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The cultural concept of *VLAST* [HOMELAND]: An insight into the worldview of Czech university students

Koncept *VLAST* [OJCZYŻNA] – wgląd w obraz świata czeskich studentów

Abstract: The article presents the results of a questionnaire survey focused on the cultural concept of *VLAST* ('homeland') in contemporary Czech, carried out within the framework of the international EUROJOS project. Data collection took place in the autumn of 2024 among students from four Czech universities. A total of 100 questionnaires were collected and analyzed. On this basis, it was found that the cultural concept of *VLAST* embraces six main semantic aspects: 1) territorial, 2) emotional, 3) genetic, 4) linguistic and cultural-historical, 5) social, and 6) residential. Furthermore, the questionnaire revealed that contemporary Czech students do not perceive the concept of *VLAST* as controversial, although they are not uncritical of its real denotation. They express a positive, usually emotionally motivated relationship to their "homeland", their (native) country, often specifically the Czech Republic, and attach high value to *VLAST*.

Keywords: ethnolinguistics; linguistic worldview; EUROJOS; questionnaires; university students; *VLAST* [HOMELAND]; semantic aspects; Czech language; value; cognitive definition

*VLAST is a place we consider our home. A place where we were born, where we grew up, and where we spent a significant part of our lives. A place, but also a society and people who shaped us. Perhaps also a place where our ancestors lived. As a young woman studying the history of education, I would also say that is a place to which we feel emotionally connected.*¹

Female university student, 19 years old, Liberec

0. Introduction²

How do today's Czech university students understand the cultural concept of *VLAST*? The present study, focused precisely on this question, presents the findings of a questionnaire survey related to that concept, conducted as part of a broader ethnolinguistic investigation within the international comparative project EUROJOS (*The Axiological Lexicon of Slavs and their Neighbours*, or LASiS) initiated years ago by ethnolinguists in Lublin under the leadership of Jerzy Bartmiński (cf. Bartmiński 2018). Thanks to this initiative, successive volumes of an axiological dictionary have been published, each devoted to a different value-based concept. Among them is the concept roughly corresponding to the idea of one's native land. In the Czech context, this is the cultural concept *VLAST* (represented by the lexeme *vlast*), historically and evidently still today as significant as the Polish *OJCZYNA*, the Russian *РОДИНА*, the Ukrainian *БАТКИВЩИНА*, or the German *VATERLAND* and *HEIMAT*, the English *HOMELAND*, the French *PATRIE*, and similar terms in other Romance languages.³ Let us also recall the Latin term *patria*, which shares the same root as several of the expressions mentioned above, namely, a connection to the concept of the father (cf. also the marked, somewhat archaic Czech lexeme *otčina*).

¹ Due to the limited scope of the study, students' responses are presented solely in English.

² This publication was supported by the Cooperatio Programme (research area Linguistics), provided by Charles University, implemented at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University.

³ These cultural concepts have been examined within the ethnolinguistic research framework, for example, in Anna Wierzbicka's (1997) study comparing concepts related to the homeland (native country) in German, Polish, and Russian. A volume edited by Jerzy Bartmiński (1993) is also worth mentioning, which includes studies on the cultural concept of *OJCZYNA* and its counterparts in several European languages, among them a contribution on the Czech *VLAST* (Damborský 1993). The latter also interprets data from an empirical survey similar in design to the present study, based on questionnaires completed by 82 students at Czech universities. For references to more recent ethnolinguistic literature on this topic, see Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska (2024). For valuable notes on some aspects of the Czech concept of *VLAST*, see also Kubok (2022).

In addition to systemic (dictionary-based) and textual data, the research also draws, following the Lublin methodology, on data obtained through questionnaires, which are typically distributed to one hundred respondents from among university students.⁴ This group has certain specific characteristics both in terms of age and social status (not only in the Czech context), which are reflected in how its members understand certain concepts. The authors of this article have previously written about the student perspective in their study on the cultural concept of *DOMOV* (Vaňková and Huleja 2017). As will be seen in the responses presented here, the concept of *VLAST* overlaps with it in many respects. The Czech expressions *vlast* and *domov* can, in certain aspects, be perceived as synonyms, and this is indeed how respondents tend to perceive them.

0.1 Research data and respondents

The research was conducted in September and October 2024, yielding 100 usable questionnaires. They were completed by native speakers of Czech studying at four Czech universities (in Liberec, Plzeň, and Praha), the majority of whom were enrolled in teacher training programs in the humanities – primarily Czech philology, but also history, social sciences, English, German, etc. A total of 85 questionnaires were collected from these students, while only 15 were completed by students in technical fields (future civil engineers). The gender distribution was also uneven: the predominance of women (73) reflects their higher representation in the humanities (especially in education); men were significantly fewer (27). The age range of respondents was 19–26 years, with younger students predominating (the average age was under 22).⁵

0.2 Individual questionnaire items

The questionnaire originally contained six questions, although only four were ultimately evaluated (see below). The first question was traditionally very general and formulated to encourage the freest possible expression:

⁴ The methodology for collecting empirical data with a focus on university students has been applied consistently across all languages studied within the EUROJOS (see Bielińska-Gardziel et al. 2017).

