotional type P learns that negative evaluations can increase perceived independence, its expected negativity rate may increase from θ_P to some strategically adjusted value θ'_P, such that

$$\theta'_P > \theta_P. \tag{55}$$

As θ'_P approaches θ_I, where θ_I denotes the expected negativity rate of an independent evaluator, the behavioral distinction between promotion and independence becomes weaker. The diagnostic value of a negative judgment can be expressed through the likelihood ratio

$$LR_N = \frac{\Pr(N \mid I)}{\Pr(N \mid P)}. \tag{56}$$

If promotional communicators increasingly use negative evaluations, then $\Pr(N \mid P)$ rises and LR_N falls. A negative judgment consequently provides less evidence in favor of the independent interpretation than it would in an environment where commercially motivated influencers almost never criticize products.

The informational consequences extend beyond individual negative judgments. If audiences become familiar with the strategic use of deinfluencing, their prior beliefs may also change. Let S represent the audience's belief that

observed criticism is strategically motivated. Increased cultural awareness of deinfluencing as a credibility technique raises $\Pr(S)$, which should reduce the extent to which negativity is automatically interpreted as evidence of independence. The same observed behavior can therefore generate a smaller posterior credibility update at a later point in time than it generated when the behavior was less common or less widely understood.

This process can be incorporated into the earlier credibility function by allowing the independence benefit to depend on perceived strategic prevalence. Let $s \in [0, 1]$ denote the perceived probability that deinfluencing is strategically deployed within the relevant environment. The maximum credibility benefit associated with independence can then be written as

$$A = A(s), \tag{57}$$

with the plausible condition

$$\frac{\partial A}{\partial s} < 0. \tag{58}$$

As strategic awareness increases, the same amount of negativity produces a smaller potential credibility gain. The rate of initial updating may also change,

$$k = k(s), \tag{59}$$

because audiences who have learned that criticism can be manufactured as a trust signal may require a longer or more consistent history of negative evaluation before revising their beliefs about the influencer's motives.

Strategic contrarianism can also affect the cost side of the credibility function. If audiences associate frequent criticism with attention seeking or reputation management, the contrarianism cost may emerge at lower levels of negativity. The parameter B may therefore increase with perceived strategic prevalence,

$$\frac{\partial B}{\partial s} > 0, \tag{60}$$

producing a credibility curve in which the benefits of initial negativity are weaker and the costs of repeated negativity appear sooner. Under these conditions, the trust-maximizing level n^* may shift toward a lower value even if the influencer's actual evaluative standards have not changed.

The broader implication is that credibility signals can become less reliable through successful imitation. A behavior initially acquires informational value because it is relatively uncommon among actors with strong promotional incentives. Once that value becomes recognized, the behavior attracts imitation from precisely those actors it previously helped audiences distinguish. The result is a partial pooling process in which independent and strategic communicators become more behaviorally similar, forcing audiences to search for additional cues that can separate them.

This dynamic may produce escalating demands for stronger evidence of sincerity. Audiences may begin to evaluate the content of criticism more closely, asking whether the negative judgment appears costly, specific, consistent with prior standards, or directed toward products from which the influencer could plausibly have benefited. A minor criticism of an irrelevant product may carry little evidential weight if it can easily be interpreted as symbolic dissent chosen to protect credibility, while criticism that involves a meaningful commercial sacrifice may remain more diagnostic. The credibility of negativity may therefore depend increasingly on its perceived cost.

A simple extension can capture this possibility. Let c_j denote the perceived cost incurred by issuing negative judgment j. The diagnostic value of the judgment may be written as

$$D_j = f(c_j), \qquad f'(c_j) > 0, \tag{61}$$

so that criticism becomes more informative when the audience believes the influencer has sacrificed a meaningful opportunity by expressing it. A negative review of a product with no sponsorship potential may provide weaker evidence of independence than rejection of a lucrative partnership or a product category closely associated with the influencer's commercial identity. This introduces a distinction between negativity frequency and negativity cost, since two influencers can produce the same proportion of negative content while providing very different amounts of evidence concerning their independence.

Strategic contrarianism also creates incentives at the upper end of the negativity distribution. Some influencers may obtain value directly from adopting

a consistently adversarial position, particularly in environments where criticism attracts engagement, distinguishes the creator from mainstream promotional culture, or provides a recognizable identity around which audiences can organize. For these communicators, negative evaluation can become a form of branding. The probability of criticism then depends partly on its identity and engagement value rather than on the merits of the object under review.

This creates an additional problem for audience inference. A highly negative creator may genuinely be independent of conventional commercial incentives while still being strategically dependent on negativity as a source of attention, social position, or audience loyalty. Independence from direct sponsorship does not imply independence from all incentives. The relevant latent motive may shift from

"I praise this because I am paid to promote it" (62)

to

"I criticize this because criticism sustains my position." (63)

Both forms introduce systematic pressures on evaluation, although they operate in opposite directions.

This possibility suggests that the model should distinguish directional independence from motivational independence. An influencer can be directionally negative while remaining strategically constrained by the rewards associated with negativity. Genuine evaluative independence requires that positive and negative judgments remain responsive primarily to the characteristics of the object and the influencer's stated standards. Strategic contrarianism weakens that relationship by making the direction of the judgment partially responsive to the social rewards of dissent.

The effect is therefore likely to alter the meaning of the credibility curve over time. When deinfluencing is uncommon, moderate negativity may occupy a relatively clear region associated with independence. As strategic adoption increases, the distributions corresponding to promotional, independent, and contrarian types begin to overlap more substantially, reducing the precision with which audiences can infer motive from frequency alone. The credibility curve may flatten, its maximum may become less pronounced, and variables

such as consistency, perceived sacrifice, specificity of criticism, and historical behavior may become increasingly important in determining whether negativity is interpreted as genuine evaluation or strategic performance.

Strategic contrarianism consequently introduces a reflexive process into the theory. Audiences reward selective criticism because it appears to reveal independence; influencers observe this reward and gain incentives to imitate the behavior; audiences gradually recognize the possibility of imitation and revise their interpretation of criticism; the credibility value of negativity then changes, altering the incentives facing influencers once again. The social meaning of deinfluencing is therefore partly endogenous to its own success, and any empirical estimate of an optimal negativity level should be treated as historically contingent on the degree to which audiences currently regard criticism as a credible signal of independent judgment.

9. Discussion

The argument developed in this article begins from a relatively simple observation: negative evaluation can increase credibility because it provides evidence that an influencer is willing to depart from promotional incentives, although the value of that evidence should decline as negativity becomes more common and may eventually reverse once criticism becomes sufficiently frequent to support alternative attributions. The resulting relationship is therefore expected to be nonlinear, with credibility determined by the changing balance between independence signaling and the reputational costs associated with habitual or strategic negativity. The mathematical representation of this process is intended to formalize that balance, while the sociological interpretation explains why the parameters governing the curve should vary across audiences, categories, roles, and historical contexts.

The central contribution is consequently not the claim that some moderate amount of negativity is intuitively preferable to either universal praise or universal criticism. That proposition is relatively easy to anticipate. The more consequential claim concerns the mechanism and graphable form of the relationship: the effect of negativity changes because the audience is revising its interpretation of what repeated evaluative behavior signifies. At low levels,

criticism is beneficial partly because it reduces the plausibility of indiscriminate promotion. At intermediate levels, the influencer may appear most clearly selective, since both approval and rejection remain plausible outcomes. At high levels, criticism becomes increasingly compatible with explanations based on cynicism, contrarianism, strategic differentiation, or identity positioning. The credibility curve therefore represents a movement between competing social attributions rather than a direct psychological preference for moderation itself.

This interpretation also places limits on the meaning of the theoretical optimum n^*. The model does not imply that there exists a universal percentage of negative content that would maximize credibility across influencer contexts. The location of the maximum depends on the parameters that describe audience sensitivity to independence, the speed with which independence is inferred, the social cost associated with frequent criticism, and the degree to which that cost accelerates. These parameters are affected by prior reputation, expected role, category norms, audience composition, cultural attitudes toward criticism, and the prevalence of deinfluencing as an established communication strategy. The relevant object of study is therefore the structure that produces an optimum and the variables that move it, rather than the identification of a context-free numerical value.

A further distinction is necessary between the amount of negativity that maximizes credibility and the amount that maximizes influence. These two outcomes are related, although there is little reason to expect their maxima to coincide. Credibility concerns the audience's assessment of the communicator's honesty, independence, judgment, or reliability, whereas influence also depends on liking, identification, aspiration, attention, perceived similarity, entertainment value, and the willingness to remain exposed to the communicator over time. A highly critical influencer may be regarded as unusually discerning and therefore highly credible, while simultaneously becoming less enjoyable, less socially attractive, or less relevant to audiences who prefer affirmation, discovery, or aspirational content.

Let $T(n)$ denote credibility and $L(n)$ denote some broader measure of liking, affinity, or parasocial attraction. Overall influence can be represented schematically as

$$F(n) = T(n)^{\alpha} L(n)^{\beta}, \tag{64}$$

where $\alpha, \beta > 0$ indicate the relative importance of credibility and affinity within a particular context. If credibility follows the single-peaked form proposed earlier, while liking begins to decline at a lower or different rate as negativity increases, then the influence-maximizing point

$$n_F^* = \arg\max_n \; F(n) \tag{65}$$

need not equal the trust-maximizing point

$$n_T^* = \arg\max_n \; T(n). \tag{66}$$

Indeed, it is plausible that

$$n_F^* < n_T^* \tag{67}$$

in many influencer settings, since an audience may continue to perceive additional criticism as evidence of discernment after the same criticism has already begun to reduce affinity or enjoyment. Figure **??** illustrates one such configuration, in which affinity declines earlier than credibility, so $n_F^* < n_T^*$. The reverse ordering is also theoretically possible in contexts where criticality itself attracts attention or strengthens identification with an audience that values skepticism, which again suggests that the relative position of the two optima should be treated as an empirical question rather than an assumption.

This distinction becomes particularly important when considering the commercial interpretation of deinfluencing. An influencer who maximizes trust may not maximize purchase behavior, engagement, retention, or recommendation acceptance, because the strongest possible signal of independence may also weaken the interpersonal or aspirational qualities through which influence operates. A rare positive recommendation issued by a highly critical reviewer may possess exceptional credibility at the moment of endorsement, while the creator's overall audience may be smaller or less emotionally attached. Conversely, a more positive influencer may retain a larger or more

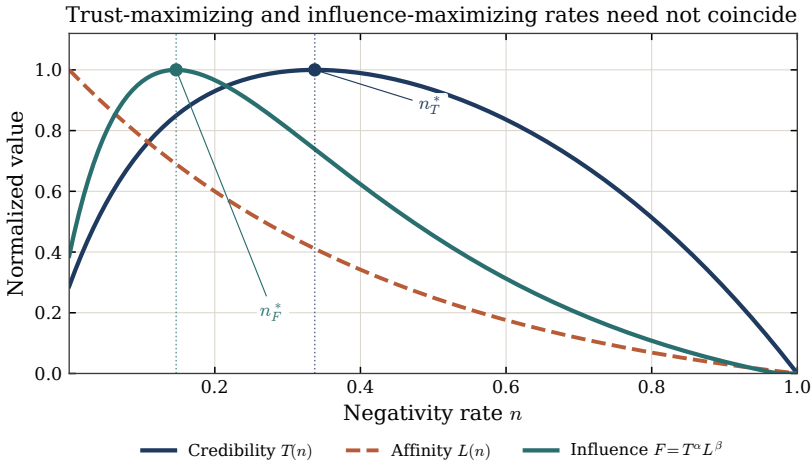

Figure 4: Schematic comparison of credibility $T(n)$, affinity $L(n)$, and overall influence $F(n) = T(n)^\alpha L(n)^\beta$. When liking falls with negativity faster than credibility does, the influence-maximizing rate lies to the left of the trust-maximizing rate. Curves are normalized for visual comparison; the functional form of $L(n)$ is illustrative.

engaged audience while making each individual endorsement less diagnostic. The commercially relevant optimum therefore depends on the outcome being maximized, and the model should resist collapsing credibility, persuasion, engagement, and long-term influence into a single dependent variable.

The distinction also provides a useful interpretation of preference alignment and confirmation bias. A negative judgment can increase perceived honesty while decreasing perceived expertise or similarity, particularly when the criticized object is strongly valued by the observer. The influence consequence of that judgment will therefore depend on the relative importance of these dimensions for subsequent behavior. In some cases, increased honesty may outweigh disagreement; in others, the loss of perceived judgment or affinity may dominate. The same act of deinfluencing can therefore move the observer upward on one evaluative dimension and downward on another, reinforcing the argument that an aggregate measure of trust may conceal important internal trade-offs.

The empirical agenda that follows from the model should therefore focus less on simple contrasts between deinfluencing and non-deinfluencing and

more on estimating response surfaces across meaningful ranges of negativity. A basic study could manipulate the proportion of negative evaluations within an influencer's visible history, using several points such as

$$n \in \{0, .10, .25, .50, .75, .90\}, \tag{68}$$

and estimate nonlinear effects on perceived independence, honesty, expertise, contrarianism, liking, purchase intention, and willingness to continue following the influencer. The primary objective would be to determine whether the expected attributional sequence emerges and whether the resulting credibility function is approximately single-peaked.

Future studies could then introduce moderator variables implied by the theoretical framework. Preference alignment can be manipulated independently of negativity frequency by varying whether the influencer's negative judgments concern products that participants already like or dislike. Identity salience can be manipulated by comparing functionally similar products with objects more strongly associated with taste, status, community, or self-definition. Perceived strategic intent could be altered by informing participants that deinfluencing is increasingly used as a creator strategy, thereby testing whether greater awareness of strategic contrarianism reduces the diagnostic value of negativity.

Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable because the model is explicitly concerned with accumulated evaluative history. A single negative review may produce a different inference from the same review embedded in a sequence of prior judgments, and repeated exposure allows researchers to examine whether audiences update gradually, whether the effect of early criticism persists, and whether a transition from independent to contrarian attribution occurs after a sufficiently sustained pattern. Such designs would also allow researchers to distinguish immediate response from longer-term reputation formation.

Observational research could complement experimental work by estimating real-world relationships between the frequency of negative content and subsequent audience responses. Creator histories could be coded for valence, sponsorship, category, and evaluative severity, while outcomes such as engagement, follower growth, endorsement response, or audience sentiment could

be modeled nonlinearly. Such designs would face substantial selection and endogeneity problems, particularly because creators choose when to criticize and may adapt their content in response to prior audience feedback, but these complications are themselves theoretically relevant because the model predicts strategic adaptation and feedback between audience interpretation and influencer behavior.

The three-type Bayesian model also generates a more specific empirical program. Rather than measuring credibility alone, studies can ask participants to estimate the perceived probability that an influencer is primarily promotional, independently evaluative, or strategically contrarian after observing different distributions of positive and negative content. If the proposed mechanism is correct, increasing negativity should initially reduce the promotional attribution, then increase the independent attribution, and eventually increase the contrarian attribution. Estimating these posterior-like judgments directly would provide a stronger test of the theory than demonstrating an inverted-U in trust without examining the interpretive process that produces it.

Further work could also investigate whether audience members differ systematically in the parameters of the credibility curve. Individuals with high advertising skepticism may obtain more information from early negative judgments than individuals who begin with greater trust in influencers. Audiences accustomed to critical review cultures may tolerate substantially higher negativity before assigning a contrarian interpretation. Similarly, long-term followers may possess priors based on a much richer history than first-time viewers, producing different responses to identical current behavior. Hierarchical or latent-class models would be useful for estimating such heterogeneity rather than treating the observed population curve as if it represented a single shared response function.

The effects of strategic contrarianism deserve particular empirical attention because they imply that the credibility value of deinfluencing may change as the practice becomes culturally familiar. Researchers could compare audiences with different levels of awareness of deinfluencing as a marketing strategy, manipulate the perceived commercial cost of issuing a negative review, or examine whether criticism directed toward a potential sponsor is treated as more diagnostic than criticism carrying little economic consequence. These studies

would help determine whether perceived sacrifice restores signal value when audiences are already aware that negativity can be performed strategically.

The broader implication of the model extends beyond influencer marketing. The same structure may apply wherever credibility is inferred from an actor's willingness to disagree with expected incentives, including political commentary, journalism, expert review, organizational communication, professional advice, and interpersonal recommendation. Selective dissent can function as evidence of autonomy because it demonstrates that agreement is conditional, while excessive dissent can reduce informational value once disagreement itself becomes predictable. The deeper theoretical object is therefore the social interpretation of patterned agreement and disagreement.

Seen in this wider sense, the credibility problem concerns the informational value of selective opposition. Perfect agreement provides little evidence of independent judgment when agreement is expected or rewarded, while persistent disagreement also becomes weakly diagnostic if opposition appears habitual or strategically useful. Credibility is more likely to emerge when audiences believe that either agreement or disagreement could plausibly occur and that the direction of judgment depends meaningfully on the object being evaluated. Deinfluencing offers a particularly visible contemporary case of this more general process because the contrast between promotion and rejection is easy to observe and because audiences are increasingly aware of the commercial incentives surrounding influencer behavior.

