
Reflection on the Experience and Response to the Tragic Events at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University

Observations from a Belgian-Czech Perspective

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Fifteen months have passed since the tragedy at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in December 2023. I had the opportunity to observe the immediate reactions to this attack, as well as the subsequent measures that were gradually taken to mitigate its consequences. With great emotion, I watched the enormous wave of solidarity that quickly transformed into concrete actions. As a result, targeted and necessary help could arrive very quickly.

The Transition from Crisis to Recovery?

After the acute phase ended, the coordination of assistance shifted from crisis management to the Faculty of Arts itself. During the first few days, various initiatives supporting the recovery process began to emerge — for example, the Peerko initiative, which brought together psychology students and crisis responders, as well as the Resilience Fund, which supported not only the newly created Resilience Centre, the Dr. Jan Dlask Memorial Fund, the Dr. Lenka Hlávková Memorial Fund, the Association United in Hope, and many others.?

I was struck by how Czech society faced, and continues to face, the challenges associated with such an extraordinary event. The way in which the process of coping with the aftermath of the attack was initiated and continues to unfold demonstrates the maturity of both society and individuals.

What Enabled Effective Response?

Key factors that enabled effective and timely assistance include:?

- the preparedness of emergency services,?
- the long-standing work of the Crisis, Disaster, and Trauma Psychology Section at the Ministry of the Interior, exchange and use of international experiences,?
- experience gained during the pandemic,?
- the existence of a network of state and non-governmental organizations focused on crisis assistance,?
- near-instant support from the Norwegian Funds and close cooperation with Norwegian researchers from NKVTS, sharing experiences with international partners.

Compared to, for example, the attacks in Brussels in 2016, assistance in the Czech Republic was provided very quickly, effectively, and, most importantly, in accordance with the latest knowledge of the needs of victims of mass violence.

Specific Steps of Assistance?

- Registration and Basic Support: Efforts were made to identify and directly contact those affected, providing not only necessary medical care but also basic information and initial psychological support.?
- Follow-up Care: Almost immediately, a follow-up care system was launched in collaboration with professionals and organizations across regions.?
- Financial Support: Thanks to the CU Endowment Fund and the generosity of the public, targeted financial assistance was provided, especially to the survivors and the injured. This support continued through subsequent phases.?
- Long-term Care: Efforts began to secure long-term support and to address the evolving needs of those affected.?
- Return to the Faculty: A significant challenge was the return to the faculty building, creating (albeit temporary) a memorial space, and providing support for students who were not directly affected but were deeply impacted by the event.

The Importance of Reflection and Documentation?

As expected, organizing the commemoration of the first anniversary of the tragic event was a challenging task — it was particularly necessary to respect the diverse needs of all involved. However, I believe it met most of the expectations, and despite the "operational" difficulties, it was conducted with dignity.?

Every such crisis is a test for society, individuals, and institutions. Although we strive to prepare thoroughly, such situations always catch us off guard to some extent. In hindsight, questions may arise about what could have been done differently or better — such reflections are essential for the future.

It would be incredibly valuable to systematically document the entire course of the event and the subsequent recovery. Preserving as much information and obtaining the most accurate data will allow the memories and data to remain available for future phases of the healing process.

The Uniqueness of This Experience?

The Czech Republic mostly relied on transferred experiences. It was possible to draw on knowledge from similar crisis events, although of a different nature (e.g., floods, the pandemic, the wave of refugees from Ukraine...) in the Czech context, as well as insights from abroad. The Czech Republic had not had direct experience with such a large-scale act of violence since the Second World War.

When similar events occurred in the past — such as violence against students, religious orders, or during the August 1968 occupation — they were not systematically analyzed or documented. It is important not to forget these unspoken and uncharted traumas that Czech society still carries.

Hope for the Future?

A strong pillar of coping with the aftermath of the tragedy was the deeply rooted willingness of Czechs to help. People immediately got involved in fundraising efforts, offered consultations, and supported the faculty and the university as a whole. This wave of solidarity is clear evidence of the strength of civil society.?

However, it must be recognized that we are facing a long journey. It will be necessary to maintain the established standards, respond to the changing needs of the affected individuals and institutions, remain open to new perspectives and initiatives, and, most importantly, find the necessary resources to implement all long-term plans. As the acute phase ends, society's attention naturally shifts elsewhere, to new topics and tasks, and support may seemingly or actually weaken, even though the needs at many levels remain.

Conclusion

The successful handling of this extraordinary tragic event stands on the firm will to help and collaborate, the ability of professionals and institutions to respond quickly and mostly effectively, based on the small, persistent work done in previous periods. If we continue to retain these qualities — if we share information, ask about the purpose and usefulness of our steps — the entire society can go through a healing process at an individual, institutional, and societal level.?

Every society is as strong as its most vulnerable members. It depends on how strong, dense, flexible, and functional the safety net we build is, and how we maintain it even in times of apparent calm.

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