⁵ We are sincerely grateful to the colleagues who, upon our request, distributed most of the questionnaires among their students and oversaw their completion. These were: Assoc. Prof. Milan Hrdlička, Ph.D., CSc. (University of West Bohemia, Plzeň), Ladislav Janovec, Ph.D. (Technical University of Liberec), and Filip Horký, Ph.D. (Czech Technical University in Prague).

“What do you think *VLAST* is?”⁶ Given that such a formulation tends to elicit responses resembling general definitions and often lacking associative (connotative) components of meaning, we made a complementary request: “Please write in the table what comes to mind when you hear the word *vlast*”. Responses could take the form of either a coherent text or a list of word-based associations. The third question aimed to elicit expressions used in the same sense as *vlast*, i. e., synonyms that could lexically represent the concept under study: “What other words or phrases can be used instead of the word *vlast*?”. Respondents could optionally add reflections on which of these expressions they use most often or prefer. The next two questions sought to gather data related to possible reflections on different, even controversial or socially polarized understandings, uses, and evaluations of the concept (or the expression). The fourth question was: “Do some people understand *VLAST* differently than you? How?”. The fifth question, “Who is a *vlastenec*/“patriot” and how does he/she manifest himself/herself?”, was ultimately not evaluated within our study, since a separate investigation of the Czech concept *VLASTENECTVÍ* (and *VLASTENEC*) is being conducted concurrently within the EUROJOS project, and will present relevant findings in a more comprehensive form (Janovec et al. in preparation). Finally, respondents were asked to complete two unfinished statements: “It is my *VLAST*, and therefore...” and “It is my *VLAST*, but ...”. Due to the limited scope of this article, the evaluation of these unfinished statements is not discussed here.

Let us now look at how students responded to the individual questions. We will focus primarily on the first two, as they provide the richest material for interpreting the fundamental dimensions of the concept, and they serve as the basis for formulating its semantic aspects. Responses to the remaining questions contributed to refining the image of *VLAST* as understood by the respondents, and in many cases led to significant clarification.

1. What is *VLAST*?

The questionnaire begins with a traditionally broad and general question. Respondents could choose to answer briefly – for example: *our country*, *home*, *our homeland*, or simply *Czech Republic* (ČR) – or in a more elaborate

⁶ According to the Lublin methodology used in LASiS, this question would read: “What do you think constitutes the essence of true *VLAST*?” However, its wording did not sound natural in Czech, so we modified it slightly. In addition – unlike the LASiS questionnaire – our questionnaire incorporates additional items concerning students’ associative responses, synonymy, other understandings of the concept, and tasks involving the completion of unfinished sentences (see subsequent sections).

and complex manner. Compare, for instance: *VLAST is a place we consider our home. A place where we were born, where we grew up, and where we spent a significant part of our lives. A place, but also a society and people who influenced us. And perhaps also a place where our ancestors lived. I would also say it is a place to which we feel emotionally connected.*⁷ Or: *A place/country where one was born, grew up, and learned traditions + a place one always returns to, because it feels like home.*⁸

In student reflections, as is the case here, responses often take the form of classical definitions, with a clearly delineated superordinate concept (*genus proximum*) and specifying features (*differentia specifica*). The most frequently used expression in the position of the superordinate concept is unequivocally *a place* (*a place where I live*), or other lexemes with territorial or spatial meaning – primarily *a country* (*a country where I was born and where I live; native country; a country in which I feel at home*), *a region* (*a region from which a given individual originates*), or *a territory* (*a territory whose inhabitants share history and culture; a territory with which a person identifies – by character, history, etc. – and feels that it is their “homeland”*⁹). Less frequently, the superordinate concept is represented by non-spatial terms, primarily those associated with the social dimension of *VLAST* (see below), such as: *a group of people who share a language, customs, and territory; a nation, a group of inhabitants united by a common language, living in the same territory, with shared symbols (flag, anthem, etc.); a society of people from the same country, speaking the same language, with a similar mentality; people who live in the same territory, share traditions, language, and a need to have something in common and to care for it. That shared element is VLAST.*

As is evident, even in these responses, the spatial aspect is mentioned as significant – at least within the specifying features.¹⁰ The territorial and social dimensions of *VLAST* also emerge as important in other data (often in combination). Less frequently, we find other, more abstract superordinate concepts: *VLAST* is described, for example, as a feeling of belonging to one's fellow citizens, the sharing of history, culture, and language, or as a set of values and traditions that create a sense of security or, to some

⁷ When listing individual responses consecutively, they are separated by a semicolon.

⁸ Such responses sometimes also cover answers to other, more specific and detailed questions (see below).

⁹ The respondent used the older, emotionally charged term *domovina*, derived from the Czech cultural keyword *domov*.

¹⁰ In some responses, we find a combination of two superordinate concepts, territorial (place) and social (nation): *together, a place on the map of the world and the nation living there, to which one feels a sense of belonging.*

extent, a “psychological” framing of the state and nation that contributes to identity.