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Spatial Structure of Commerce in Pakistan in Terms of Establishment and Formalization

Abstract: Wholesale and retail trade is the largest block of Pakistan's enumerated economic establishments. Using the district release of the 2023/24 Economic Census, joined to 2023 population totals, this note maps the stock of trading premises and retail shops across 135 districts in the four provinces. It then sets that stock beside the SECP company register, as a measure of formal entry, and beside satellite night-time lights, as a measure of subsequent activity growth. The three layers support a simple district typology and a reading of formalisation as a thin overlay on a vast micro-enterprise base.

Keywords: Pakistan; Economic Census; wholesale and retail trade; retail density; informal enterprise; company registration; night-time lights; spatial structure

1. Introduction

Wholesale and retail trade is involved in everyday economic life in Pakistan. The first integrated Economic Census, conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics alongside the Seventh Population and Housing Census, places more than seven million economic establishments on a common national frame [1, 2]. Trade accounts for the largest block of these units, and retail shops alone run into the millions [4, 8]. For all the weight of this sector in employment and household provisioning, published work has long described commerce in national aggregates. District patterns of shop density, the thin corporate layer sitting above the informal bazaar, and the geography of subsequent activity growth have remained difficult to set beside one another. This note brings those three layers into a single, compact account.

1.1 Motivation

Commerce in Pakistan is at once ubiquitous and poorly mapped. Kiryana stores, wholesale yards, repair workshops and small trading premises absorb a large share of urban and small-town livelihoods. National accounts record the contribution of wholesale and retail trade to value added; labour-force rounds record the share of workers in the same activities [7]. A district-level picture of the establishments has been poor. Policy discussion of SMEs, municipal markets, secondary-city development and the tax net all presuppose some sense of where trading units cluster and how dense those clusters are relative to population.

The 2023/24 Economic Census assisted in this area because it unified information [1]. Gallup Pakistan's reading of the same files puts the national total at about 7.14 million establishments, with wholesale and retail trade (PSIC 45 to 47) above three million units and retail shops near 2.7 million [8, 10]. Punjab holds around three-fifths of the country's establishments, a share that exceeds its population weight [11]. Almost the entire frame is micro in scale: units with fewer than fifty persons engaged dominate the count [9]. These magnitudes concretize the spatial question; a district with a thick carpet of small shops is a different commercial landscape from a district whose population is large and whose trading premises are few. Secondary

cities—Gujranwala, Multan, Faisalabad, Peshawar, Quetta, and a long tail of district headquarters—are positioned between the metropolitan cores and the sparse periphery, and they are precisely the places where debates about market development now turn.

The Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan reports a corporate register still measured in the low hundreds of thousands, even after several years of rapid online incorporation [12]. Trading remains a prominent sector among new companies, and recent Commission releases point to registrations arising from a wide set of smaller cities and towns [13–15]. The contrast between millions of census establishments and a far smaller company register is itself a fact about how commerce is organised in the country. Pairing the two official sources, at provincial resolution, gives a first measure of that gap.

1.2 Scope of the available data

The paper works with three public layers, each answering a distinct question.

The Economic Census 2023/24 is the core [1, 2, 4]. Provincial Excel files already released by PBS report, for every district, the number of establishments and the persons engaged, first by major PSIC sector and then by unit type. From these files one may construct a district panel of all establishments, of wholesale and retail trade, and—where the unit-type table is in hand—of retail shops. Population totals from the 2023 Census convert those counts into densities [6]. The resulting picture is a stock at one point in time: a map of how thickly trading premises are spread across the districts of the country.

Change in the number of physical shops, year by year and town by town, is unavailable outside this frame. Pakistan's earlier attempt at an economic census left an incomplete national list, so a district panel of openings and closures is still to be built from future rounds or from an open Statistical Business Register. In place of that missing flow, the paper draws on two corroborating series that are public, regular, and geographically at least provincial or district in reach.

The first is the SECP series of company incorporations [12–15]. Monthly and annual releases give new registrations by province and by broad sector, including trading, services, and information technology and e-commerce. The series captures formal entry and the widening of the corporate map toward

smaller cities. It remains a register of companies rather than of storefronts; the two objects differ in legal form, in scale, and in coverage of the informal bazaar.

The second is satellite night-time lights, drawn from VIIRS composites and already used in Pakistani work on district and provincial economic activity [19–22, 25]. Lights track the intensity of non-farm activity across years and can be ranked at district or tehsil level. Districts that shine more brightly over time are places where commercial and urban activity has thickened. Lights are treated here as a growth ranking that sits beside the 2023 stock, rather than as a count of new shutters.

A short national anchor comes from the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics' reconstruction of wholesale and retail trade, which places the sector on a long historical path of establishment growth and still faster growth in output [16]. That national path explains how the 2023 stock came to be as large as it is.

1.3 Contribution

The paper offers a first compact district account of trade and retail density using the official Economic Census files, joined to 2023 population totals [2, 4, 6]. That district reading sits in a wider literature on how retail outlets are distributed across cities and regions [26]. It then sets the census stock beside two accessible official and quasi-official series: SECP incorporations as a measure of formal entry [12], and night-time lights as a measure of subsequent activity growth [19–21]. The three layers together support a simple typology of districts—commercial cores, mixed industrial-commercial districts, populous but shop-thin districts, and a sparse periphery—and a reading of formalisation as a thin overlay on a vast micro-enterprise base.

The note is written for replication. Parsing steps for the stacked PBS tables, the density formulae, and the concordance of district names belong in an appendix, so that later work may extend the same frame once a second census round or a geo-coded business register becomes available. Causal claims about roads, industrial estates, remittances or mall development are left for papers with a different design. The present purpose is more modest and,

given the novelty of the census frame, prior: to put the geography of Pakistani commerce on the table in a form that other researchers can use.

2. Data and measurement

2.1 Primary data examination

The working frame is the district release of Pakistan's first integrated Economic Census, carried out by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics with the Seventh Population and Housing Census [1, 6]. Enumerators recorded every economic unit encountered on the building frame and coded it to the Pakistan Standard Industrial Classification. The public district workbooks, posted province by province, are the files used here [2, 4]. Two tables from that release do the main work. Table 1 gives, for each district, the number of establishments and the persons engaged by major PSIC sector. Table 2 gives the same two quantities by unit type—retail shop, wholesale shop, service shop, production shop, hotel, factory, bank, school, and the remaining categories on the PBS list.

The workbooks use a stacking mechanism of managing district blocks, which leads to some risks in terms of accuracy, as opposed to a matrix list. A district name sits on its own row; a header follows; a district total follows; sector or unit-type rows follow after that. The files carry the usual marks of a first public release. District names vary in spelling across tables (Jhang appears as JHUNG in one sheet; Swat as SAWAT; Nowshera as NOWSHEHRA). Footnotes in the unit-type sheets occupy the same column as district titles. The compilation treats those footnotes as notes and keeps a single cleaned district identifier. Once parsed, Table 1 yields 135 districts across the four provinces: 36 in Punjab, 30 in Sindh, 35 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 34 in Balochistan. Islamabad Capital Territory is covered in the published national and provincial summaries and is brought in at that level; a district workbook in the same layout is still to be posted.

From the parsed blocks three stock measures are retained for every district. The first is the district total of establishments and of persons engaged. The second is wholesale and retail trade together with its workforce. The third, drawn from Table 2, is the count of retail shops and of wholesale shops. Two

supporting cuts travel with these: manufacturing (PSIC 10 to 33) and other service activities (PSIC 94 to 96), so that trade can be read against the rest of the local enterprise mix. Persons engaged per trading establishment give a crude measure of scale. District population from the 2023 Census converts the counts into densities—establishments per thousand residents—which are the quantities used in Section 3 [6].

The compiled four-province frame sits close to the published national totals. The remaining gap is accounted for, in the main, by Islamabad Capital Territory, whose establishment count in the Gallup Pakistan reading of the same census is of the order of 87,000 units [8, 11]. Table 1 sets out the files and the fields taken from them. Table 2 reports the compiled stock against the published national benchmarks. Table 3 reports the shop and related unit-type counts on which the retail analysis rests.

Table 1: Source files and fields drawn from the Economic Census district release

Source	What is taken
Table 1. Establishments and workforce by PSIC (major categories). Four provincial workbooks [2]. Grain: district × sector.	District name; sector; PSIC; establishments; persons engaged. Constructs: all establishments; PSIC 45–47; PSIC 10–33; PSIC 94–96; persons per trade unit.
Table 2. Establishments and workforce by unit type. Same provinces [4]. Grain: district × unit type.	Retail / wholesale / service / production shops; hotel; factory. Constructs: retail-shop and wholesale-shop counts; retail share.
Seventh Population and Housing Census, 2023 [6]. Grain: district.	Total population; urban share where published. Constructs: trade units and retail shops per 1,000 residents.

Workbooks from the PBS Economic Census pages. District identifiers standardised by hand where spellings diverged. Footnote rows in the unit-type files were set aside.

Table 2: Compiled four-province frame and published national benchmarks, Economic Census 2023/24

	Districts	Establishments	Persons engaged	Trade units (PSIC 45–47)	Persons in trade
Punjab	36	4,364,293	13,645,277	1,882,159	4,134,073
Sindh	30	1,385,170	5,713,319	695,488	1,905,010
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	35	1,004,235	3,981,466	456,231	916,802
Balochistan	34	303,089	1,382,545	151,427	338,232
Four-province compilation	**135**	**7,056,787**	**24,722,607**	**3,185,305**	**7,294,117**
Published national total (PBS / Gallup)	—	7.14 million	25.34 million	3.22 million	7.44 million

Compiled figures are the sum of district blocks in the provincial Table 1 workbooks [2]. Published national totals include Islamabad Capital Territory and any residual units outside the four workbooks [3, 8, 10]. Punjab's 4.36 million establishments are 61.8 per cent of the four-province frame and about 61 per cent of the published national stock. Trade is 45.1 per cent of compiled establishments in Punjab, 50.2 per cent in Sindh, 45.4 per cent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 50.0 per cent in Balochistan.

Table 3: Shop and related unit types in the compiled files

Unit type (PBS label)	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	Four-province total
Shop Retail	1,609,106	605,306	403,600	130,601	2,748,613
Shop Wholesale	109,652	44,594	21,773	9,993	186,012
Shop Service	526,913	166,141	85,195	28,472	806,721
Shop Production	415,676	120,880	81,762	16,959	635,277
Hotel	152,984	55,632	31,387	11,555	251,558
Factory	14,544	5,525	2,101	645	22,815
All establishments (district totals)	4,364,293	1,385,170	1,004,235	303,089	7,056,787

Labels follow the unit-type sheets [4]. The four-province retail-shop total of 2.75 million matches the published national figure of nearly 2.7 million retail shops once Islamabad and rounding in the public briefs are allowed for [5, 8]. Factories remain a thin layer: 22,815 units in the compiled frame, against more than two and a half million retail shops. The trade workforce of 7.29 million across 3.19 million trade establishments implies about 2.3 persons engaged per trading unit in the four-province frame.

Two features of this source shape everything that follows. The census is a stock taken in 2023/24, so densities in Section 3 describe the geography of premises as enumerated, rather than a history of openings. And the public district files already support the paper's main descriptive task: they name every district, they separate trade from other sectors, and they separate retail shops from the rest of the unit-type list. That is the foundation on which the SECP and night-light layers in the remainder of Section 2 are added.

2.2 Linking the census stock to corroborating series

Where the previous subsection records how many trading units stood in each district in 2023/24, two further public series supply movement and legal

form. The first is the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan's incorporation record [12]. The second is satellite night-time lights [19, 20]. Both join the census frame on geography that is already in the compiled files, and both are issued on a timetable that the census, as a single enumeration, does not provide.

Company incorporations join at province and, in the Commission's recent releases, at sector. Annual reports and monthly press notes give the number of new companies by Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Islamabad Capital Territory and Gilgit-Baltistan, with trading listed among the leading sectors beside information technology and e-commerce, services, and construction [12, 14, 15]. The stock of registered companies reached 222,697 at the close of 2023–24 after 27,542 new registrations in that year [12]; later releases put the register above 258,000 by the end of 2024–25 and at 294,101 by April 2026 [13, 15]. In the first four months of 2025–26 the Commission recorded 14,802 new companies, of which 7,476 were in Punjab, 3,230 in Islamabad Capital Territory, 2,197 in Sindh, 1,320 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 337 in Gilgit-Baltistan and 242 in Balochistan [14]. Trading accounted for 1,954 of those registrations. About three in ten of the new companies in that period came from some 250 cities and towns outside Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, including district headquarters such as Layyah, Burewala, Swat, Gwadar and Gilgit [14].

These figures match the census in direction even though they measure a different object. Punjab leads both the establishment stock and the flow of new companies. Trading is a large sector in both sources. The scale, however, differs by an order of magnitude: 3.19 million trade establishments in the four-province census frame against a national company register still below 0.3 million [2, 15]. The formalization ratio is the official, reproducible measure of how much of the enumerated bazaar has taken corporate form. Sector tags on new companies (trading, e-commerce, services) further show which parts of commerce are entering the corporate register, which the census unit-type list, being a stock of premises, leaves implicit.

Night-time lights join at district and, in processed compilations such as Data Darbar, at tehsil [19, 25]. VIIRS composites give a radiance value

for each month and year from the early 2010s onward [19]. Pakistani applications of the same family of data have already allocated provincial GDP and estimated district growth, including work on provincial and district rates [20], the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Bureau of Statistics night-light GDP study [21], and district GDP estimates for Azad Jammu and Kashmir [22]. Validation work on Karachi shows that radiance tracks population density and economic activity more reliably than intra-urban living standards [23]; harmonized DMSP–VIIRS series have been shown to predict subnational development indicators in other low-income settings [24].

The merge with the census is a name concordance on district titles, after the spelling variants already cleaned above. Once merged, two comparisons become available. The level comparison asks whether districts with a high 2023 trade density are also bright in the lights record. The change comparison ranks districts by growth in radiance over a common window (2012–2024, or the shorter 2020–2026 series) and sets that ranking beside the 2023 stock. Agreement on the level—commercial cores that are both shop-dense and luminous—strengthens the reading of the census map. Divergence on the change—shop-dense districts whose lights are flat, or thinner districts whose lights are rising—is equally useful, because it separates a large inherited stock of premises from recent thickening of activity.

A short national series from the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics supplies the historical scale against which both proxies are read [16]. That reconstruction puts wholesale and retail trade at about 2.66 million establishments and an average annual increase of 4.14 per cent since 1988, with output rising faster, at 6.50 per cent. The 2023 census stock is then the current end of a long national expansion rather than a one-year event. Population totals from the 2023 Census, already used as the density denominator, also join the lights series so that radiance can be expressed per resident where the raw night-time signal would otherwise favour large, densely built districts [6]. Labour Force Survey rounds, which record employment in trade at provincial level, offer a further consistency check on the workforce column of the census, though their district detail is thinner than the census frame and is used only in passing [7].

2.3 Limits of the compiled frame

The Economic Census records premises and persons engaged at the date of enumeration. A district history of openings and closures would require a second comparable census, an open Statistical Business Register with dates of birth and death, or a licensed point-of-interest panel with two vintages. Until those appear, growth in Section 5 is inferred from lights and from the corporate flow, with the PIDE national path as background [12, 16, 19].

SECP incorporations are companies. Most census establishments are unincorporated micro units. An increase in registrations may reflect easier online filing through eZfile as much as a new physical outlet [12], and the Commission's town list, while valuable, is still released as illustration rather than as a full microdata file of registered offices. Formalisation ratios in Section 4 are therefore provincial and indicative.

Night-time lights measure radiance. Gas flaring, snow and desert albedo, and the concentration of public lighting in cantonments and highways all affect the signal, which is why low-population tehsils need a flag and why agricultural output is better allocated by rural population than by luminosity [21, 23, 25]. Lights corroborate the census map; they do not count shutters.

Two further boundaries follow from the source files themselves. Household-based economic activity—tailoring, livestock, food preparation and the like—was enumerated on a separate, much larger count in the census documentation, and that count is left outside the establishment densities used here. Islamabad Capital Territory, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir enter the provincial and national comparisons from published summaries, while the tidy district matrix of Tables 2 and 3 is the four-province workbook release. The unit of analysis throughout is the district. Towns appear in the narrative as headquarters and as the SECP list of secondary centres; they are within districts rather than a parallel official frame.

3. The stock of commerce across districts

With the district frame in hand, the 2023/24 stock can be read at three resolutions: the province, the district count of trading units, and the mix of sectors inside those districts. Population totals from the Seventh Census convert

the counts into densities [6]. Unless a district figure is discussed on its own, provincial densities below use the official 2023 provincial populations, so that Islamabad's omission from the workbooks does not distort the four-province comparison.

3.1 National and provincial totals

Of the 7.06 million establishments compiled from the four provincial Table 1 files, 3.19 million—45.1 per cent—are in wholesale and retail trade, including repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (PSIC 45–47) [2]. Those trading units engage 7.29 million persons, or about 2.3 persons per establishment. Retail shops, from the unit-type files, are 2.75 million of the same frame [4]. Trade is therefore the modal activity in every province, yet the weight of that mode and the density of premises both vary.

Punjab holds 4.36 million establishments and 1.88 million trade units, 61.8 and 59.1 per cent of the four-province totals. Relative to its 2023 population of 127.7 million, that is 34.2 establishments and 14.7 trade units per thousand residents. Sindh's 1.39 million establishments and 0.70 million trade units give lower densities, 24.9 and 12.5 per thousand, on a population of 55.7 million. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with 1.00 million establishments and 0.46 million trade units, is close to Sindh on density (24.6 and 11.2 per thousand). Balochistan's 0.30 million establishments and 0.15 million trade units, on 14.9 million residents, are 20.4 and 10.2 per thousand. Trade's share of all establishments is in fact highest in Sindh and Balochistan (50.2 and 50.0 per cent) and lowest in Punjab (43.1 per cent), where agriculture-linked units and a thicker manufacturing layer take up more of the local mix.

Persons engaged per trading establishment are 2.2 in Punjab, 2.0 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2.2 in Balochistan and 2.7 in Sindh. The Sindh figure is pulled up by Karachi's districts, where trading units are still small by any corporate standard and yet larger than the kiryana average in the rest of the frame.

Table 4: Establishments, trade units and density by province, Economic Census 2023/24

	Pop. 2023	Estab.	Per 1,000	Trade units	Trade / 1,000	Trade share (%)	Persons / trade unit
Punjab	127,688,922	4,364,293	34.2	1,882,159	14.7	43.1	2.2
Sindh	55,696,147	1,385,170	24.9	695,488	12.5	50.2	2.7
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	40,856,097	1,004,235	24.6	456,231	11.2	45.4	2.0
Balochistan	14,894,402	303,089	20.4	151,427	10.2	50.0	2.2
Four provinces	239,135,568	7,056,787	29.5	3,185,305	13.3	45.1	2.3

Establishment and trade counts are the compiled district totals in Table 2 [2]. Populations are the official 2023 Census provincial totals [6]. Persons engaged per trade unit are trade workforce divided by trade establishments.

3.2 District density of trade

Absolute counts and densities tell different stories. On counts, the commercial map is concentrated in a handful of large Punjab districts and in Karachi. Lahore has 244,481 trade units and Faisalabad 181,751. Gujranwala, Multan and Rawalpindi follow, each with more than 80,000. The seven Karachi districts together have 315,983 trade units—9.9 per cent of the four-province trade stock—on a 2023 population of about 20.4 million. The ten districts with the largest trade counts hold 31.8 per cent of all compiled trade units. Peshawar (59,960) and Quetta (48,954) are the largest stocks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

Density, restricted here to districts with at least one million residents so that small highland and desert denominators do not dominate the ranking, rearranges that list. Karachi South has 27.8 trade units per thousand residents, well above every other large district, and is entirely urban. Faisalabad (20.0), Keamari (19.0), Quetta (18.9) and Lahore (18.8) form a second tier. Multan (16.9) and Gujranwala (15.9) sit just below. Peshawar, with a large rural hinterland inside the district boundary, has 12.6 trade units per thousand—near the four-province average of 13.3—despite a substantial absolute stock. Among large districts the thin tail is also clear: Kech (3.6 per thousand), Khyber (5.8) and Tharparkar (6.0), and a run of upper-Sindh and newly merged districts in the 8–10 range (Thatta, Bajaur, Kashmore, Badin, Jacobabad).

Two readings follow. First, metropolitan cores are commercially dense, but density is not reserved for the three largest cities: Faisalabad, Multan, Gujranwala and Quetta belong in the same band as Lahore. Second, several populous districts remain shop-thin relative to their populations. The gap between Lahore's 18.8 trade units per thousand and Tharparkar's 6.0 is a fact

about how unevenly premises are spread, even after population is held in the denominator.

Table 5: Leading districts by trade-unit count and by trade density (population at least 1 million)

Rank	By number of trade units	Units	Per 1,000	By density (pop. ≥ 1m)	Per 1,000	Units
1	Lahore	244,481	18.8	Karachi South	27.8	64,858
2	Faisalabad	181,751	20.0	Faisalabad	20.0	181,751
3	Gujranwala	94,661	15.9	Keamari	19.0	39,384
4	Multan	90,789	16.9	Quetta	18.9	48,954
5	Rawalpindi	81,825	13.4	Lahore	18.8	244,481
6	Rahim Yar Khan	74,094	13.3	Multan	16.9	90,789
7	Karachi South	64,858	27.8	Chakwal	16.1	27,926
8	Muzaffargarh	62,367	12.4	Gujranwala	15.9	94,661
9	Peshawar	59,960	12.6	Jhelum	15.9	21,929
10	Bahawalpur	58,189	13.6	Malir	15.7	38,258

Population denominators are 2023 Census district totals [6] joined to the converted PBS Table 1 files [2]. Karachi is shown by district; the seven Karachi districts combined have 315,983 trade units, or 15.5 per thousand residents. Small districts with high ratios on a modest base—Upper Chitral is the main example—are omitted from this ranking.

3.3 Composition

Trade's share of local establishments is highest in the commercial cores and lower where agriculture-linked units fill more of the frame. In Karachi South, 63.0 per cent of establishments are in wholesale and retail trade; in Quetta 58.1 per cent; in Lahore 56.9 per cent; in Peshawar 51.7 per cent. In a band of central and north-eastern Punjab the share falls to the low thirties: Narowal 31.5 per cent, Hafizabad 31.0, Nankana Sahib 33.7, Chiniot 34.3, Toba Tek Singh 34.1. Those same districts record agriculture, forestry and fishing at 32–41 per cent of establishments. The census is counting farm-linked premises as well as shops, and in the canal colonies that farm-linked layer is thick.

Manufacturing's share of establishments is more even, and modest, once the unit of observation is the premise rather than the factory. Across the four provinces manufacturing is 10.1 per cent of establishments in Punjab, 9.6 per cent in Sindh, 9.0 per cent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 6.9 per cent in Balochistan. Even Gujranwala, Sialkot, Sheikhupura and Faisalabad—districts known for industry—have manufacturing shares of establishments in the 9–12 per cent range, because the census manufacturing category includes small production shops alongside factories. Table 3 has already shown how rare the factory unit type is: 22,815 factories in the four-province frame against 2.75 million

retail shops. Other service activities (PSIC 94–96) are 13–14 per cent of establishments in every province and are a stable background category rather than a regional marker.

Scale inside trade remains micro almost everywhere. Lahore's 3.1 persons engaged per trading establishment is high for this frame; the provincial means stay between 2.0 and 2.7. The "missing middle" documented in the national briefs is visible here as a district fact: the geography of commerce is a geography of very small units [9].

Table 6: Sector shares of establishments by province (per cent)

	Trade (45–47)	Manuf. (10–33)	Other services (94–96)	Agric. (01–03)
Punjab	43.1	10.1	12.9	19.2
Sindh	50.2	9.6	13.8	7.3
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	45.4	9.0	13.9	13.4
Balochistan	50.0	6.9	14.2	8.2

Shares are compiled from district Table 1 blocks [2]. Remaining sectors—education, health, accommodation and food, public administration and others—make up the residual.

3.4 A simple typology

Reviews of retail-outlet geography find the same regularities in other settings: shops cluster with population and transport, cores remain dense, and thin hinterlands persist [26]. The stock, the densities and the sector mix sort the 135 districts into four descriptive types. Commercial cores combine a large or mid-sized stock of trade units with a high trade share of establishments and, in most cases, high density. Karachi South, Lahore, Quetta, Keamari and Faisalabad are the clearest members. Peshawar belongs on the absolute-stock criterion and on trade share, with density held down by the rural part of the district. These are the places where the corporate register and night-lights in the next two sections are most likely to coincide with the census map. Mixed industrial-commercial districts have large establishment totals and a lower trade share, with a visible manufacturing or farm-linked layer beside the shops. Gujranwala, Sialkot, Sheikhupura, Kasur, Gujrat and Chiniot are of this type. Commerce is present in volume—Gujranwala's 94,661 trade units would lead several provinces—yet it shares the premise stock with workshops and, in the canal districts, with agriculture-linked units. Populous,

shop-moderate districts have a million or more residents and trade densities at or below the four-province mean. Rawalpindi (13.4 per thousand), Rahim Yar Khan (13.3), Muzaffargarh (12.4) and a long list of southern Punjab and upper-Sindh districts fall here. The absolute number of shops is often large because the population is large; the premise cover per resident is ordinary. Sparse and peripheral districts have both a small stock and a low density. Kech, Washuk, Kohlu, the Kohistan districts, Orakzai, Khyber, South Waziristan and Tharparkar are representative. Trade shares of establishments can still be near half, as in Balochistan as a whole; what is scarce is the number of premises relative to territory and population. These districts are the counterpart to the cores in any later discussion of where formal companies and night-time radiance have, or have not, thickened. Whether cores are also the places of fastest subsequent activity, and whether sparse districts are seeing catch-up in the corporate register, are questions for the SECP and lights layers rather than for the 2023 count of shops.

4. Formalisation and new company formation

The Economic Census counts premises. The Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan counts companies. Putting the two official series on the same provincial map gives a first measure of how much of enumerated commerce has taken corporate form, and where new companies are being registered after the census year.

4.1 Disconnects or differences

At the close of 2023–24 the Commission reported 222,697 registered companies, after 27,542 incorporations in that year [12]. Subsequent releases put the register above 258,000 by the end of 2024–25 and at 294,101 by April 2026 [13, 15]. Against the published census stock of 7.14 million establishments, the corporate register is 4.1 per cent of the establishment count at the later date, and 3.1 per cent at mid-2024 [8, 12]. Against the 3.22 million trade establishments in the published national briefs, the entire company register—trading firms plus every other sector—is still about one company per eleven trading premises [10, 15].

PIDE's earlier reconstruction of wholesale and retail trade pointed in the same direction: NTN holders were estimated at 17.2 per cent of WRT establishments, and return filers at 5.9 per cent [16]. The SECP register is narrower still, because a national tax number can attach to an unincorporated business. Most of the 2.75 million retail shops in the compiled unit-type files are outside the corporate form [4]. Survey evidence from Lahore wholesale and retail micro-entrepreneurs points the same way: only a small minority operate at full formality, and most sit on a continuum between registered and unregistered practice [28]. Cross-country work on entrepreneurship in emerging markets likewise treats formal registration as a conditional, institutionally mediated choice rather than an automatic upgrade of the shop stock [27].

The gap is also a provincial one, and Islamabad Capital Territory is the exception that clarifies the rule. The Commission's 2023–24 incorporations were 11,465 in Punjab, 8,626 in Islamabad, 4,094 in Sindh, 2,248 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 623 in Gilgit-Baltistan and 486 in Balochistan [12]. Relative to the compiled establishment stock, those flows amount to 0.26 new companies per hundred establishments in Punjab, 0.30 in Sindh, 0.22 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 0.16 in Balochistan. Islamabad, with an establishment stock of the order of 87,000 in the Gallup reading of the census, recorded 8,626 new companies in a single year—almost ten new companies per hundred enumerated establishments [11, 12]. The capital is a registered-office magnet. The four provinces remain a landscape of unincorporated units with a thin annual overlay of companies.

Table 7: Census establishments and the SECP company register

	Establishments	Companies	Companies as % of estab.
Published national stock, 2023/24	7.14 million	—	—
SECP register, 30 June 2024	—	222,697	3.1
SECP register, April 2026	—	294,101	4.1
Trade establishments, published national	3.22 million	294,101 (all sectors)	9.1

The company column in the last row is the entire SECP register, all sectors included [8, 10, 15]. A trading-only company stock at provincial level is still unpublished in machine-readable form. Percentages use the 7.14 million published establishment total.

Table 8: New incorporations, 2023–24, beside the compiled establishment stock

	Census establishments	New companies, 2023–24	New co. per 100 estab.
Punjab	4,364,293	11,465	0.26
Sindh	1,385,170	4,094	0.30
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	1,004,235	2,248	0.22
Balochistan	303,089	486	0.16
Islamabad Capital Territory	∼87,000	8,626	∼9.9
Gilgit-Baltistan	—	623	—

Establishment counts for the four provinces are from Table 2 [2]. The ICT establishment figure follows Gallup Pakistan's reading of the census [11]. Incorporation counts are from the SECP Annual Report 2024 [12].

4.2 Where formal firms are appearing

The provincial ranking of new companies follows the census ranking of establishments, with one displacement. Punjab leads both series. Sindh is second in the establishment stock and third in incorporations once Islamabad is counted separately. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan trail on both. What the incorporation series adds is the capital's weight in the corporate flow and a documented spread toward smaller cities.

In the first four months of 2025–26 the Commission registered 14,802 companies, 99.9 per cent of them through the eZfile portal [14]. Punjab accounted for 7,476 of those registrations, Islamabad 3,230, Sindh 2,197, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 1,320, Gilgit-Baltistan 337 and Balochistan 242. The Commission noted that nearly 30 per cent of the total originated in some 250 cities and towns outside Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, and named Layyah, Burewala, Bhakkar, Pakpattan, Hasilpur, Chaman, Gwadar, Zhob, Turbat, Bannu, Kohat, Tank, Swat, Mansehra, Thatta, Larkana, Dadu, Rohri, Hunza and Gilgit among them. April 2026, a record month of 4,082 incorporations, reproduced the same geography: Punjab 51 per cent, Islamabad 18 per cent, Sindh 15 per cent, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 8 per cent, Gilgit-Baltistan 7 per cent, Balochistan 2 per cent [15].

Sector tags on the new companies only partly overlap the census trade category. Information technology and e-commerce led the four-month 2025–26 tally with 2,999 registrations (20.3 per cent). Trading followed with 1,954 (13.2 per cent), then services with 1,807 and real estate development and construction with 1,393 [14]. In April 2026 trading was again second, with

757 companies after 832 in information technology and e-commerce [15]. Trading is a persistent corporate sector. It is no longer the leading one. The corporate margin of Pakistani commerce is tilting toward digitally registered IT, e-commerce and services firms, many of them with registered offices in Islamabad or Lahore and with operational footprints that the establishment census would record, if at all, as small service units. Evidence from family-owned retail shops in Pakistan suggests that digital platforms can support informal transactions without pulling the shop itself into corporate form [29]. That reading fits a register now led by IT and e-commerce companies sitting above a still-unincorporated shop base.

Private limited companies were 59 per cent of the four-month 2025–26 registrations and single-member companies 37 per cent [14]. The corporate overlay is itself a micro overlay: most new companies are closely held vehicles rather than multi-establishment chains. That is consistent with PIDE's count of about 134 retail chain-store brands, concentrated in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad–Rawalpindi [18]. Chains are visible in the large-city cores of Section 3.4. They are a small fraction of the 2.75 million retail shops.

Table 9: Sector mix of new SECP registrations, July to October 2025

Sector	New companies	Share of period total (%)
Information technology and e-commerce	2,999	20.3
Trading	1,954	13.2
Services	1,807	12.2
Real estate development and construction	1,393	9.4
Tourism and transport	1,042	7.0
Education	787	5.3
Food and beverages	751	5.1
Other sectors	4,069	27.5
Total	14,802	100.0

SECP press release of 12 November 2025 [14]. "Other sectors" aggregates the remaining published headings (mining, marketing, textiles, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, healthcare, and the rest).

4.3 Reading the sources together

The commercial cores of Section 3.4 are also the provinces and cities that dominate the corporate flow. Punjab's 61.8 per cent of compiled establishments and its 42 per cent of 2023–24 incorporations (11,465 of 27,542) are the same

regional concentration seen from two official windows [2, 12]. Karachi and Lahore carry both the thickest shop stock and a large share of trading and services companies. Quetta and Peshawar, the provincial cores, have the largest establishment counts in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and belong to the same broad pattern, even though their annual incorporation numbers remain small.

Formalisation intensity, measured as new companies per hundred census establishments, is another matter. Islamabad is in a class of its own. Among the four provinces the rates in Table 8 are tightly bunched between 0.16 and 0.30. Balochistan's establishment stock is already the thinnest per resident; its corporate flow is thinner still. Sindh's rate is slightly above Punjab's, which is consistent with Karachi's role as a corporate domicile for firms whose premises may sit in other districts. The census density map and the incorporation map therefore agree on where the majority is and diverge on where the corporate form is disproportionately used.

The secondary-town list in the Commission's releases is the one element that the district census stock, taken alone, would miss [14, 15]. Layyah, Bhakkar, Pakpattan, Swat, Gwadar and Hunza are district headquarters or small cities inside the shop-moderate and sparse types of Section 3.4. Their appearance in the incorporation record is evidence that digital registration has reached beyond the three metropolitan cores. It is evidence of registered offices and legal vehicles, which may or may not coincide with a new storefront in the same town.