From the examples above, it is clear that a typical response includes not just one, but a combination of several semantic elements that, according to respondents, constitute the cultural concept of *VLAST*. In order to grasp these individual components and at least approximately generalize and quantify them, we isolate them as so-called *segments* and treat them as minimal semantic units (the term *segment* is adopted from Cinkrautová et al. 2025). For example, in the response *a place where I was born*, two segments can be identified: “place” and “birth”; in the response *a place on the map of the world and a nation living there, to which we feel we belong*, three segments: “place (on the map of the world)”, “nation”, and “feeling of belonging”; in the response *a group of people who share a language, customs, and territory*, four segments: “group of people”, “language”, “customs” and “territory”.

The approximate frequency of individual segments – that is, semantic elements that respondents perceive as present in the concept of *VLAST* – is reflected in the following table. The number on the right indicates how many respondents mentioned a given characteristic (usually among several others) in their answer to the first question. Expressions that can be interpreted as lexemes conveying a similar principle are grouped together and understood as different realizations of a particular semantic aspect (e.g., the expressions *place*, *country*, and *territory* in the first row of Table 1 refer to the territorial aspect of meaning). Table 1 presents the individual aspects in order of the number of mentions found in the responses. Below the table (as is the case for all subsequent tables), the aspects and their linguistic realizations are commented on, with examples of specific responses.

Table 1. Aspects identified in the responses to the first question

What is <i>VLAST</i> ?		
1.	<i>place, country, territory...</i> territorial aspect	84
2.	<i>relationship, emotional bond, feeling of belonging; identification; it is my home; I care about it ...</i> emotional aspect	75
3.	<i>birth, ancestors, origin, roots ...</i> genetic aspect	54
4.	<i>shared language, culture, past, traditions; symbols ...</i> linguistic and cultural-historical aspect	27
5.	<i>group of people, nation ...</i> social aspect	26
6.	<i>a place where I live ...</i> residential aspect ¹¹	24

¹¹ We refer to the *residential* aspect as one connected to the current experience of living, permanent residence, or dwelling in a given place. It often appears in conjunction with the *genetic* aspect, for example: ... *a place where I was born, raised, and live* or *a place we were born into, grew up in, and spent a significant part of our lives* (see below).

1.1 Place, country, territory (the territorial aspect)

In connection with *VLAST*, the segment reflecting the territorial aspect of meaning is the most frequently mentioned (84 responses). This is consistent with dictionary definitions of *vlast*, such as “native country” (PSJČ, SSČ) or “place of birth or residence” (PSJČ), among others. As indicated above, it is characteristic that a spatial designation most often appears in the role of the superordinate concept (genus proximum), and alongside it, respondents typically mention other – non-spatial – aspects depending on their individual choices. Compare, for example: *a place on the map of the world and a nation living there, to which we feel we belong; it is a space in which people of the same culture move and speak the same language. It is a certain territory; a territory with which a person identifies (by character, history, etc.) and feels that is their “homeland”*.

1.2 Emotional bond, sense of belonging; identity; home (emotional aspect)

A full three quarters of respondents (75 responses) expressed, in various ways, an emotional involvement associated with the concept of *VLAST*: *it is a country to which I have an emotional connection, I feel love and belonging toward it, I am part of it, I care about it, I enjoy returning to it* (all of these characteristics were recorded in the questionnaires). This category also includes responses linking *VLAST* with identity and identification (“who I actually am”) – these occurred six times. Explicit references to *VLAST* as home were also included: *it is a country that is my home* (cf. also occurrences of expressions such as *doma*, *domovina*). In the case of the concept *DOMOV* (‘home’), the emotional aspect (including the sense of belonging) is a significant connotation (cf. Vaňková 2015; Vaňková and Huleja 2017). Seventeen respondents referred to *DOMOV* in their answer to this question (and even more did so in the following one). Occasionally, expressions explicitly pointing to the etymology of the word *vlast* were mentioned – namely, that it refers to what is one’s own, what one possesses (4 respondents). It is characteristic that possessive pronouns in the first person singular or plural appear in the responses (my home, our country); e.g. *a country to which I have a strong emotional bond, with which I identify, I care about it, and it is my home; the country of my birth, but also a country I care about; a part of my identity*.

1.3 Birth, origin (genetic aspect)

The aspect of birth (*native country*) and origin (*the country I come from*) is also a fundamental component of dictionary definitions conceived

denotatively (cf. PSJČ, SSJČ, SSČ), and this interpretation was given by 54 respondents. However, the respondents' expressions tend to be richer, especially as the aspect of birth is often linked to other phenomena such as family or ancestors, or expressed metaphorically through the notion of roots: *a country where I was born; a region from which a given individual originates; a place we come from (my VLAST). The place and origin of our roots.*

1.4 Shared language, culture, history, traditions, symbols (linguistic and cultural-historical aspect)

Within the linguistic and cultural-historical aspect, which comprises 27 responses, it is once again evident that respondents often refer not only to the social aspect but also to several others, including some not previously included (here, for example, the political aspect): *native country, a geographical and political entity where I was born and from which I and my ancestors originate.* In most responses, several of these aspects are interconnected: place, birth and origin, current life, emotional bond, and shared experience ("harmony") with other people who speak a common language and share a common culture and history. Cf.: *(vlast is) a country in which I live, to which I belong, where I feel at home, and where I feel harmony with the people, culture, and language.* It is clear that this aspect is often linked to the emotional aspect (see above, 1.2). Emphasis is placed on what we share as members of the same sociocultural group. Cf.: *for me, vlast is an environment united by culture, history, and language; the cultural-historical foundation of a nation, which is also tied to a specific territory where it originated and developed; vlast is a concept that encompasses the history of our country, its culture, and its people.*