5. Change over time

The 2023/24 census is a stock. Two public series give the country a history against which that stock can be read: the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics' reconstruction of wholesale and retail trade since 1988 [16], and the SECP's annual count of new companies [12, 13]. District night-time lights remain the intended spatial proxy for the same question—whether activity has thickened in the cores of Section 3.4 or in the shop-moderate and sparse districts—and the method for that merge is set out first.

5.1 Method

VIIRS annual composites from the Earth Observation Group at the Colorado School of Mines give a cloud-screened radiance field at roughly 500 metres from 2012 onward [19]. Pakistani applications of the same family of data have already allocated provincial GDP and estimated district growth, including provincial and district rates [20], the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa night-light GDP study [21], and the Azad Jammu and Kashmir district GDP estimates [22]. Data Darbar's processed layer uses monthly VIIRS from June 2020 to 2026 at tehsil level, with a flag on tehsils below one person per square kilometre so that snow and desert albedo are less likely to be read as activity [25]. At intra-urban scale, radiance is better read as a joint function of density, infrastructure and activity than as a welfare measure [23]. Harmonized night-light series improve the case for using lights as a subnational development proxy where official GDP is thin [24].

5.2 Two national series

Table 10 restates the two public series that the draft treated as Figure 5.1. An average annual increase of 4.14 per cent in WRT establishments since 1988, ending at the Institute's estimate of 2.66 million, implies a 1988 stock of about 0.64 million units, 1.28 million by 2005 and 1.92 million by 2015 [16, 17]. The 2023/24 census count of 3.22 million units in PSIC 45–47 sits above that path [3, 10]. The two figures are different objects: PIDE's series is a reconstructed national estimate of wholesale and retail trade; the census is a full enumeration of trade premises, including repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, on a geo-coded building frame. The useful reading is that both describe a sector that has multiplied several times over a generation, and that the census stock is the larger, more complete count at the end of that generation.

Output in the same PIDE reconstruction rose faster still, at 6.50 per cent a year [16]. Premises increased; value added per premise increased with them. That is consistent with the micro scale in Table 4—about 2.3 persons engaged per trading establishment in the compiled frame—and with a long rise in turnover inside those small units.

New SECP registrations were 16,929 in 2019–20, jumped to 25,533 in 2020–21 as online filing widened, and then ran at 26,502, 27,746 and 27,542 in the next three years [12]. The July 2025 release puts 2024–25 above 35,000, a 27 per cent increase on 2023–24, with the register itself moving from 222,697 companies at 30 June 2024 to more than 258,000 a year later [13]. The timing matters for interpretation. The step-up after 2019–20 is in large part the eZfile portal and related facilitation; it is a formalisation surge as much as a surge in new physical outlets. Trading remains a large heading inside that flow, as Table 9 showed, while information technology and e-commerce have taken the lead.

Table 10: Two public series of change in Pakistani commerce

Panel	Series	Value
A. Establishments	Implied WRT stock, 1988 (PIDE path)	$\approx$ 0.64 million
	WRT stock, PIDE reconstruction (end of series)	2.66 million
	Average annual growth in WRT establishments since 1988	4.14%
	Average annual growth in WRT output since 1988	6.50%
	Census stock, PSIC 45–47, 2023/24	3.22 million
B. Companies	New SECP registrations, 2019–20	16,929
	New SECP registrations, 2020–21	25,533
	New SECP registrations, 2021–22	26,502
	New SECP registrations, 2022–23	27,746
	New SECP registrations, 2023–24	27,542
	New SECP registrations, 2024–25	$>$ 35,000
	Company register, 30 June 2024	222,697
	Company register, end-2024–25	$>$ 258,000
	Company register, April 2026	294,101

Panel A: SIDDIQUE [16]; PIDE [17]; PBS / Gallup Pakistan reading of the Economic Census 2023/24 [3, 10]. Panel B: SECP [12]; SECP [13]; SECP [15]. The 2024–25 figure is recorded as "over 35,000" in the July 2025 release.

5.3 Implications for district types

Until district radiance is on the same file as Table 5, the implications for the four types in Section 3.4 are directional.

Commercial cores already hold a disproportionate share of the 2023 stock and of new companies. Lights work on Pakistan and the wider South Asian sample has usually found persistence: places that are bright remain bright [20, 24]. The test for a revision is whether Karachi South, Lahore, Faisalabad,

Quetta and Keamari also show above-average radiance growth after 2012, or whether their lights are high and flat while secondary districts catch up.

Mixed industrial-commercial districts—Gujranwala, Sialkot, Sheikhupura, Kasur—are the places where factory lighting and workshop lighting will inflate radiance relative to shop counts. A high light-growth rate there is consistent with industry as much as with new retail. The census manufacturing share of establishments, already shown to be modest, will need the factory unit-type count beside the lights ranking before those districts are read as commercial catch-up.

Populous, shop-moderate districts and the sparse periphery are where a lights ranking would add the most. A district with 9–12 trade units per thousand residents in 2023 and a steep radiance increase after 2012 is a candidate for recent thickening that the stock, taken alone, understates. A sparse district whose lights are flat is consistent with the thin premise cover already measured. The SECP secondary-town list (Layyah, Bhakkar, Swat, Gwadar, Hunza and the rest) supplies names to look up first in that ranking [14].

The national historical anchor is already firm enough for the close of a short paper. Commerce in Pakistan has added premises at about four per cent a year for a generation on the PIDE path; the 2023/24 census finds more than three million trade units and 2.75 million retail shops at the end of that path; the corporate register has been adding companies at a rising rate, still equal to only a few per cent of the establishment stock [2, 15, 16]. Growth, in other words, is the background condition.

6. Discussion and conclusion

6.1 Information from the layers

The census stock, the company register and the two national time series describe the same economy from different official windows. Commerce in the four provinces is a field of 3.19 million trade establishments and 2.75 million retail shops, almost all of them micro units of two or three persons engaged [2, 4]. Forty-five per cent of all compiled establishments are in wholesale and retail trade. That share is higher in Sindh and Balochistan than in Punjab, where agriculture-linked premises take up more of the local mix. Density, once

population is in the denominator, still favours a short list of cores—Karachi South, Faisalabad, Keamari, Quetta, Lahore, Multan, Gujranwala—while populous districts in upper Sindh, the merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and much of Balochistan remain shop-thin [6]. Ten districts hold 32 per cent of the compiled trade stock. Karachi's seven districts together hold 10 per cent.

The corporate layer is small beside that stock and is organised differently. Registered companies were 3.1 per cent of published census establishments in mid-2024 and 4.1 per cent by April 2026 [12, 15]. New incorporations per hundred establishments in 2023–24 ran at 0.16 to 0.30 in the four provinces and near ten in Islamabad Capital Territory. Trading is a persistent heading among new companies and is no longer the leading one; information technology and e-commerce have taken that place [14]. The Commission's own releases put about three in ten recent registrations in some 250 cities and towns outside Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. Formalisation, on this evidence, is a thin, metropolitan-skewed rim that has begun to include secondary district headquarters.

The time series place both facts in a longer expansion. On the PIDE path, wholesale and retail establishments have grown at 4.14 per cent a year since 1988, from an implied 0.64 million units to 2.66 million, with output rising faster at 6.50 per cent [16]. The census count of 3.22 million trade units is the larger, enumerated stock at the end of that path. Company registrations stepped up after 2019–20 as online filing widened and exceeded 35,000 in 2024–25 [13]. Growth in premises and growth in legal vehicles are both established at national level. What remains spatially open is whether radiance after 2012 has thickened in the cores, in the mixed industrial-commercial districts, or in the shop-moderate and sparse types named in Section 3.4 [19, 20].

The three layers therefore agree on concentration and on expansion, and they part on form. The mass of Pakistani commerce is unincorporated retail. The growth of that mass is measured in decades. The corporate form is recent, digital and still small.

6.2 Effect and impact

Municipal market policy and SME programmes that treat “commerce” as a single object will miss the typology. Cores already have dense premise cover and a disproportionate share of companies; the binding constraints there are more likely to be congestion, titling, tax administration and the terms on which micro units graduate into the missing middle. Shop-moderate and sparse districts have the opposite problem: few premises per resident and a corporate flow that is thinner still. A utility-store series or a bazaar-upgrading programme in those districts is a different instrument from a company-law reform that mainly shows up in Islamabad’s incorporation count.

Formalisation policy has the same split. eZfile has raised the annual flow of companies and has reached named secondary towns [12, 14]. The formalisation ratio in Table 8 shows how far that flow still sits from the establishment stock. A target defined on company registrations will move the rim. A target defined on shops per thousand residents, or on persons engaged in trade, will move the mass. Both targets are legitimate; they are different targets. Provincial planning departments that now have district Table 1 and Table 2 files can at least set them separately [2, 4].

The Statistical Business Register promised as a census output is the instrument that would join the two [1]. A register with district location, PSIC code, unit type and a date of birth would turn Section 3 into a panel and would make Section 4’s provincial ratios into district ratios. Until that file is public, night-time lights are the practical spatial proxy for change, and the SECP town list is the practical qualitative list of places to watch [14, 19].

Secondary cities are the interesting margin for a follow-up paper. Faisalabad already belongs with the cores on density. Gujranwala, Multan, Peshawar, Quetta, Sialkot and a string of Punjab canal-colony districts have large absolute stocks and mixed sector composition. Layyah, Swat, Gwadar and Hunza appear in the incorporation record with modest census densities. Those names are where a lights ranking and, later, a business register would most change the present map.

6.3 Limits and next measurement steps

The limits follow from the sources and have already disciplined the design. The census is a 2023/24 stock; household enterprises sit on a separate, larger count; Islamabad, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir enter only through published summaries; district titles required a concordance; small-district densities are sensitive to the population denominator. Incorporations are companies, often with a registered office in one place and premises in another, and the 2020–21 step-up in Panel B of Table 10 is in part a filing reform. Lights measure radiance [21, 23].

The next measurement steps are therefore short and ordered. First, attach annual VIIRS radiance to the 135-district file and report growth rates beside Table 5, with a flag on low-population units [19, 24, 25]. Second, request from the Commission a machine-readable list of incorporations by registered-office district and by sector, so that Table 8 can be rebuilt at the same grain as Table 5. Third, fold Islamabad into the tidy matrix once a district workbook in the Table 1 layout is posted. Fourth, keep the 2017 population totals as an alternative denominator and, where urban shares are published, split density into urban and rural parts of the same district. Peshawar's mid-range density is the warning that district boundaries mix a commercial core with a rural hinterland.

6.4 Conclusion

Pakistan's first integrated Economic Census puts more than seven million establishments on a district frame and finds trade at the centre of that frame [1]. In the four provinces compiled here there are 3.19 million wholesale and retail units and 2.75 million retail shops, 13.3 trade units per thousand residents, and 2.3 persons engaged per trading establishment. The geography of those units is uneven. A handful of cores are commercially dense; a long tail of populous and peripheral districts is shop-thin; a middle group of industrial-commercial districts holds shops beside workshops and farm-linked premises.

The corporate register covers a few per cent of that stock [15]. New companies have been arriving at a rising rate, with Islamabad far above the provincial formalisation ratios and with trading still important inside a flow now led

by information technology and e-commerce. Secondary towns appear in that flow. They remain a list rather than a district panel.

Over a generation the trading sector has added premises at about four per cent a year on the PIDE reconstruction, and output has risen faster [16]. The 2023/24 count is the enumerated stock at the end of that expansion. Growth is therefore the background. The contribution of this note is to put the present geography of that growth on the table—district by district, sector by sector, and beside the only official flow of new firms—so that a lights ranking, a public business register, or a second census can measure how the map is changing.

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Štěpán Turčín

The Course of the Šik Reform and Its Possible Final Form, *Part II*

Abstract: This second part of the study turns from the course of the Šik Reform to the form it was intended to take. Drawing on the Action Programme of 1968, draft legislation on socialist enterprises and contemporary theoretical documents, it reconstructs the projected model of enterprise autonomy, workers' councils and the receding role of directive planning. It then follows the gradual curtailment of these designs after August 1968 and the political rejection of the reform by early 1970.

Keywords: Šik Reform; economic planning; socialist economy; Czechoslovakia; 1968; workers' councils; enterprise autonomy

1. The Possible Final Form of the Šik Reform

The third and final stage of the reform process began in 1968, when Alexander Dubček assumed the post of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz) in January, and Ota Šik was appointed Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Reform in May. The reform thus gained new momentum, and certain "taboos" that had previously constrained the scope of reform were abandoned under the new political leadership. Although this stage was never completed due to the external intervention of Warsaw Pact forces in August 1968, it is possible to trace the intended direction of the Šik Reform through legislative drafts and theoretical documents produced by various experts and institutions during 1968 and 1969.

The principal political document of the so-called "post-January period" was the *Akční program KSČ* [*Action Programme of the CPCz*], adopted by the CPCz Central Committee on April 5, 1968.[1] This document marked a conceptual shift from decentralization to democratization. At the April plenary session of the CPCz Central Committee, Dubček[2] declared his intention to deepen and accelerate the reform with the following words:

"We want to implement the new system of management in practice. We must stop speaking only of improving the system and clearly state that what we seek is a profound economic reform, aimed at creating a new model for the functioning of the socialist economy."[3]

The *Action Programme* stated, among other things, that the economic plan should be transformed "from a tool of command into an instrument through which society determines, by scientific means, the most advantageous long-term direction of its development." It criticized the system of protecting

[1] ŠULC, Zdislav (ed.). *Dokumenty k hospodářské politice v Československu z let 1963–1969…* [*Documents on Economic Policy in Czechoslovakia from 1963 to 1969…*], s. 78–79.

[2] KOSTA, Jiří. *K historii a koncepci československé ekonomické reformy v letech 1965–1969…* [*On the History and Concept of the Czechoslovak Economic Reform in 1965–1969…*], s. 31.

[3] *Rok šedesátý osmý v usneseních a dokumentech ÚV KSČ* [*The Year 1968 in the Resolutions and Documents of the CPCz Central Committee*]. Praha: Svoboda, 1969, s. 83.

economically inefficient and backward enterprises, along with the associated pricing, subsidy, and grant policies, especially the system of surcharges in foreign trade:

"It is not sustainable to blunt economic policy by taking from those who perform well and giving to those who manage poorly."

Differences in enterprise income levels were henceforth utilized to reflect actual differences in economic performance. Enterprises were to be granted freedom in all matters directly related to their management and operations, with the ability to respond creatively to market needs. Economic competition – especially with advanced foreign competitors – was emphasized as a key motivating force.

The programme also introduced a vision for the democratization of the economy, which included "the realization of enterprise and enterprise group autonomy and their relative independence from state organs." Enterprises would have the right to form voluntary associations, decide the scope of their activities, leave such associations, operate independently, or join new ones.[4] This process, however, was not to take place spontaneously, but under government-defined rules – later formalized in the draft *Law on Socialist Enterprises*.[5] Additionally, it expressed support for cooperative enterprise in agriculture. Unified agricultural cooperatives were to be allowed to sell a portion of their produce directly to consumers and the retail network. Cooperative activity was to be permitted wherever cooperatives could finance their operations through their own revenues. The long-term goal was to transform individual cooperatives into autonomous, fully-fledged organizations and to dismantle unnecessary administrative centralization. Supervisory bodies over cooperatives were to be limited to those performing economically beneficial functions. In the service sector, small-scale personal enterprise was also to be granted a legitimate role.[6]

[4] *Ibidem*, s. 125–127.

[5] ŠULC, Zdislav. *Hospodářská politika* [*Economic Policy*]. Praha: Consus, 1993. ISBN 80-901004-7-3, s. 100.

[6] *Rok šedesátý osmý v usneseních a dokumentech ÚV KSČ...* [*The Year 1968 in the Resolutions and Documents of the CPCz Central Committee...*], s. 128–129.

The *Action Programme* also addressed the question of enterprise governance. In the new model, enterprise work collectives were to feel directly the consequences of both good and poor management, while also gaining influence over how enterprises were run. So-called democratic organs within enterprises were to be granted formal authority over enterprise leadership. Directors and senior managers would be accountable to these bodies for the overall results of their management and would also be appointed to their positions by them. These governance organs were to be formed through a combination of elected representatives from the enterprise's workforce and selected external participants with the expertise and qualifications needed for effective decision-making.[7] Although the *Action Programme* did not explicitly name this model, it effectively laid the foundation for a system of enterprise self-management, in which decision-making would be shared with specific internal governance bodies–namely, *workers' councils* (*rady pracujících*). [8]

Among most members of the CPCz Central Committee, the preferred design was the so-called "one-third model," according to which one-third of the council would be elected by enterprise employees, one-third would consist of appointed external experts (e.g., academics), and one-third would be made up of representatives from state authorities (such as ministries). Ota Šik opposed this model. He proposed that workers' councils should be elected solely by the enterprise's employees, with external experts allowed to join only with the consent of the workforce. The council would be accountable to the employees and subject to their control. It would also be responsible for selecting, appointing, and overseeing the enterprise director.

Šik publicly presented this concept on May 20, 1968, and thanks to the substantial media attention it received, enterprises quickly embraced the idea. Some had already begun electing their self-governance bodies even before the proposal was formally approved by the government on June 6, 1968. The issue of workers' councils was further elaborated in the document *Zásady pro zřizování kolektivních podnikatelských orgánů v podnicích* [*Principles for the*

[7] *Ibidem*, s. 126–127.

[8] LONDÁK, Miroslav. *Ekonomická tzv. Šikova reforma…* [*The So-Called Šik Economic Reform…*], s. 335.

Establishment of Collective Entrepreneurial Organs in Enterprises], dated May 24, 1968.[9] Among other things, it stated:

"The creation of collective entrepreneurial organs – enterprise directorates and workers' councils – is a major step in enforcing enterprise autonomy, eliminating bureaucratic and directive forms of enterprise management, and represents a significant move toward the democratization of the entire national economy."[10]

Although the *Action Programme* laid out a clear path for continuing the economic reform, there was ultimately not enough time for its full implementation due to the Warsaw Pact invasion. Part of the most visible elements that were successfully introduced were the *workers' councils*, which remained in place roughly until the summer of 1969. Under heavy pressure from the Soviet Union, they were dismantled by the spring of that year. The last functioning council, located at the Škoda plant in Plzeň, was forced to cease operations on November 12, 1969.[11]

After August 1968, the reform movement lost one of its key figures: Ota Šik. At the time of the invasion, Šik was on vacation in Yugoslavia. Branded by the Soviets as a leading "counterrevolutionary" whom they wished to remove, he did not return to Czechoslovakia. Instead, he submitted his resignation by telegram on September 2, 1968, and chose to emigrate to Switzerland, where he subsequently accepted a position at the University of Basel.[12] In a televised interview for Swiss television on November 24, 1968, Šik was asked how closely his proposed model resembled capitalism. He responded

[9] ŠIK, Ota. *Jarní probuzení – iluze a skutečnost…* [*Spring Awakening – Illusion and Reality…*], s. 179–180. Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 12, a. j. 114, *Zásady pro zřizování kolektivních podnikatelských orgánů v podnicích z 24. května 1968* [*Principles for the Establishment of Collective Entrepreneurial Bodies in Enterprises of 24 May 1968*], s. 1.

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[11] KOSTA, Jiří. *K historii a koncepci československé ekonomické reformy v letech 1965–1969…* [*On the History and Concept of the Czechoslovak Economic Reform in 1965–1969…*], s. 38.

[12] ŠIK, Ota. *Jarní probuzení – iluze a skutečnost…* [*Spring Awakening – Illusion and Reality…*], s. 210, 217.

that it was still a socialist model that did not depart from the principle of collective ownership – specifically, it did not envisage the introduction of private ownership in industry. The only exception would be small businesses based on personal or family initiative, which would be permitted as private enterprise. Everything else would be either cooperative property or a newly conceived form of collective ownership, distinct from bureaucratic state ownership. The aim was the complete separation of enterprises from the state.

This form of collective ownership would apply to large enterprises, which would have no shareholders and pay no dividends. Profits would not be distributed to private owners or shareholders but would instead serve the interests of the enterprise's employees. Enterprises would be required to act as independent market players and develop technologically in response to competition. After paying taxes, all earnings would remain within the enterprise and could be used for further development through investment or for increasing employment.[13] The economic plan would no longer set binding targets for enterprises from the center. Rather, it would serve as a guiding framework, offering insight into key macroeconomic relationships to help enterprises formulate their own forward-looking strategies. To this end, medium- and long-term scientific planning and forecasting would be employed.

Even after August 1968, reformers still briefly held out hope for continuing the reform process and implementing its core elements. Various theoretical proposals were prepared during this time. Before the August invasion, a comprehensive document titled *Nástin koncepce dalšího rozvíjení ekonomické soustavy řízení* [*Outline of the Concept for Further Development of the Economic Management System*] had been created by economists from the Economic Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (M. Horálek, Č. Kožušník, and O. Turek) and the National Economic Secretariat of the Government Presidium (M. Sokol). It was presented for public discussion and published in *Hospodářské noviny* on April 5, 1968.[14]

[13] Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 21, a. j. 215, *Rozhovor s. Šika s redaktory švýcarské televize 24. listopadu 1968* [*Interview of Comrade Šik with Swiss Television Reporters, 24 November 1968*], s. 17–19.

[14] VONDROVÁ, Jitka (ed.). *Ekonomická reforma 1965–1969…* [*The Economic Reform 1965–1969…*], s. 263, 292.

This text combined theoretical considerations with practical recommendations for both systemic and regulatory changes to the economic mechanism. In retrospect, it reveals clear progress in reform thinking, though certain epistemological limitations for further development still remained.

In October 1968, a new theoretical group led by Karel Kouba was established under the Economic Council.[15] Its goal was to resume work on a substantive and time-bound comprehensive programme for further reform. The group aimed to rigorously separate the enterprise sphere from the state, break up monopolies, define new forms of state economic policy, and address the key causes of reform stagnation – including conflicting interest groups, inflationary trends, and structural imbalances in the national economy.

This theoretical group, composed once again of members from the Economic Institute of the ČSAV and the National Economic Secretariat, gradually submitted several proposals refining their vision and making certain concessions in response to the increasingly restrictive normalization policies imposed by the CPCz leadership. These proposals culminated in a document titled *Náčrt základní koncepce rozvíjení ekonomické reformy* [*Draft of the Basic Concept for the Development of Economic Reform*], dated May 12, 1969. However, these proposals encountered resistance from central authorities and never moved beyond the Economic Council. The government never formally discussed them.[16]

Until the early months of 1969, efforts were still underway to push forward legislative proposals that would have advanced the economic reform to the next stage. Chief among these were the *Law on Socialist Enterprises* and the *Law on Entrepreneurial Activity*. The most developed versions of these efforts are likely represented by the *Draft Law on Socialist Enterprises* dated April 21, 1969, and the *Draft Principles of the Law on Entrepreneurial Activity* dated February 21, 1969.

[15] PRŮCHA, Václav a kol. *Hospodářské a sociální dějiny Československa 1918–1992…* [*Economic and Social History of Czechoslovakia 1918–1992…*], s. 388.

[16] VONDROVÁ, Jitka (ed.). *Ekonomická reforma 1965–1969…* [*The Economic Reform 1965–1969…*], s. 14, 15, 439, 449.

Although the term "privatization" was omitted for ideological reasons, these proposals nonetheless addressed the transformation of ownership relations. The fundamental change was to be the de-statization of the enterprise sector (though this term, too, was avoided) and the introduction of pluralistic ownership. By defining core capital and registering it in the enterprise register, a legal separation between enterprises and the state – specifically the state budget – was to be established. The state would no longer have the right to directly intervene in enterprise operations (except as defined by law), nor would it guarantee enterprise liabilities. In contrast, the state would be obliged to compensate a socialist legal entity for any damages resulting from its interference in the enterprise's economic activities.

The legal status of enterprises was defined as follows:

"An enterprise acts in legal relations under its own name, may acquire rights and assume obligations, and bears property liability arising from these relations. The enterprise has the right to legal protection against any party that unlawfully interferes with its rights."

The proposals also addressed market protection. Entrepreneurs would be prohibited from abusing market positions, restricting competition, or engaging in unfair business practices. Sanctions for such violations were to be imposed through judicial proceedings.

Additionally, the proposals called for the separation of ownership and management functions in enterprises that exceeded the scale of small production. Ownership functions would be exercised by an *enterprise council*, elected both from among employees and external experts. Management functions would be performed by the enterprise director, appointed by the enterprise council through a public selection process. The drafts also envisaged foreign participation in the Czechoslovak economy.[17]

Hopes of enacting these legislative proposals – and of continuing and deepening the reform process – persisted until April 1969, when Dubček was replaced as First Secretary of the CPCz by Gustáv Husák. After this leadership change, government institutions no longer pursued reform initiatives, and some

[17] ŠULC, Zdislav (ed.). *Dokumenty k hospodářské politice v Československu z let 1963–1969…* [*Documents on Economic Policy in Czechoslovakia from 1963 to 1969…*], s. 78–138.

officials – particularly within the State Planning Commission – secretly began preparing a return to centralized planning.[18]

As early as December 1968, a resolution of the CPCz Presidium had already associated the economic reform with inflationary trends and macroeconomic imbalances: "The economic conditions established during the transition to the new management system failed to create a sufficiently demanding environment for the enterprise sector–one that would counteract inflationary pressures and promote macroeconomic balance."[19]

A somewhat ambivalent stance toward the reform was expressed by Prime Minister Oldřich Černík during a CPCz Central Committee meeting on December 12, 1968. He stated that reform should "proceed thoughtfully through gradual implementation" but also warned that "economic reform cannot be introduced precipitously," and that "implementing economic reform all at once would have such profound economic, social, and societal impacts that it could provoke a shock with unforeseeable consequences."[20]

The subsequent resolution of the CPCz Central Committee, published in *Rudé právo* on December 16, 1968, stated:

"The economic management system has so far failed to restore balance in the national economy, because it remains underdeveloped, has been introduced in an incomplete and inconsistent manner, and the transition has not been managed or understood."

Nonetheless, the resolution called for "submission of a draft law on the status of the socialist enterprise and a law defining the basic conditions of socialist entrepreneurship." These laws were intended to establish a framework enabling "enterprises and certain enterprise groupings to become organizations with full economic responsibility and the capacity to operate independently

[18] PRŮCHA, Václav a kol. *Hospodářské a sociální dějiny Československa 1918–1992…* [*Economic and Social History of Czechoslovakia 1918–1992…*], s. 389.

[19] Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 12, a. j. 114, *Usnesení předsednictva ÚV KSČ z prosince 1968* [*Resolution of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPCz from December 1968*], s. 1.

[20] Národní archiv, f. 01, sv. 201. a. j. 127, *Stenografický zápis ze Zasedání ústředního výboru Komunistické strany Československa dne 12.–13. prosince 1968* [*Stenographic Record of the Meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Held on 12–13 December 1968*], s. 18, 24.

within the framework of the state's economic policy and its regulatory interventions." The deadline for submitting the legislation was set for the first quarter of 1969.[21]

The *Law on Socialist Enterprises* was also discussed during a meeting between the delegations of the governments of the Czech Socialist Republic (ČSR) and the Slovak Socialist Republic (SSR), held in Bratislava from February 26 to 27, 1969. The following day, *Rudé právo* published a joint communiqué from this meeting of the national governments, which stated, among other things, that:

"Both governments emphasize their commitment to further developing the economic reform, whereby the fundamental principle must be the organic integration of planning and the market–and under no circumstances a return to the directive management system, nor the creation of an unregulated market."

It further declared that:

"Maximum effort will be made to ensure that the *Law on the Socialist Enterprise* is adopted as soon as possible."[22]

The explanatory report attached to the resolution of the Czechoslovak government from March 3, 1969, stated that preparation of the *Law on Socialist Enterprises*:

"is in accordance with the current effort to consolidate and further successfully develop our socialist society,"[23]

and emphasized the need:

"for the law to be discussed and enter into force as soon as possible."[24]

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[21] *Usnesení ÚV KSČ k hlavním výsledkům, problémům a úkolům hospodářské politiky v současném období* [*Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPCz on the Main Results, Problems and Tasks of Economic Policy in the Current Period*]. *Rudé právo*, 1968, roč. 49, č. 336, s. 2.

[22] Národní archiv, f. ÚV ČSR – Praha 1969, *Záznam z jednání schůze vlády dne 4. března 1969* [*Record of the Government Meeting of 4 March 1969*], s. 4.

[23] *Spolutvůrci celostátní politiky. Ze společné schůze národních vlád* [*Co-Creators of National Policy. From the Joint Meeting of the National Governments*]. *Rudé právo*, 1969, roč. 49, č. 50, s. 1–2.

[24] Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 12, a. j. 114, *Důvodová zpráva k Usnesení vlády Československé socialistické republiky ze dne 3. března 1969 č. 38 k informaci o hlavních problémech diskuze k návrhu zákona o socialistických podnicích* [*Explanatory Report to the Resolution of the Government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic of 3 March 1969 No. 38 on the Main Issues of the Discussion on the Draft Law on Socialist Enterprises*], s. 1.

Even as late as April 28, 1969, the newly elected Chairman of the Federal Assembly of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Alexander Dubček – who had stepped down as First Secretary of the CPCz just eleven days earlier – remarked in his inaugural address to the legislature:

"Among the important legislative acts that will allow us to gradually implement the fundamental objectives of the economic reform and stabilize our national economy will be, above all, the laws on socialist enterprises and socialist entrepreneurship."[25]

However, by May 1969, the CPCz Central Committee had already adopted an implementation directive that marked the first step toward restoring the primacy of central planning. The definitive political rejection of the economic reform came in late January 1970, when the CPCz convened a full session dedicated to economic issues. The national economic plan, together with the reaffirmed leading role of the Party in the economy, was once again declared the principal instrument for resolving the crisis in the Czechoslovak economy.[26]

2. Conclusion

From its founding in 1918 to its dissolution in 1992, Czechoslovakia experienced several fundamental transformations of its social structure, political system, and mechanisms of economic governance. This unusually high number of systemic changes in a relatively short period was shaped both by external forces – especially the influence of global powers – and by internal efforts to identify an ideal form for managing a relatively young, independent state. More than half of Czechoslovakia's existence was defined by the communist regime, which held power from 1948 to 1989. Today, particularly among younger generations who did not live through that period, the era is often viewed simplistically as four decades of political repression and economic

[25] *Stenoprotokol 2. schůze Federálního shromáždění Československé socialistické republiky ze dne 28. dubna 1969* [*Stenographic Record of the 2nd Session of the Federal Assembly of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic Held on 28 April 1969*]. Dostupné z: https://www.psp.cz/eknih/1969fs/slsn/stenprot/002schuz/s002001.htm

[26] VONDROVÁ, Jitka (ed.). *Ekonomická reforma 1965–1969...* [*The Economic Reform 1965–1969...*], s. 15.

inefficiency under the strict control of the Communist Party. A closer examination, however, reveals that this period was not monolithic. The regime itself, particularly during the 1960s, searched for solutions to improve unsatisfactory – above all economic – developments.

These reform efforts were most evident in the second half of the 1960s, especially in 1968, when economic reform was accompanied by a partial loosening of political conditions. This attempt at building what was called "socialism with a human face," which enjoyed broad public support, was ultimately rejected by the Soviet leadership and violently suppressed in August of that year. As a result, Czechoslovakia was denied the opportunity to fully develop and apply its emerging vision of a modern socialist society. Precisely because that opportunity was lost, examining surviving documents from this period is all the more compelling. They may help answer whether the reformist ideas of that time were viable under contemporary conditions – and how closely the envisioned management model would have approached the form of capitalism known today.

The theoretical part of this study described the broader economic and political framework in which the Šik Reform unfolded. Initial discussions about the need for reform began in the early 1960s, during the period of the Third Five-Year Plan (1961–1965). That plan was overly optimistic, and when combined with other internal and external challenges, it quickly failed. A resulting economic crisis peaked in 1963, when – for the first time since the end of World War II – the national income actually declined. In response, state leadership adopted several measures, one of which was the initiation of the first steps toward the Šik Reform.

The Fourth Five-Year Plan (1966–1970), during which the reform was primarily implemented, set more realistic targets. Most of these, including national income growth, were successfully exceeded. Although economic development showed signs of improvement, some issues persisted – such as the rushed wholesale price overhaul in January 1967, which caused greater-than-expected price increases and created price distortions.

The practical part of this study analyzed the course of the Šik Reform, placing special emphasis on the shifting attitudes of political leaders and the evolution of both implemented and unimplemented reform elements –

particularly regarding enterprise autonomy and the role of central planning. The reform emerged as a response to the economic downturn of 1962–1964, prompting top CPCz officials to engage in critical dialogue with economists about the hitherto untouchable command-administrative system. In 1963, the CPCz entrusted the progressive economist Ota Šik with drafting the reform framework together with his team. From the outset, however, development of the reform was complicated by the resistance of conservative politicians and economists who remained committed to the old directive system and were reluctant to accept change. For ideological reasons, the proposed documents also had to avoid radical ideas that might evoke a shift toward capitalist models.

The reform was officially approved and published in January 1965 as the *Main Guidelines for Improving the Planned Management of the National Economy*. The first elements of implementation began on January 1, 1966, and further acceleration came with the *Programme for the Accelerated Implementation of the New System of Planned Management*, launched on January 1, 1967. A turning point came in early 1968 when the conservative Antonín Novotný was replaced by the reform-minded Alexander Dubček. The CPCz *Action Programme*, adopted in April of that year, went beyond economic reform and called for political change as well. The dynamically unfolding reform process was, however, abruptly halted by the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968.

Even after the invasion, reformers continued to push for progress, as evidenced by the *Draft Law on Socialist Enterprises* (April 1969) and the *Draft Principles of the Law on Entrepreneurial Activity* (February 1969). Yet under the new so-called "normalization" leadership, headed by the conservative Gustáv Husák who replaced Dubček, these and other proposals failed to advance. From the second half of 1969 onward, Czechoslovakia gradually returned to the old command-administrative model of economic governance, bringing the Šik Reform to a definitive end.