1.5 Group of people, nation (social aspect)

In 26 of the responses, the relationship to one's homeland is understood as something shared with others; it pertains to the entire community that inhabits a particular territory, typically over generations, and collectively takes care of it. This usually refers to a nation. The social aspect is closely intertwined with the previously mentioned dimension (1.4), which includes shared language, history, and culture. Compare: *a society of people from the same country, speaking the same language, possessing a similar mentality; a nation, a group of inhabitants united by, for example, a common language, living in the same territory, sharing symbols (flag, anthem), etc.; people who live in the same territory, share the same traditions and language, and*

feel the need to have something in common and to care for it. That shared element is the VLAST.

1.6 Place of residence (residential aspect)

This characteristic (24 responses), once again derived from the spatial dimension, is typically associated with one's place of birth or origin. Compare: *the country in which I live, in which I was born.* The aspect of currently residing in the *VLAST* is one of the most significant features, even though many people do not spend their entire lives in the place where they were born and raised. Often, they remember their *VLAST* from abroad, or from a country that has become their "second *VLAST*".¹² Typically, the notion of long-term residence in a particular country is accompanied by a "positive relationship" (emotional aspect); without such a relationship, the place might not be referred to as a *VLAST* at all. Compare: *a place where we live long-term and to which we have a certain emotional attachment; a somewhat sentimental designation for the country of birth, or the country in which one currently lives and to which one has a positive relationship; ...a place and a society in which one lives and exists.*

2. What comes to mind when you hear the word *vlast*?

The second question was deliberately formulated in a similar but more specific way than the first. It aimed to elicit associations that are shared and linguistically shaped – that is, associations with the status of connotations. Respondents were allowed to enter their answers into a table, either in full sentences or as single-word "points", depending on what felt more comfortable. These points were often listed in greater numbers and reflected, in an associative and frequently non-linear manner, several aspects – territorial and more specifically "natural" (e.g., Czech landscape), symbolic (anthem, flag), and others (see below), as well as typical scenarios through which the concept is perceived (e.g., military conflict). Compare: *Czech landscape, especially nature and countryside, but also cities; furthermore, the anthem, coat of arms, flag; national emblem, Czech flag, Prague, borders of the Czech Republic on a map. I also recall a clash of armies fighting for their VLAST, that is, for their nation and land; Czechia, Europe, family, borders, culture.*

¹² Somewhat different responses would likely be obtained if the questionnaires were distributed, for example, among emigrants or even among a naturally diverse, multilingual group of students. However, the fact that Czech was the respondents' native language clearly shaped their perspective.

The associative and often fragmentary nature of the responses, along with their diversity, makes precise evaluation difficult. On the other hand, it is evident that these responses complement the findings from the first question. The aspects identified in the previous analysis were almost entirely represented here as well, though in a much more concrete form. For instance, where respondents previously wrote “country of birth”, they now often mentioned “Czechia”. Table 2 and its commentary present the individual aspects as characterized in Table 1, and in the same order, even though the frequency of items differs slightly (though not significantly). As can be seen, there is a noticeable increase in items reflecting the linguistic and cultural-historical aspects.

Table 2. Aspects identified in the responses to the second question

What comes to mind when you hear the word <i>vlast</i> ?		
1.	<i>place, country, territory; landscape, nature; Czechia ...</i> territorial aspect	77
2.	<i>relationship, emotional bond, sense of belonging; identification; “it is my home”; “I care about it”; pride, love ...</i> emotional aspect	80
3.	<i>birth, family, ancestors, origin, roots ...</i> genetic aspect	20
4.	<i>shared language, culture (music, literature), history (figures, periods, events, monuments), traditions; symbols (anthem, flag, coat of arms) ...</i> linguistic and cultural-historical aspect	64
5.	<i>group of people, nation ...</i> social aspect	24
6.	<i>“place where I live” ...</i> residential aspect	3 (39)

2.1 Place, country, territory (territorial aspect)

VLAST is understood once again as a place – a territory “geographically defined by borders” – and, in terms of another dimension, as a place that is “mine” or “ours”. Territoriality is expressed here more concretely than in responses to the first question. In addition to expressions such as *our country* or *home*, which also appeared in the first set of responses, terms like *Bohemia*, *the Czech Republic*, and *Czech landscape* are frequently mentioned (*Czechness* was referenced 28 times), and occasionally also *Europe*.

More specific locations with positive connotations come to the fore, often associated with one’s native region and its natural environment, such as *Czech landscape, nature, countryside, village, forests, hills, greenery, gardens, fields* – and with an even stronger emphasis on the dimension of personal life: *my favorite places, the landscape of my residence, Šumava, the Central Bohemian Highlands*. Symbolic places associated with the Czech environment also appear, such as the *Vltava River, Říp Mountain, Prague* (including *Wenceslas Square*), or the respondent’s birthplace. *When I hear the word vlast, I think of our country. If I want to be specific, I must admit*

that the first images that come to mind are those around Hradec Králové, because that is where I come from.