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[2] Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 12, a. j. 114, Důvodová zpráva k Usnesení vlády Československé socialistické republiky ze dne 3. března 1969 č. 38 k informaci o hlavních problémech diskuze k návrhu zákona o socialistických podnicích. [*National Archives, f. 07/15, vol. 12, inv. no. 114, Explanatory Report on the Resolution of the Government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic of March 3, 1969, No. 38, regarding the main issues in the discussion on the draft law on socialist enterprises.*]

[3] Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 12, a. j. 114, Současný hospodářský vývoj (stručné podklady) od Státního statistického úřadu z 22. května 1968. [*National Archives, f. 07/15, vol. 12, inv. no. 114, Current Economic Development (brief background materials) from the State Statistical Office, May 22, 1968.*]

[4] Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 12, a. j. 114, Usnesení předsednictva ÚV KSČ z prosince 1968. [*National Archives, f. 07/15, vol. 12, inv. no. 114, Resolution of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPCz, December 1968.*]

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[6] Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 21, a. j. 215, Rozhovor s. Šika s redaktory švýcarské televize 24. listopadu 1968. [*National Archives, f. 07/15, vol. 21, inv. no. 215, Interview of Comrade Šik with Reporters from Swiss Television, November 24, 1968.*]

[7] Národní archiv, f. ÚV ČSR – Praha 1969, Záznam z jednání schůze vlády dne 4. března 1969. [*National Archives, f. Central Committee of the ČSR – Prague 1969, Record of the Government Meeting on March 4, 1969.*]

[8] Národní archiv, f. ÚV KSČ – Ekonomické oddělení, kar. 54, Usnesení vlády Československé socialistické republiky ze dne 8. dubna 1966 č. 139 k návrhu programu urychlené realizace nové soustavy řízení. [*National Archives, f. CPCz Central Committee*

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[12] ŠULC, Zdislav (ed.). Dokumenty k hospodářské politice v Československu z let 1963–1969. Praha: Vysoká škola ekonomická, 1998. ISBN 80-7079-514-X. [*Documents on Economic Policy in Czechoslovakia 1963–1969. Prague: University of Economics, 1998.*]

[13] VONDROVÁ, Jitka (ed.). Ekonomická reforma 1965–1969. Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2010. ISBN 978-80-7285-131-7. [*The Economic Reform 1965–1969. Prague: Institute of Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 2010.*]

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[15] O návrhu zásad zdokonalení plánovitého řízení národního hospodářství. *Rudé právo*, 1964, roč. 45, č. 289, s. 3–4. [*On the Draft Principles for Improving the Planned Management of the National Economy. Rudé právo, 1964, vol. 45, no. 289, pp. 3–4.*]

[16] Spolutvůrci celostátní politiky. Ze společné schůze národních vlád. *Rudé právo*, 1969, roč. 49, č. 50, s. 1–2. [*Co-Creators of Nationwide Policy. From the Joint Meeting of the National Governments. Rudé právo, 1969, vol. 49, no. 50, pp. 1–2.*]

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[18] Usnesení ÚV KSČ k hlavním výsledkům, problémům a úkolům hospodářské politiky v současném období. *Rudé právo*, 1968, roč. 49, č. 336, s. 2. [*Resolution of the CPCz Central Committee on the Main Results, Problems, and Tasks of Economic Policy in the Current Period. Rudé právo, 1968, vol. 49, no. 336, p. 2.*]

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Totalitarianism in the Long Time: Literature as a Seismograph and Its Blind Spots

Abstract: This study proposes a dynamic model of totalitarianism and a method for examining its literary representation. It approaches totalitarianism as a process comprising incubation, seizure of power, terror, normalization, erosion, and the subsequent formation of memory. Using the metaphor of literature as a seismograph, the study identifies both the analytical possibilities and the limitations of literary evidence and derives nine methodological principles for comparative analysis. The model is tested through a Czech sequence of works by Kafka, Čapek, and Petiška, supplemented by Hungarian and Polish points of comparison.

Keywords: totalitarianism; literature; seismograph; Central Europe; comparative literary study; dynamic model; Kafka; Čapek; Petiška; long twentieth century

1. A Moving Target

The concept of totalitarianism is going through a peculiar crisis. Never has so much been written about it, and never have the human sciences been less sure of it. The most recent stocktaking of the historiography of the Soviet bloc brings together objections that historians have been raising against the "totalitarian paradigm" for decades. The model, they say, captures the monolith but not the change. It sees the summit of power but not the society underneath. It registers the command but not what individuals actually do — the evasions, the compromises, the "third paths" that run between consent and resistance.[1] Some conclude from this that the concept has served its time. This study will assert the opposite, demonstrating that the concept has merely been unsuitably measured. A moving object cannot be measured with a motionless instrument.

The study addresses four dimensions of change: the concept of totalitarianism, the historical phenomenon, its literary representation, and the technologies through which power operates. Understandings of the concept have changed substantially between Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* and contemporary revisionist scholarship, as scholars have brought different questions, archives, and interpretive perspectives to the subject. [2] The phenomenon itself also changes over time: totalitarian societies pass through phases of establishment, intensified repression, consolidation, and possible collapse. Literary representations vary both historically and across Central Europe, taking the form of warning, testimony, coded criticism, celebration, or remembrance in societies whose experiences of totalitarian rule followed different trajectories. Finally, the technologies of power and communication changed repeatedly during the twentieth century. Shifts in the use of print, radio, film, ritual, dossiers, and television altered both the circulation of information and the forms through which authority was exercised.

An approach confined to a single definition, historical moment, national literature, or medium cannot adequately account for these interrelated changes. This study hence argues that the changing forms of totalitarianism require

[1] UNGUREANU, Manuela L. (ed.). *Rethinking the Historiography of the Soviet Bloc: The Totalitarianism Paradigm and Institutional Practices under Communism.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2026.

[2] ARENDT, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951.

a comparative approach that follows both the phenomenon and its literary representations across national contexts and over an extended historical period. The "long twentieth century" provides the necessary temporal scope. Ending the inquiry in 1945, for example, would exclude the subsequent development of communist regimes and prevent an examination of the full cycle proposed here. Literature offers a means of studying these changes together. A text's date connects it to a particular phase of the process, while its social and national context locates it within a specific historical trajectory. Its form and circulation also bear the traces of contemporary media, whether the newspaper column, radio broadcast, dossier, or screen. Successive generations interpret these features through changing theoretical frameworks, making the history of a text's reception part of the inquiry into how totalitarianism has been understood.

The metaphor we have long used for this instrument — literature as society's sensitive seismograph — has an anthropological core, something close to a deep catechesis. A tremor is a sensation the body knows before the mind can name it. Societies, too, feel the ground shifting beneath their institutions before they have a word for it, and literature is the organ of that pre-conceptual awareness. Yet precisely for that reason the metaphor must not be left uncritically whole. An instrument made of flesh and language has a will — and therefore a guilt. It stands in the epicenter of what it measures. It can be calibrated by power. And it works in the opposite direction, too: it does not only record; it educates. It teaches its readers how to read the record. A seismograph that trains seismologists is unknown to geology; literature has one.

The study rests on two cores that mirror each other. Core One says: *the object is dynamic.* It offers a model of totalitarianism as a complete life cycle, with an internal dynamic (phases, media) and an external one (the history of the concept). Core Two says: *the instrument is dynamic and has blind spots.* It offers a typology of the seismograph's powers and limits. The two cores meet in a demonstration: on the Czech line — Kafka, Čapek, Petiška — supplemented by Hungarian and Polish points of triangulation, we show that the field measures. The conclusion then turns the instrument over to its other

side: the formative function of literature, and what the record of tremors does to the reader.

2. A Dynamic Model of Totalitarianism

2.1 Internal Dynamics: The Life Cycle

The classic model of totalitarianism, developed by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, identifies six interrelated features: an official ideology, a single mass party, a terroristic secret police, a monopoly on weapons, a monopoly on mass communication, and a centrally directed economy.[3] These criteria provide a practical basis for classifying regimes, but they are less suited to explaining how totalitarian rule emerges, changes, or disintegrates. The model primarily describes an established system, leaving the processes of its formation and transformation insufficiently explained. Stephen Turner's recent account places this limitation in its intellectual and political context: the checklist emerged from the scholarly consensus of the early Cold War and reflected Friedrich's own theoretical commitments. Friedrich's subsequent removal of terror from the list by the 1960s also shows that the model itself underwent revision.[4]

Dynamics does exist in classics and is scattered across them in pieces. Giovanni Sartori separated a phase of establishment from a phase of stabilization and assigned terror to the first: a regime, on his account, stays totalitarian even after the bloody stage has settled into routine.[5] Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan described post-totalitarianism as a type in its own right, the condition into which the Soviet-bloc regimes drifted after Stalin's death.[6] Czech political

[3] FRIEDRICH, Carl J. – Brzezinski, Zbigniew K. *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956.

[4] TURNER, Stephen. Carl Friedrich's Path to "Totalitarianism." In: Ungureanu, Manuela L. (ed.). *Rethinking the Historiography of the Soviet Bloc.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2026, pp. 42–55.

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[6] LINZ, Juan J. – Stepan, Alfred. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

science has systematized both.[7] Nonetheless, each of these moves dynamizes only part of the arc — the beginning, or the late stage — never the whole thing, from birth to memory.

The model proposed here brings these partial accounts together into five phases: incubation, seizure of power, terror, normalization, and erosion, including the subsequent formation of memory. Incubation describes the emergence of totalitarian tendencies within a democracy in crisis, often before contemporaries recognize their significance. Seizure of power occurs through a coup, a formally legal takeover, or external intervention, followed by the rapid suppression of political pluralism. Terror involves systematic repression and dehumanization through institutions and practices such as camps, show trials, and the reduction of individuals to files and numbers. Normalization consolidates rule through routine administration, surveillance, and accommodation in everyday life. Erosion encompasses the weakening of the regime, resistance, and eventual collapse; its aftermath includes the opening of archives and disputes over historical responsibility and memory. These phases should be understood as overlapping processes rather than discrete, inevitable steps. Their boundaries are often identifiable only retrospectively and remain open to interpretation. Their timing and sequence also differ across national contexts. The Czech lands moved from a comparatively strong interwar democracy through Nazi occupation and, later, the communist takeover of February 1948. Poland experienced German and Soviet occupation followed by a Sovietization that remained incomplete, while Slovakia had an internally established wartime dictatorship in 1939–1945. In Hungary, the revolution of 1956 interrupted communist rule before Soviet intervention restored it. A country may therefore experience successive cycles, and the seizure of power may result from annexation or occupation as well as domestic political developments. These differences make comparison across national trajectories essential to the model, as discussed further in subsequent sections.

The model places Nazism and communism side by side on three grounds. First, totalitarianism emerged as a comparative concept: Arendt analyzed

[7] BALÍK, Stanislav – KUBÁT, Michal. *Teorie a praxe nedemokratických režimů* [Theory and Practice of Non-Democratic Regimes]. Prague: Dokořán, 2012.

Nazism and Stalinism in parallel, as did Friedrich and Brzezinski. This comparison has always been contested, and recent scholarship has explicitly sought to move "beyond totalitarianism."[8] Our model incorporates that debate rather than treating the two regimes as unproblematically identical. Second, it compares not their ideologies but their dynamics: the shape of their development and their mechanisms of rule—the use of media, language, fear, and bureaucratic records. Their programs remained distinct, as did the criteria by which they selected their victims: race in one case, class in the other. Third, and most importantly for Central Europe, the two regimes were experienced in succession. In the Czech lands, they passed through the same society and often through the same lives. Offices, buildings, files, and practices of fear carried over; in 1945, the pen barely lifted from the paper. Literature therefore records them as a continuous experience of unfreedom—one that can be measured only along an extended historical axis.

2.2 Internal Dynamics: Media and Codes

In the classic syndrome the "monopoly of the means of mass communication" sits there as a constant, because the state has the media, "full stop". We turn the constant into a variable — each phase of the cycle has its own dominant code and channel for the transmission of information and messages, and when the channel changes, the nature of power changes with it, and so does the nature of fear.

Incubation speaks through print and radio: through the campaign, the headline, the broadcast that carries the leader's voice into the kitchen. The seizure of power stages itself through film and ritual: the procession, the congress, the oath, the newsreel. Power puts itself on display; it aestheticizes itself; it performs. Terror writes with the dossier and the camp. Its medium is the file, the card index, the interrogation protocol, the forced confession read out over the radio at the show trial — and the number that replaces the human being, on the forearm and on the cover of the folder. Normalization broadcasts by television and keeps its file quiet: the cadre report, everyday surveillance, fear dissolved into routine. And erosion builds itself a substitute network against

[8] GEYER, Michael – FITZPATRICK, Sheila (eds.). *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

the monopoly — samizdat, magnitizdat, émigré publishing — while the phase of memory opens the last medium of all: the archive.

The material that flows through every one of these channels is language. Victor Klemperer showed, on the German of the Third Reich, how speech can be militarized and how euphemism can mask a crime.[9] Michał Głowiński described the Polish *nowomowa*.[10] Petr Fidelius took apart the speech of communist power.[11] And Vladimír Macura, following these models, built a semiotics of the "happy age."[12] What matters for our purposes is one thing: language is the place where the technology of power and the technology of literature touch. Both work in the same material. From this a key consequence will follow for the seismograph metaphor (III.1): the tremor and the instrument are made of one and the same substance.

2.3 External Dynamics: The History of the Concept

The concept of totalitarianism has its own biography. Abbott Gleason called it the "inner history of the Cold War."[13] The word is born in 1923, in an Italian liberal polemic against Mussolini. Fascism promptly adopts it as a badge of honor. After the war the concept is canonized — Arendt in 1951, Friedrich and Brzezinski in 1956 — and then corroded by revisionism in the 1960s and 1970s. After 1989 it is raised again by the new institutions of memory, and attacked again by the historiography of everyday life. In the Polish debate the "totalitarian syndrome" has been described as an essentially contested concept in Gallie's sense.[14] In the Czech context the everyday word *totalita*

[9] KLEMPERER, Victor. *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI — Lingua Tertii Imperii. A Philologist's Notebook*. Trans. Martin Brady. London: Athlone Press, 2000.

[10] GŁOWIŃSKI, Michał. *Nowomowa po polsku* [Newspeak in Polish]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1990.

[11] FIDELIUS, Petr. *Řeč komunistické moci* [The Speech of Communist Power]. Prague: Triáda, 1998.

[12] MACURA, Vladimír. *Šťastný věk (a jiné studie o socialistické kultuře)* [The Happy Age, and Other Studies in Socialist Culture]. Prague: Academia, 2008.

[13] GLEASON, Abbott. *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War.* New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

[14] GALLIE, Walter B. Essentially Contested Concepts. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56, 1955–1956, pp. 167–198; BRZECHCZYN, Krzysztof. Totalitarian Syndrome as a Case of an Essentially Contested Concept. In: Ungureanu, Manuela L. (ed.), op. cit., pp. 88 ff.

— a shorthand, not a scholarly term — made a peculiar career of its own, becoming more familiar than the concept it abbreviated.[15]

From this biography follows not resignation but a methodical rule. The historicity of the concept is not to be tidied away by a definition in the introduction. It is to be built into the model as the external dynamics. We read each phase with the optics that suit it both historically and analytically: incubation and seizure through the optics of the genesis of movements; terror through the classic model; normalization through revisionism and the study of everyday life; erosion and memory through memory studies and the reflection of the twenty-first century. The succession of optics is itself a datum, not noise. And with that, the objection of anachronism falls. We are not imposing one theory on seventy years. We are watching theory and phenomenon chase each other, sometimes missing, sometimes catching up.

2.4 The Field: Matrix and Probes

The two dynamics can be folded into a single figure (fig. 1).

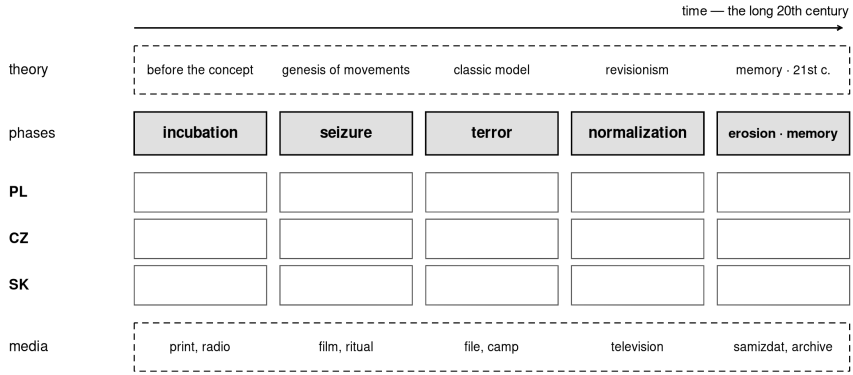

Figure 1: The field: phases of the cycle, three literatures, a band of theories above and a band of media below.

Along the horizontal axis runs the time of the long century, and on it the phases of the cycle. Vertically stand the three literatures — Polish, Czech,

[15] BLAIVE, Muriel. On the Origins of "Totalita": A Social Epistemology of a Nonconcept. In: Ungureanu, Manuela L. (ed.), op. cit., pp. 271 ff.

Slovak — as the rows of a matrix. Above the matrix runs a band of theories (the external dynamics); below it a band of media (the internal dynamics of II.2). Every cell of the matrix is a place for texts. The whole field is a measuring network. The matrix makes similarities visible without erasing differences in national timing, political context, or literary response. It also guides the selection of probes: individual texts can be located within the larger field and compared across phases, media, and literary traditions.

3. The Seismograph — Powers and Limits

3.1 The Load the Metaphor Can Bear

Why a seismograph — and why for literature in particular? Comparing art to a sensitive recorder of social movements is old, and people do it loosely, about music and painting too. For literature the comparison holds in a stronger, more literal sense, for the reason we prepared in II.2: the tremor and the instrument are made of the same substance. Power shakes society with language — the campaign, the slogan, the decree, the euphemism, the panegyric. Literature measures with language. No other instrument is built from the same material as the quaking it records. That is the source of its unique sensitivity, just as it is the source of its unique vulnerability: what is made of the same substance can be overwritten by the same force.

The corpus includes not only works that warn, resist, or bear witness, but also texts that endorse and celebrate totalitarian rule. The latter require a different mode of analysis: rather than treating them as independent testimony, we examine how they participate in the regime's production of meaning. Literary responses also vary across the life cycle — anticipation is characteristic of incubation, testimony of terror, coded expression of normalization, and remembrance of the period after collapse. These shifts connect literary form to the changing conditions in which texts are produced and received.

3.2 A Typology of Blind Spots

(A) The instrument. The first limit is the deepest. A seismograph records involuntarily; a writer chooses. The instrument cannot refuse to register. The author can — he can keep silent, conform, lie. A literary seismograph is

an instrument with a will, and therefore with a guilt. Its record has an ethics that geophysics does not know. First rule: the silence of a station is not the same as the stillness of the ground. Silence, too, is a datum; it only has to be read as silence.

The second limit: the instrument stands in the epicenter. A real seismograph measures from the outside. A writer is shaken by the very thing he records. And power knows how to calibrate the instrument. Socialist realism was a seismograph wired to draw the prescribed, ascending curve. The most thorough calibration, moreover, is the kind the instrument performs on itself, in advance, "without any mental reservations," as the period's formula of scholarly self-criticism had it.[16] Czech literature possesses an image of the calibrated instrument that is four centuries old: Comenius's pilgrim is given the spectacles of Delusion — but they sit crooked, so he can peer out past the rims.[17] Every calibration has its slack. Literature is that peering past the rim.

Third: there is also the instrument as exciter. The proclamatory, celebratory register does not record tremors; it produces them. It is part of the machine that shakes. The rule: do not read exciters as bad measurements. Read them as data about the source. An ode to the leader says nothing about what society felt. It says precisely what society was being shaken with.

(B) The record. Fourth: a record is not a transmission. A seismogram that no station reads warns no one. Censorship, as a rule, does not stop the writing — it cuts the line. The manuscript goes on arising; it simply does not arrive. The drawer, the letter, the bottle. Samizdat and the émigré press as an improvised substitute network. Here, too, the limit turns into a measurement. The bottle's time in transit is itself a quantity: it measures the length of unfreedom.

Fifth: registration is not prediction. Seismology records stress and foreshocks, not dates. Not even the most sensitive literary record of the 1930s named the day of Munich. What it recorded was the accumulation of stress along the fault. We therefore propose, throughout this work, to retire the word

[16] MUKAŘOVSKÝ, Jan. Kam směřuje dnešní theorie umění? [Where Is Today's Theory of Art Heading?]. *Slovo a slovesnost* 11, 1949, no. 2, pp. 49–59, quoted p. 51.

[17] COMENIUS, John Amos. *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* (1623, printed 1631).

"prophetic" and replace it with the more precise "sensitive." Literature shows stress, not the calendar. Paradoxically, this benefits the metaphor: it relieves it of a claim it could not carry.

The sixth limit is the most treacherous: aseismic creep. The most dangerous movement of the earth's plates is slow slippage without quakes. And that is exactly what the normalizing drift of a society is: a catastrophe without an earthquake, a shift that no one feels because it never stops. The classic seismograph fails here. Literature had to develop special instruments for creep — the prose of the everyday, the record of non-events, the poetics of greyness. Theory found a name for this condition only years later.[18] Literature was recording it before it had a name.

(C) The network and its reading. Seventh: the density of the network. Where no station stands, the tremor goes unregistered. The silenced voices, the oral culture, the burnt archive. The map of stations is itself a historical document; the absence of a record is not the absence of a tremor. And one station alone cannot localize. To fix an epicenter you need triangulation — at least three stations. Right here the comparative design PL–CZ–SK stops being a whim and becomes a necessity. Three literatures are the minimal seismographic network. National clocks run at different speeds (II.1). The same tremor reaches each station with a different delay and a different amplitude. Only by comparing the records can you separate what belongs to the source from what belongs to the station: the invariant from the nationally conditioned.

Eighth: the retrospective calibration of reading. After an earthquake, every earlier quiver looks like a foreshock. Retrospective teleology is the occupational disease of anyone who reads old records after the catastrophe. The safeguard is to date the optics: do not lend the text knowledge it could not have had, and own the succession of optics as an axis in its own right (II.3). How such a safeguard works in practice, we show at once on the first case of the demonstration.

[18] HAVEL, Václav. The Power of the Powerless (1978). In: Keane, John (ed.). *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe.* London: Hutchinson, 1985.

3.3 Sampling Rates

Literature records historical experience at different temporal scales. Bakhtin's distinction between small time and great time helps clarify these differences.[19] Journalism operates in small time: it responds to events as they unfold and preserves details that may later disappear, although its proximity to the present can make broader patterns difficult to discern. Exile writing offers greater distance. It can identify longer historical movements more clearly, but may lose some of the texture of everyday life; the most influential postwar account of the Central European "captive mind" emerged from precisely this position.[20] Writing kept in a drawer occupies a third distinct position: it is produced in direct response to its historical moment but addressed to an unknown future reader. Each perspective reveals something the others cannot. A fuller account therefore requires all three — a point demonstrated by the Czech case studies that follow.

3.4 Blind Spots as a Research Program

The limits of the seismograph metaphor provide a set of practical rules for interpretation. Analysis must attend to silences and missing records, distinguish texts that document power from those that help produce it, account for delays between writing and publication, and avoid treating literary works as predictions of specific events. It must also recognize gradual social change, compare records across national contexts, and remain conscious of the historically situated perspective of the reader. Together, these principles turn the metaphor's blind spots into a research program. They also correspond to a typology of voices developed elsewhere: the silenced voice is a broken instrument; the voice within the apparatus is shaped by its calibration; the voice at the threshold records from the edge of the network; and the voice in the drawer

[19] BAKHTIN, Mikhail M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays.* Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

[20] MIŁOSZ, Czesław. *The Captive Mind.* Trans. Jane Zielonko. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.

preserves a record without transmitting it.[21] The next section puts this method to the test.

4. Demonstration: The Czech Line and Points of Triangulation

The demonstration follows a single Czech line, supplemented by two other national traditions for triangulation. This narrower focus allows the model's three dimensions — the phases of totalitarianism, changes in media, and shifts in theoretical perspective — to be examined across three types of literary record: journalism, drama, and writing withheld from publication. The study thus demonstrates how the instrument and its comparative network operate.

The Czech trajectory comprises two successive cycles rather than one. The first began in 1938–1939, when the state ceased to exist and Nazi rule was imposed through annexation and occupation. The years 1945–1948 brought only a partial and temporary relaxation, as the country remained within the Soviet sphere of influence before the communist seizure of power in February 1948. Within this second cycle, the reforms and growing demands for freedom during the 1960s were abruptly halted by the invasion of August 1968. The normalization that followed did not restore the mass terror of the earlier period. Instead, control was imposed gradually through administrative pressure, selective repression, and repeated accommodation, allowing society to adjust to each restriction before the next was introduced. Figure 2 therefore shows two major peaks separated by a shallow interval from 1945 to 1948, followed by the sharp disruption of August 1968 and a gradual, stepped rise during normalization. The line ends in 1989 because the period under examination has ended, not because the absence of a further record guarantees lasting stability.

4.1 Kafka — The Zero Point

The Trial was written in 1914–1915 and published posthumously in 1925.[22] It arises, then, not just before the regimes but before the word. The concept of totalitarianism enters European speech only in 1923. Josef K. is arrested

[21] PAVERA, Libor. Monograph in preparation; the documentary parallels (incl. *Lidové noviny*, December 15, 1950) and the typology of voices are developed there.

[22] KAFKA, Franz. *The Trial* (*Der Process*; written 1914–1915, published 1925).

without having done anything. The proceedings run everywhere and nowhere. The file that decides about him he never sees. And all the while he walks free: the trial is not a wall but an atmosphere. For our construction this is the zero point of the scale. This is what the record looks like while the tremor is still potential. The text registers the stress of modern bureaucratic power — the case without guilt, the apparatus without a face, the file as a medium that precedes and outlives the person it describes. It does not register the future camps.

Here the eighth rule proves itself. The postwar generations read *The Trial* with the sensitivity their own experience had given them, and they read it as a prophecy of the camps. We do not inherit that reading. We date it. It belongs to the history of reading (II.3), not to the text. The zero point loses nothing by this. On the contrary, it shows how much of the apparatus of the later totality was already prepared in "normal" modernity, before a regime was found that would assemble the whole thing.

4.2 Čapek — Rising Amplitude

Three texts in three years. *War with the Newts* (1936), *The White Disease* (1937), *The Mother* (1938).[23] Read them side by side and you watch the needle start to swing: a satirical panorama, then a moral duel, then a chamber tragedy. Distance, dilemma, rifle. This is not a change of mind. It is rising amplitude in one and the same record: the closer the source, the greater the deflection. Čapek suits this reading for another reason, too: he wrote at two rates at once. A man of the daily pen — one piece a day in the paper, sometimes more — and at the same time a dramatist and novelist. Poláček, it was said, ought to keep one desk for journalism and another for fiction. A pretty phrase, but linguistically beside the point: the idiolect is one. For measurement, though, the pair of desks is productive. The daily column captures the day. The drama assembles what the years have accumulated. It was the high rate of the newsroom that gave Čapek a resolution nobody without one possessed — and the long waves of great time he then composed at the second desk.

[23] ČAPEK, Karel. *War with the Newts* (1936); *The White Disease* (1937); *The Mother* (1938).

Inside the trio, the axis of media runs on its own, as if the author had laid it out for us. *War with the Newts* is built from the material of the press — reports, protocols, clippings, conference minutes. An instrument constructed from the medium it measures: the press measuring itself. *The White Disease* puts the crowd and the Marshal's spectacle on stage — the ritual of the seizure phase. And into *The Mother* the war enters by radio: the receiver is the last channel by which the public penetrates the most intimate space, and the play's final impulse comes over the air. Print, crowd, radio — in three years of a single pen. The internal dynamics of media (II.2) documented on one author. And the fifth rule one last time: Čapek named no date. He recorded the loading of the fault. The record breaks off in December 1938, when the author dies a few weeks after Munich. That, too, is why "prophetic" is the wrong word even for him. He was sensitive.

4.3 Petiška — The Bottle

The third type of record is the strangest of all: a record made in the knowledge that it would not be sent. *Journey to the Land of Lidivoni* was written in 1951–1952, at the maximum of the tremors. Its author was twenty-seven. By later testimony, he and his friends expected house searches and arrest daily.[24] The text protects itself with a triple mask. The motto from Hesiod sets at the gate of the book the hawk with the songbird in its claws — the oldest European emblem of the singer in the grip of the predator, the witness who stands inside the thing he records. The invocation of a "doctor of the liberal arts, Jakub Libertus" turns the narrative into sworn testimony before God — a counter-file set against the forced protocol. And the diction of an old travel relation moves the scene to a safe distance. That the mask was more than a genre game is confirmed by an archival detail: the hidden manuscript bore, for cover, a note identifying it as a translation from an old German original, "Die Reise nach Leuteduften."[25] It is a *pia fraus* in reverse — a forgery that covers not a crime but a witness. Masking, then, runs in two directions. Power covers crime with language, as even the official death certificates from the camps attest.

[24] THE preface by E. M. (Eduard Martin) of April 1999 to the first print edition; in: Petiška, op. cit. (n. 1).

[25] IBID.

Literature covers the witness with language. Two cryptographies of the same substance.[26]

Inside the fiction, the text registers with a precision that documents can nowadays confirm. The first institution the castaway encounters on the island is directed historiography: a young historian shows him a royal decree in which the king himself, in numbered rules, prescribes how history is to be written. The satire records the very mechanism that the official sources of December 1950 record in the language of pledges and assignments.[27] And the name of the land is a diagnosis: "In the land of Lidivoni, people smell of fear" — and whoever lives there long enough stops noticing the scent.[28] The habituation of fear. A sense dulled by duration. Aseismic creep captured in a single image, two decades before theory found a name for the condition. The book's second motto, from Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, then states the program we called the wager on long time in the introduction: deception profits for a moment; truth profits over the long run. It is not our projection into the text, then. The book carries long time inscribed at its gate. And its own fate fulfilled the wager. Written under the terror, with a preface dated April 1968, its typesetting scattered after August 21, it reached its reader only in another state and another century. The fate of a single manuscript is a seismogram of four phases of the cycle (fig. 2).[29]

[26] ON the Mauthausen death letters, see the author's study of the Šajtar case (in press / manuscript); on the "two cryptographies" cf. Klemperer, op. cit.

[27] PAVERA, Libor. Monograph in preparation; the documentary parallels (incl. *Lidové noviny*, December 15, 1950) and the typology of voices are developed there.

[28] PETIŠKA, op. cit. (n. 1), [para. 333 of the e-edition; print pagination

[29] A separate comparative study of Petiška's *Journey to the Land of Lidivoni* (alongside, among others, Comenius's *Labyrinth of the World*, which likewise "sees through" the world) is in preparation.

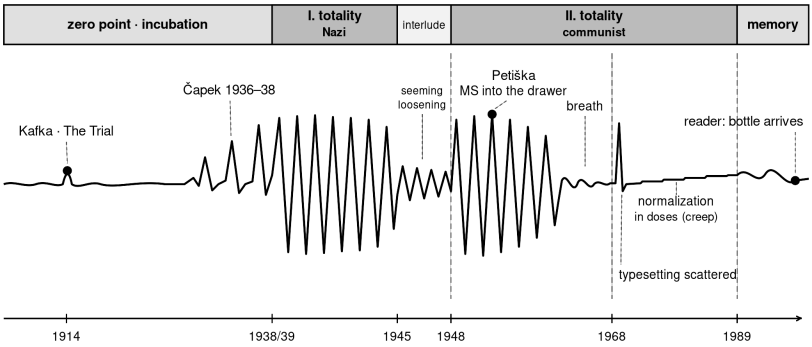

Figure 2: The Czech seismogram: two cycles, the interlude of 1945–1948, and the fate of a single manuscript.

4.4 Points of Triangulation

The seventh rule asks for at least three stations if you want to fix an epicenter. The second is supplied by Hungary. Gyula Illyés wrote *One Sentence on Tyranny* in 1950. It was printed on November 2, 1956, in the middle of the revolution, and then suppressed again for decades.[30] A Hungarian bottle: the same arc of fate as Petiška's, shifted by a phase according to the Hungarian clock. The form itself is seismographic — a single sentence swelling over hundreds of lines, an enumeration that cannot stop because tyranny is present in everything the poem names. The third station comes from Poland. Adam Ważyk, a court poet of socialist realism, in 1955 published his *Poem for Adults* and publicly admitted that the prescribed curve had been false.[31] A rare spectacle: an exciter recalibrating itself back into a recorder before its readers' eyes. The scandal the poem triggered measured the arrival of the thaw in Poland a year before October.

Slovakia measures on a clock shifted by a whole cycle: it went through its first totality during the war. Janko Jesenský wrote anti-regime verses in the years of the wartime Slovak state; they could not appear at home, circulated

[30] ILLYÉS, Gyula. Egy mondat a zsarnokságról [One Sentence on Tyranny]. Written 1950; printed in *Irodalmi Újság*, November 2, 1956.

[31] WAŻYK, Adam. Poemat dla dorosłych [A Poem for Adults]. *Nowa Kultura*, 1955, no. 34.

in manuscript copies, and were printed only after the liberation.[32] A Slovak bottle from the older cycle, and proof that the phase shift of national clocks can be measured even twice within one country. The source is the same. The times of arrival differ. And it is precisely the difference of times that comparative study measures.

5. Conclusion: Long Time and the Instrument's Other Side

Let us come back to where we started. Historiography reproaches the totalitarian paradigm with stasis, with blindness to the conduct of individuals, to everyday life, to "third paths."[33] Our answer has been: these are not defects of the concept. They are defects of measurement — and literature is the instrument park that registers exactly these quantities as a matter of course. The conduct of the individual is its material. Everyday life is its element. The third paths are its plot. Comparative literary study therefore enters the dispute over totalitarianism not as an ornament but as a missing piece of measuring equipment.