The responses are highly individualized (many items appear only once), making precise quantitative evaluation difficult. Some items within the territorial category also overlap in nature and meaning with other aspects – especially the emotional (*home, a place where I belong, a safe place, a place I feel connected to*), genetic (e.g., *country of birth, place where my family lives, place where I grew up*), or residential aspect (*place where I live*). As is evident, all these aspects are closely interconnected.

2.2 Relationship, emotional bond, sense of belonging; identity; home (emotional aspect)

Responses expressing this semantic aspect were even more frequent than in the first question (80 mentions), and its significance is evident not only in the individual lexemes cited by respondents (*love, emotional bond, pride* – the latter mentioned 19 times), but also in explicit statements such as: *VLAST = home, culture, values, traditions; a feeling of “belonging” – something that is inherently mine; a sense of responsibility – as an individual, I am accountable for the well-being and misfortune of VLAST*. One respondent provided a composite answer consisting of expressions from various aspects, including several emotionally charged terms: *home, landscape, country, nation, Smetana, love, pride, emotion, nostalgia, foundation, roots, fertile ground, music, literature, language, art, history, politics, traditions*. The very use of expressions such as *home, homeland, my home, our home, at home, home country* (mentioned a total of 36 times) carries emotional connotations in this context. First-person singular expressions are typical in responses to this question (less so in the plural), and appear more frequently than in the previous question, along with possessive pronouns in the first person (*my country*). Compare also the emphasis on the etymologically grounded connotation of *vlastní* (“one’s own”), mentioned similarly to how it was mentioned in the first question (3 times): *one’s own country, country of birth, and – figuratively – a country to which we gladly return, which we consider our own, our beloved*.

2.3 Birth, origin (genetic aspect)

This aspect is interpreted broadly – we include responses that mention birth, family, parents, ancestors, and also roots or heritage. Examples include: *home, family, a place where my ancestors also lived; a place where my family has lived for generations; foundation, roots*. Also included are

responses such as: *a place I come from; a place where I grew up; or, in my view, we may consider our native territory (country, city, region) as our VLAST*, and most commonly: *country of birth* (see also the territorial aspect above). The genetic aspect overlaps with the social aspect and, through its orientation toward a connection with previous generations, also expresses the cultural-historical dimension.

2.4 Shared language, culture, history, traditions, symbols (linguistic and cultural-historical aspect)

History was explicitly mentioned 15 times within this aspect, with specific examples referring to historical periods and events such as the 19th century, the Czech National Revival, the Czechoslovak resistance during World War II, communism, the Velvet Revolution, and November 1989. Respondents also cited figures associated with Czech history and statehood (Jan Hus, T. G. Masaryk, Václav Havel), as well as legendary heroes (Forefather Čech, Přemysl the Ploughman). Culture was mentioned 27 times – students (mostly from Czech language and literature programs) most frequently referred to literature, especially authors from the 19th century. Music was also cited, most notably Bedřich Smetana and his cycle of symphonic poems *Má vlast*, or Smetana himself as a national composer (*Má vlast* or its author were mentioned 10 times). The Czech national anthem was mentioned 9 times (see below).

Reference to the shared language, Czech or the mother tongue, was explicitly present in 18 responses. Several responses (approximately 6) mentioned *vlastivěda* (civic education), *národopis* (ethnography), and directly *folklore*, including traditional costumes, holiday celebrations, or, more generally, the sharing of traditions. Food, drink, and national dishes (e.g., *svíčková* with dumplings)¹³ were mentioned 9 times, including two mentions of good beer. Sport appeared three times (e.g., sporting events where people feel proud of their *VLAST*; ice hockey; the Ice Hockey World Championship). One response referred to Czech companies and Czech-made products. Mentions of patriotism, patriots, and national pride were included here as well (11 responses), including the observation that “Czechs are not very patriotic”. Fighting for *VLAST* was explicitly mentioned four times in this question (and more frequently in responses to other questions). Respondents often referred to (Czech) national symbolism, both generally and specifically (26 mentions in total). The Czech flag was the most frequently cited symbol

¹³ Traditional Czech dish, roast beef with a special sauce made from root vegetables and cream.

(11 times), followed by the anthem (9 times). The linden tree (*lípa*) was mentioned twice as an emblematic Czech tree. Four responses referred to the image of the Czech Republic on a map.

2.5 Group of people, nation (social aspect)

In this context, particular emphasis is placed on the (Czech) nation, which was explicitly mentioned 14 times. This reflects the historically strong association – dating back to the Czech National Revival – between two highly valued and closely intertwined concepts: *VLAST* and *NÁROD* (nation). At that time, both were often perceived as sacred and constructed in similar ways. Although this bond may be somewhat weaker today, the two concepts remain closely linked, as confirmed by students' responses to the question of what comes to mind when they hear the word *vlast*: *home; nation; national pride; national symbols; Czech language; Bohemia; the Czech Republic*.

2.6 Place where I live (residential aspect)

This aspect is most clearly expressed through neutral terms such as *place of residence* or phrases like *the place where I live* or *the place where I live with my family*. Although the terms *residence* and *living* were explicitly mentioned only three times, if we include other expressions that imply the aspect of current residence (and which were categorized under previously discussed aspects), it becomes evident that this dimension holds a meaningful place in respondents' conceptualizations. In our case, this primarily concerns responses containing the word *home*, which naturally encompasses the semantic element of current residence (see section 2.2 for details). If we include the residential aspect as implicitly expressed in this way, we find that respondents referred to it 39 times.

2.7 Conclusion to the first two questions

To conclude this section, it is important to note that the aspects outlined above – and the items grouped under them, which are in fact artificially extracted from the context of the responses – are the result of analytical abstraction, which is necessarily limiting and distorting. It is more meaningful to interpret respondents' answers holistically, in broader contexts, and to treat each response as a whole. For example, *VLAST* may simultaneously mean all of the following to a respondent: *Country of birth. Landscape. But also everything that belongs to my nationality: language, traditions. Above all, however, the Czech Republic as a whole. Or: a sense of belonging to other citizens; sharing history, culture, and the same language. Or,*

expressed differently: *a place where one is born, raised in the local culture, customs, and traditions, and therefore feels at home – in one's VLAST*. Other responses, often fragmentary and associative, include: *Má vlast – Czech writers – Forefather Čech*¹⁴ – *hills – greenery – village – folklore – national symbols – 19th century – sense of humor*, or associations focused on modern history: *Czechoslovak resistance – Sokol*¹⁵ – *Velvet Revolution 1989 – communism – truth and love*¹⁶ – *V. Havel*.

If the first question revealed that *VLAST* is perceived as the country of birth, to which one has an emotional attachment – associated with love of place and close people, and with a shared awareness of common history, culture, symbolism, and language – then the second question clarified more concretely that this *VLAST* is the Czech Republic. Respondents associate it with specific Czech realities: the landscape and favorite places within it, their native region and family. The associations (or connotations) strongly reflect the Czech nation and key milestones in its history, historical periods and significant events (especially the National Revival, the founding of the republic in 1918, World War II and the resistance, totalitarianism and Soviet occupation, the Velvet Revolution and the events of 17 November 1989), as well as prominent historical figures (Jan Hus, Czech writers, T. G. Masaryk, Václav Havel). Also present are stereotypical notions about Czechs (e.g., that they have a sense of humor, or are not very patriotic). Fragments of the Czech national anthem appear, e.g., the opening verse *Kde domov můj*, and references to *skaliny a lučiny* (rocks and meadows, an allusion to it), and the cycle of symphonic poems *Má vlast* by Bedřich Smetana is frequently mentioned. This is likely due not only to the lexical presence of the word *vlast* in the title, but also to the nature of the work itself – its unique celebration of Czech history, legends, and landscape – and its status as part of the canon of works perceived as “patriotic”.

These observations are further supported by the so-called word clouds generated from the responses to the first two questions (see Figures 1 and 2 below).¹⁷

¹⁴ A character from old Czech legends: the forefather of Czechs came with his company to Mount Říp and settled in what is now Bohemia.

¹⁵ Sokol (Falcon) is a traditional Czech patriotic gymnastics organization for all ages, founded in 1862 for the physical, moral and intellectual education of the nation.

¹⁶ *Truth and love* – a part of the slogan associated with Václav Havel and the period of the Velvet Revolution in November 1989 (the full slogan is *Truth and love must triumph over lies and hatred*).

¹⁷ The word clouds are generated from a carefully compiled mini-corpus consisting of all student responses. The term mini-corpus refers to a set of lemmas compiled only from the words contained in the respondents' answers, and the size of individual lexemes in the

to defend this concept, as if they assumed that there were doubts about whether it “sounds good”.

Table 3. Aspects identified in the responses to the third question

What other words or phrases can be used instead of the word <i>vlast</i> ?		
1.	<i>country / land</i>	53
2.	<i>home</i>	24
3.	<i>nation</i>	23
4.	<i>“domovina” (homeland, cf. note 9)</i>	20
5.	terms referring to the <i>Czech Republic</i>	12
6.	<i>birthplace</i>	5
7.	<i>territory</i>	4
8.	<i>place (place of origin 3 times, place where I live 1 time)</i>	4
9.	<i>refuge</i>	2
10.	<i>at our place</i> (possibly compatible with the term <i>home</i> , see above)	2
11.	<i>region</i> (always with the attribute <i>native</i>)	2
12.	<i>pride</i>	2

The most frequently cited synonym for the term *vlast* is *země* (= *country*, 53 times, including the more archaic, less frequent term *zem* – 8 times). In the case of this otherwise neutral term, it is important to mention its most frequent attributive collocation *rodná* (= *native*) with 23 responses, which de facto creates a separate synonym (*VLAST* is *native country*). Other attributes include the semantically uniform group of possessive pronouns *my* or *our* (4 times) and the attribute *of origin* (in the phrase *country of origin*, 2 times). As for the respondents’ arguments for choosing the word *country*, they stated without further explanation that it was *familiar* to them, that it is *the most accurate* and *most common* synonym. One emphasized that he most often says *in my country*. A total of 5 students justified the use of the Czech word for *country*.