The study has offered two cores. The dynamic model (Core One) assembles the full life cycle of totalitarianism — incubation, seizure, terror, normalization, erosion with memory — and builds into it two further variables: the media of each phase and the history of the concept itself. The seismograph (Core Two) is the instrument fitted to this object: a metaphor taken seriously, limping and all — nine blind spots, nine rules, the most important of which is triangulation. One station cannot fix an epicenter. The demonstration then showed both cores at work on a single line and two foreign stations.

From all of this follows the closing thesis toward which the whole construction has been moving: a dynamic object can be measured with a dynamic instrument — it is a possibility, and in truth a necessity, to look at totalitarianism along a great, temporally extended axis, to follow things in long time, to use Bakhtin's term. Nowhere would we see the dynamics so plainly

[32] JESENSKÝ, Janko. Anti-regime verses of 1939–1945, in book form after 1945 (incl. the collection *Čierne dni* [Black Days]).

[33] UNGUREANU, Manuela L. (ed.). *Rethinking the Historiography of the Soviet Bloc: The Totalitarianism Paradigm and Institutional Practices under Communism.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2026.

displayed as across the long twentieth century. On a shorter surface the graph would simply be missing — the curve of what happens in the two entities we have fixed our attention on: society and literature. Shorten the axis and you lose not data but shape.

The typology has one further implication. The literary record may appear quieter after 1989, but this should not be taken as evidence that the underlying risks have disappeared. Gradual shifts may occur without an obvious rupture, while the incubation of authoritarian tendencies is often recognizable only in retrospect. As follows, it is not possible to treat totalitarianism as a closed historical chapter from that point onward. It remains a possibility wherever trust in democratic institutions deteriorates. The field of observation consequently extends beyond 1989, reminding us that democracy and freedom depend on sustained attention and collective responsibility.

Let us also acknowledge the boundary of our scope. We have been speaking of political totality, or geopolitical totality, and it is not the only kind a human being undergoes. There is an existential totality, personal and inward, with no external cause. There is an economic totality. There are other projections, each of which would need instruments of its own. The zero point of our demonstration, as it happens, knew this before we did: Kafka's trial records a totality that is not yet — or not only — political. The model therefore claims no completeness. To say it with Bakhtin: the last word on totality has not been spoken. Unfinalizability is not a weakness of the description; it is a property of the object and a condition of further inquiry.[34]

And, at the last, the instrument's other side. A seismograph that trains seismologists is unknown to geology. Literature has one, and that is its formative function — deeper than any didactics. A tremor is something the body knows before it has a concept for it, and literature is the way that knowledge of tremors becomes knowledge that can be passed on. Reading tremors can be learned. It is work that no other kind of record will do in literature's place. Generations that have never lived through an earthquake can learn to recognize foreshocks from an archive of records — and that is the sober, unpathetic point of the whole construction. It holds all the more because the newest techniques

[34] BAKHTIN, Mikhail M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays.* Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

of masking no longer need a monopoly on communication. The network divides the audience by itself. All the more reason, then, to know how to read the records of a century that had the monopoly. Deception, as Diderot already knew at the gate of Petiška's book, profits for a moment. Along the long axis, the record wins. The long twentieth century is the proving ground where this can be shown.

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[4] ČAPEK, Karel. *Matka*. *The Mother* (1938).

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Comparative Statistics of Systemic and Structural Differences in the Czech and Polish Legal Codes

Abstract: This article offers a quantitative and qualitative comparison of three groups of Czech and Polish legal acts: constitutions, civil codes and commercial company legislation. Linguistic kinship between Czech and Polish does not entail stylistic kinship of legal texts. The Polish Constitution is markedly more extensive and axiological, whereas the Czech Constitution remains closer to a framework model. This relation is reversed at the level of the civil codes. The differences reflect distinct legislative strategies and have consequences for legal translation and the teaching of languages for specific purposes.

Keywords: legal linguistics; comparative statistics; Czech law; Polish law; constitution; civil code; commercial companies; legal translation; legislative style; corpus linguistics

1. Introduction

A quantitative comparison of the Czech and Polish legal systems is not a merely technical exercise. It is a cognitive instrument that makes it possible to grasp differences in the way law is conceived, in the degree of regulatory precision, and in the relationship between the constitution and ordinary legislation. Despite close linguistic kinship and a shared heritage of continental civil law, Czech and Polish legal acts differ markedly in length, level of detail, and textual organisation.

The present analysis focuses on three key groups of acts: constitutions, civil codes, and statutes governing commercial companies. The aim is not only to juxtapose figures, but also to show how quantitative differences translate into specialist translation practice, the teaching of legal language, and the understanding of distinct legal cultures. In this sense, comparative statistics become a productive method of inquiry rather than a purely formal description. The argument developed here is closely connected with my other research on legal collocations, false friends and the Latin layer of Czech-Polish legal terminology, which I am preparing in a larger forthcoming book on the subject.

1.1 Corpus-based approaches to legal language

The comparison of Czech and Polish legislation can be situated within the wider field of corpus-based legal linguistics. In the German context, Vogel, Hamann and Gauer (2018) introduced computer-assisted legal linguistics and the JuReko reference corpus, bringing legislation, judicial decisions and legal scholarship into a common empirical framework. More recent methodological discussions and case studies are collected by Vogel, Walter and Tripps (2022). These approaches provide a framework for investigating recurrent linguistic patterns in legal texts while distinguishing observations about usage from arguments about legal interpretation.

Austrian research offers complementary examples of legal text processing. The BRISE-plandok corpus developed by Recski et al. (2025; first published online in 2024) contains manually annotated German-language planning regulations from Vienna. Its relevance to the present discussion lies in the explicit documentation of corpus selection and annotation, rather than

in a direct comparison of national legislative styles. Filtz, Kirrane and Polleres (2021), working in legal informatics, address the organisation and interlinking of Austrian legal data. These projects illustrate different research purposes and should not be treated as interchangeable with a representative corpus of legal language.

For Czech, Glogar (2025) presents KoPr and discusses the design of a representative legal-language corpus encompassing several legal genres. In the Polish context, Biel, Wasilewska and Koźbiał (2026) apply multidimensional analysis to institutional legal and administrative registers, comparing the Polish Eurolect with the national variety. For a Czech–Polish comparison, this line of research motivates attention to register, institutional setting and the distinction between domestic legislation and translated EU texts. It also suggests that national language alone is too broad a category to explain textual variation.

The translation and teaching implications require a similarly differentiated approach. Leńko-Szymańska and Biel (2023) examine terminological collocations in trainee and professional translations of company-law material, using comparable non-translated documents as an additional point of reference. Kontutytė (2025) investigates corpus work in the teaching of German legal language, drawing on GeLeCo. These studies offer concrete models for moving from general claims about translation difficulty to the analysis of phraseological choices and learning tasks. The broader terminology framework is developed in Biel and Kockaert (2023), while Graziadei (2025) discusses legal translation from the perspective of comparative law. Wright (2026) provides an overview of current corpus perspectives on legal discourse.

Against this background, the contribution of the present article is best framed as an exploratory comparison of the textual organisation of selected Czech and Polish statutes. Structural counts can identify differences worth investigating, but they do not by themselves establish semantic density, greater legal precision or the extent of judicial discretion. A fuller account would combine matched legal subject areas, documented corpus queries and qualitative analysis of the relevant provisions.

2. Methodology and the Cognitive Status of Quantitative Comparison

The analysis is based on current texts:

- the Constitution of the Czech Republic (*Ústava České republiky*, 1992/1993, as amended);

- the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (*Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, 1997, as amended);

- the Czech Civil Code (*Občanský zákoník*, Act No. 89/2012 Coll., in force since 2014);

- the Polish Civil Code (*Kodeks cywilny*);

- the Czech Business Corporations Act (*Zákon o obchodních korporacích*, Act No. 90/2012 Coll.);

- the Polish Commercial Companies Code (*Kodeks spółek handlowych*).

The quantitative data are approximate and serve comparative purposes. They describe structure (number of chapters, articles or paragraphs) rather than semantic content. Where possible, a corpus perspective has also been taken into account, in particular KoPr, the Representative Corpus of the Czech Legal Language.[1] A longer code is not automatically a better code (or even more thorough, for that matter). Length and density are, however, reliable indicators of a legislator's preferred strategy: whether precision is sought in the constitution, in the code, or in case law.

Why is such a comparison productive? First, it reveals differences in legislative density that remain invisible in a purely qualitative reading. Second, it makes it possible to link constitutional style with the style of the codes that follow it. Third, it opens a space for translational and didactic reflection: both the translator and the student of legal language need to know whether they are dealing with a synthetic or a casuistic text. Finally, quantitative comparison provides empirical support for claims formulated in legal linguistics, including observations developed in my other studies on collocations, false friends (*faux amis*) and the Latin heritage of the two languages.[2]

[1] Ondrej Glogar, Representative Corpus of the Czech Legal Language: A Tool for Jurisprudence, International Journal for the Semiotics of Law (2025).

[2] Cf. also Lucja Biel on legal translation and EU legal language, and the programme of the journal Comparative Legilinguistics.

Methodological qualification. The structural comparisons presented here should be distinguished from corpus-based measurements of lexical frequency and from measures of normative complexity. Article and section numbering is not a uniform unit of textual length across legal systems; amendments may introduce additional numbered provisions or repeal existing ones. The interpretation of structural differences must therefore take account of the substantive scope of each act. KoPr provides a methodological reference (Glogar 2025), but reproducible corpus queries are not reported in the present article. Claims about lexical frequency, legislative density and translation effects should accordingly be treated as exploratory hypotheses requiring further empirical testing.

3. Comparing the Constitutions: Polish Detail versus Czech Conciseness

Table 1: Structure of the Czech and Polish constitutions

Parameter	Ústava ČR	Konstytucja RP
Chapters	8	13
Articles	c. 113	243
Preamble	short, declarative	extensive, axiological
Density	more synthetic	more detailed

The Polish Constitution of 1997 is clearly more extensive. This difference is results from several historical and political factors. After 1989, Poland underwent an intensive process of building the legitimacy of a democratic state governed by the rule of law. The expanded preamble and the chapter on the freedoms and rights of persons and citizens (Arts. 30-86) had not only a normative but also a symbolic function: they recorded a break with the previous regime. The Czech Constitution, adopted in the circumstances of the dissolution of the federation, prefers conciseness and leaves more room for ordinary legislation and case law.[3]

[3] Michele Graziadei, Legal Translation and the Quest for Authenticity, International Journal for the Semiotics of Law (2025).

A further reason for Polish constitutional amplitude lies in the decision to write a relatively complete catalogue of rights, sources of law and institutional competences into the constitutional text itself. The Czech model is closer to a framework constitution: many questions of rights are developed in the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, which forms part of the constitutional order but is a separate act. The Polish text absorbs more of this material into a single document. For the translator this means that rendering the Polish constitution into Czech often requires compression, whereas translation in the opposite direction requires specification and the avoidance of excessive generality.

The difference also has a didactic value. Students of legal Czech and legal Polish easily assume that two closely related languages will produce similarly organised constitutional texts. Table 1 shows that this assumption is false. What looks like a simple equivalent pair - constitution / ustava / konstytucja - conceals two different textual economies.

4. Civil Codes: Continuation and Reversal of Constitutional Style

Table 2: Structure of the civil codes

Parameter	Občanský zákoník	Kodeks cywilny
Parts / books	5 parts	4 books
Paragraphs	c. 3,080	c. 1,080–1,250
Length	substantially greater	smaller

The Czech Civil Code (the so-called new OZ) is one of the most detailed civil codes in continental Europe. Its construction testifies to a striving for maximum regulatory precision and to a limitation of the role of case law in the sphere of basic institutions. The Polish Civil Code, although amended many times since 1964, retains a more synthetic character. It leaves more work to doctrine and to the courts.

It is noteworthy that, in the case of the civil codes, the relation of detail is reversed in comparison with the constitutions. The Czech constitution is concise, yet the Czech civil code is highly elaborate. The Polish constitution is elaborate, whereas the civil code remains relatively synthetic. This may be

interpreted as two different legislative strategies: the Czech Republic transfers precision to the level of ordinary statutes, Poland to the constitutional level. The codes that follow the constitution therefore do not simply copy its style; they compensate for it.

This compensation is productive for legal linguistics. If we asked only which language is more detailed, the answer would be unstable: Polish at the constitutional level, Czech at the level of the civil code. Comparative statistics force us to distinguish levels of the legal system. They also explain why a translator who has mastered constitutional Czech-Polish correspondences may still be surprised by the density of the Czech Civil Code.

Table 3: Selected terms — frequency and scope (indicative)

Term	Czech Civil Code	Polish Civil Code
závazek / zobowiązanie	very high	high
smlouva / umowa	extremely high	very high
vlastnictví / własność	high	high
společnost / spółka	also civil-law	mainly commercial

These examples correspond to observations developed in my other research on collocations and false friends. Terms such as *společnost / spółka* or *závazek / zobowiązanie* are not merely lexical counterparts: their frequency and scope of use reflect a different regulatory density. In the Czech Civil Code, *závazek* appears across a very wide range of contexts, which requires particular caution when selecting a Polish equivalent.[4] The same is true of *společnost*, which in Czech legal language may denote a company, an association or, outside the strict legal register, society as such. Polish *spółka* is narrower. Quantitative comparison thus leads back to qualitative contrast: numbers make visible the places where the translator must not rely on formal similarity.

5. Commercial Company Legislation

Both acts are modern and adapted to the realities of a market economy and EU law. The Czech statute, however, shows a greater tendency to regulate in detail

[4] These observations are developed more fully in my forthcoming book on Czech-Polish legal terminology, translation theory and applied linguistics.

Table 4: Structure of company legislation

Parameter	ZOK	KSH
Paragraphs	c. 780	c. 630–650
Detail	high, more casuistic	high, more synthetic

the organs of companies, managerial liability and transformation procedures. Once again we see a continuation of the style already present in the civil code: Czech legislation prefers casuistry. The Polish Commercial Companies Code is by no means brief, but it remains somewhat more synthetic and leaves more space for judicial interpretation and commercial practice.

The similarity of the catalogues of company forms is itself instructive. After 1989 both systems reconstructed private-law vehicles for business activity under the influence of continental models and, later, of EU company law. Quantitative differences therefore cannot be explained by a different inventory of institutions. They arise from the way those institutions are written: how many paragraphs are needed to constitute a limited liability company, how much of the organ structure is fixed by statute, and how much is left to the articles of association.

For translator training, these observations can be developed into tasks that compare terminological collocations in source texts, translations and comparable non-translated legal documents, following the research design of Leńko-Szymańska and Biel (2023). Corpus-based teaching of legal language also provides a relevant point of comparison (Kontutytė 2025). Differences in the length of national statutes do not, on their own, justify shortening or expanding the legal content of a translation; such decisions require attention to the purpose of the translation and the legal concepts involved (Graziadei 2025).

6. Synthesis: What Does the Comparison Yield?

Tables 1-4 present a coherent, though not homogeneous, picture:

1. The Polish constitution is clearly more extensive and more axiological. The Czech Constitution prefers conciseness.

2. The Czech Civil Code is quantitatively dominant: a substantially higher number of paragraphs and greater regulatory density.

3. Company legislation is similar in terms of the catalogue of legal forms, yet the Czech act remains somewhat more elaborate.

4. Quantitative differences have direct translational and didactic consequences.

The comparison is productive for several reasons. First, it shows that linguistic proximity does not mean stylistic proximity. Second, it reveals different legislative strategies: the Czech Republic transfers precision to the level of ordinary statutes, Poland to the constitutional level. Third, it provides empirical support for claims formulated in my other research on collocations, false friends and the Latin heritage of the two legal languages. Finally, it allows students and translators to understand that law in both languages is not merely a set of terms, but also a set of different ways of textually organising legal reality.[5]

In other words, comparative statistics are not an ornament of legal linguistics. They are a means of knowledge. They tell us where to look more closely, which equivalents are only apparent, and how the style of a constitution prepares - or fails to prepare - the style of the codes that implement it.

7. Conclusion

A statistical comparison of Czech and Polish legal acts shows that quantitative differences are not accidental. They reflect distinct legislative traditions and different approaches to regulatory precision. The Czech system tends towards detail at the level of the codes; the Polish system towards greater code-level synthesis combined with an expanded constitutional text. Awareness of these differences is indispensable both in legal translation practice and in the teaching of languages for specific purposes.

The argument of this article will be taken further in a forthcoming larger book devoted to Czech-Polish legal terminology in the light of translation

[5] On corpus-driven legal linguistics see Glogar (2025); on textual fit in translated law see Lucja Biel, Lost in the Eurofog (revised edition).

theory and applied linguistics. There the quantitative findings sketched here can be combined with a closer analysis of collocations, false friends and the Latin layer of both legal languages. Comparative statistics thus prove to be not only a method of description, but also a means of understanding distinct legal cultures.

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