The second most frequently mentioned alternative term is *home* (24 times, including one instance of *at our place*). Two students added argumentation. The first wrote that *even though there are many other cultures and nations in the world, she always likes to return to the Czech Republic*, i.e. to her home. The second, who used the term *my home*, pointed out that he *associates it with our national anthem, Kde domov můj?* (“Where Is My Home?”).

Third place goes to the term *nation* (23 times, including one instance of *nationality*) and fourth place to the word *domovina* (= *homeland*, 20 times), to which three students added their arguments. The first student said that *domovina* sounds *nice and comforting*, while the second *found it very similar* [to the word *vlast*] *in terms of feelings*. From our point of view, the most remarkable argument came from the third student, who pointed out the *pomposity* of the term *vlast*, which he therefore replaces with the

words *Czechia* (*Bohemia*) and *domovina*: *I don't say that I am returning to my "vlast" from abroad, but generally that I am returning to Bohemia. Probably because I feel these terms are more neutral ("homeland" carries a calmer, less pompous connotation).* In fifth place, students listed a group of terms referring to the *Czech Republic* (12 times, including the terms *Czech Republic*, *republic*, *Republic*, *ČR*, *Czechia*, and *Bohemia*). We will leave the other less frequent answers shown in the table without comment. We did not include synonyms with only one occurrence in the table, such as *culture*, *region*, *residence*, *belonging*, *heart of Europe*, *cradle*, *family*, *soil*, *landscape*, *patriot*, *part of my identity*, and also *fatherland* and *motherland*.¹⁸

4. Do some people understand the concept of *VLAST* differently than you do? How?

As we have already mentioned, for the vast majority of respondents, the concept of *VLAST* is not controversial, let alone negative. In Question 4, we attempted to challenge this view by asking respondents whether some people understand *VLAST* differently.

Table 4. Aspects identified in the responses to the fourth question

Do some people understand the concept of <i>VLAST</i> differently than you do? How? ¹⁹		
1.	no answer, <i>I don't know</i> , <i>I can't imagine it</i> , <i>I haven't discussed it with anyone...</i>	62
2.	some people attach less importance to it; it is not so important to them	11
3.	some people view it more patriotically	10
4.	some people view it less patriotically	3
5.	some people understand it more broadly, more globally	3
6.	foreigners (migrants) understand it differently	3

62 respondents either did not answer at all or wrote that they did not know what other people understood by the term or could not imagine how it might be understood differently. 11 respondents answered that some people imagine something of *lesser value* or *importance* when they think about the concept *VLAST*. This fact was often signaled by expressions such as *only*, *just*, *merely*, i.e., for example, *just as a state*; *only as the place where they were born*; *as a mere country*; *as a material thing*; *as a point on the*

¹⁸ The last two terms are perhaps surprisingly infrequent compared to other Slavic languages, see Polish *ojczyzna*, Ukrainian *вітчизна*.

¹⁹ For question 4 and completing unfinished statements, respondents were less willing to answer, so we do not have responses from all of them.

map. One respondent stated that *other people perhaps understand VLAST superficially, not with such love :-)*.

10 respondents stated that other people understand *VLAST* in a more patriotic way (*they are more patriotic than I am; patriots attach a completely different significance to it different weight; they emphasize the aspect of pride*), sometimes even radically and xenophobically (*they guard it too jealously and try to make it inaccessible to others; recently, the word homeland (and Czech symbols) has been used as a tool for oppressing minorities and as a kind of symbol behind which one can hide when doing negative things and expressing hatred toward minorities*). One respondent stated in this context that *patriotism does not mean much to him* because, *although he likes the Czech Republic, he disagrees with most of the opinions of its inhabitants*, while another considers *patriotism to be outdated*.

On the other hand, three respondents mentioned that some people have a less patriotic view of their country, feel less pride in it, and *do not have an emotional connection to it*. One respondent said that *such people despise Czechia and its history, are ashamed of being Czech, and call themselves by another name*. Another respondent told us that some people consider their *VLAST to be something derogatory and nationalistic*.

Two other types of answers were reported by the same number of respondents. The first pointed out that some people may understand the concept of *VLAST* in a broader, more global context, whether as *Europe* or *the EU* (*I know a few people who see themselves more as Europeans*), or as *the entire Earth and not just the country in which they live*. In this context, one respondent told us that some people may not perceive their *VLAST as a home, but as a prison, and may despise it* and therefore have a *more global orientation*. The second response emphasized the fact that foreigners and migrants understand *VLAST* differently, but did not specify how.

We can therefore see that, to a lesser extent, the concept of *VLAST* does indeed have controversial potential. The main issue is how a particular language user evaluates its patriotic or nationalistic facet. What one person values as patriotism, another may condemn as nationalism. The questionnaire survey also shows that another “area of friction” in the Czech linguistic picture of *VLAST* is that this concept, or rather the word *vlast* itself, may be evaluated by some as too marked (e.g., pathetic, archaic, old-fashioned, or outdated). However, it should be noted again that most respondents perceive this concept as neutral or rather positive.

5. Conclusion

In Czech explanatory dictionaries, the definition of *VLAST* is typically rendered as a “country of birth”.²⁰ The questionnaire-based research presented here confirms this core meaning, composed of the semantic units *place* (or *country*) and *birth*, but only as a semantic nucleus – one that is further developed and enriched by additional semantic characteristics. As demonstrated, the semantic structure of the concept of *VLAST* comprises several dimensions: **territorial** (place, country), **genetic** (birth, origin, ancestors), **social** (nation, group of people sharing a relationship to *VLAST*), **cultural-historical** (the past, including shared language, transmitted cultural patterns, and culture in general – music, literature, etc., including symbolism), **residential** (country of permanent residence, place of living), and finally, by no means least, **emotional**, associated with a sense of belonging and the experience of both personal and shared identity. It is evident that *VLAST* remains a significant value in the Czech cultural context. Based on the responses of Czech students, *VLAST* may be defined approximately as follows:

Preliminary Cognitive Definition of *VLAST*

VLAST is a place (a country) where a person was born, raised, and currently lives; where their family resides and where their ancestors lived. It is a place where one shares, with others (members of the same nation), a common language, customs, traditions, culture (including, for example, food), symbols, and a shared past (history). A person has a special emotional connection to this place and to the individual attributes of *VLAST*: a sense of belonging, shared experience, love, closeness, as well as respect, pride, deep emotional attachment, and nostalgia. They perceive this place as their home, as something that is “their own”, and as part of their identity. They feel responsible for it, wish to take care of it, and, if necessary, are willing to fight for it.²¹

Some responses explicitly stated that certain conditions typically associated with the stereotype of *VLAST* need not necessarily apply: one does

²⁰ See the definition in SSJČ: “a country to which one has an emotional attachment because one was born there, has lived there, or currently lives there; country of birth (as opposed to foreign land)”.

²¹ Compare, for instance: *a sense of responsibility – as an individual, I am accountable for the well-being and misfortune of VLAST*. The phrase *bojovat za vlast* (“to fight for *VLAST*”) was mentioned only a few times, possibly due to the fact that 73 out of 100 respondents were women. More responses referring to the defense of *VLAST* (a total of 13) are discussed in subsection 5.1.

not have to be born in a given country or live there to perceive it as their *VLAST*; nor must one agree with its politics or feel proud of it. Paradoxically, such statements confirm the importance of these semantic elements in the stereotypical (or idealized) understanding of *VLAST*. Some students felt the need to emphasize that *VLAST*, i.e. the country of birth, is generally perceived as a unique and privileged place – one that we usually love and wish to see as the best in the world – but that we may also be critical of it and view it with a degree of detachment.

It should also be noted that our hypothesis regarding the perceived excessive pomposity or ideological burden of the term *VLAST* was not confirmed by the respondents' answers. All indications suggest that the concept is perceived today by most people in their twenties as largely unmarked, or that it carries almost exclusively positive connotations. Any ideological residues from the communist era (which may still be associated with the term by older generations) appear to have faded. Moreover, the concept does not seem to be negatively affected by the rhetoric of current extremist political groups, which often build their discourse around *VLAST* (or the word *vlast*) and related terms such as *vlastenec* ('patriot') or *vlastenectví* ('patriotism'), thereby contributing to societal polarization. These semantic dimensions of *VLAST* – linked to various stages of Czech history and culturally significant texts – will be explored in greater detail in a forthcoming comprehensive study by the authors.

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Koncept *VLAST* [OJCZYŹNA] – wgląd w obraz świata czeskich studentów

Streszczenie: W artykule prezentowane są wyniki badania ankietowego dotyczącego konceptu *VLAST* [OJCZYŹNA] we współczesnym języku czeskim, przeprowadzonego w ramach międzynarodowego projektu etnolingwistycznego EUROJOS. Ankietowe gromadzenie danych miało miejsce jesienią 2024 roku wśród studentów czterech czeskich uczelni wyższych. Łącznie zebrano i przeanalizowano 100 ankiet. Na podstawie uzyskanych danych stwierdzono, że struktura konceptu *VLAST* obejmuje sześć głównych aspektów semantycznych: (1) terytorialny, (2) emocjonalny, (3) genetyczny, (4) językowy i kulturowo-historyczny, (5) społeczny oraz (6) rezydencjalny. Ankietę ukazuje również, że współcześni czescy studenci w zdecydowanej większości nie postrzegają pojęcia *VLAST* jako kontrowersyjnego, choć nie odnoszą się bezkrytycznie do jego realnego denotatu. Wobec „ziemi ojczystej”, swojego kraju – często explicite Republiki Czeskiej – wyrażają pozytywny, przeważnie emocjonalnie motywowany stosunek i łączą ojczyznę z wysoką wartością.

Słowa kluczowe: etnolingwistyka; językowy obraz świata; EUROJOS; ankiety; studenci; *VLAST* [OJCZYŹNA]; aspekty semantyczne; język czeski; wartość; definicja kognitywna