

We Have Never Been Safe: Czech Feminist Student Activism Imagining and Doing Academia *Otherwise*

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Across Europe, universities have become increasingly shaped by a dual political transformation: the deepening of neoliberal governance (Vohlídalová/Linková 2017; Nyklová 2017; Chelcea/Druță 2016; Stenning/Smith/Rochovská/Świątek 2010) and the rise of illiberal movements such as the anti-gender one targeting gender equality, queer rights, and academic freedom (Kováts/Pető 2017; Graff/Korolczuk 2022; Smrdelj/Kuhar 2025). In Central and Eastern Europe, these dynamics intersect with post-socialist histories marked by anti-communist revanchism, depoliticisation, and persistent suspicion toward collectivist politics and social justice claims (Slačálek/Šitera 2021; Slačálek 2021; Hrubeš/Navrátil 2017). These forces produce institutional environments in which gendered harm is simultaneously widespread and systematically minimised, and in which feminist knowledge and activism are often dismissed as ideological extremism.

Against this backdrop, feminist student activism has emerged as a critical, though understudied, force within Czech universities. Since the late 2010s, grassroots collectives addressing gender-based violence, queer exclusion, and hostile pedagogical cultures have gained visibility (Linková et al. 2023), partly inspired by the global #MeToo movement and partly driven by domestic struggles around democratic backsliding and anti-gender organising. These initiatives challenge entrenched hierarchies within academic institutions while attempting to carve out safer spaces for marginalised students and early-career scholars. By imagining – and doing – university *otherwise*, they provide a window into how activism persists despite hostile terrains, and what alternative futures it envisions. Their work is often precarious and emotional, carried out in institutional settings that tend to pathologise activism and individualise responsibility for systemic problems.

This article examines how feminist student activists in Czech academia understand and navigate these conditions, and what kinds of political imaginaries they generate through their organising. I focus specifically on grassroots collectives working to address gender-based violence and transform university cultures, based on sixteen semi-structured, Czech-language interviews conducted with student organisers between 2021 and 2023. Rather than viewing activism merely as a reaction to institutional failure, I analyse it as a form of political imagination that reorients how the university is understood, inhabited, and claimed.

To do so, I combine Snow and Benford's (1988) diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames with feminist and queer scholarship on utopian imaginaries, which emphasises the anticipatory, affective world-building and life-building aspects of social movements (von Redecker 2024). This analytical pairing allows to examine both how activists interpret the structural forces shaping Czech academia and how

they envision and prefigure more just academic futures. Central to these imaginaries is the concept of “safe space” (Quinan 2016, Bonu Rosenkranz 2025), not as a stable or privately bounded arena but as a collective horizon that organises political action and articulates an alternative vision of academic life grounded in care and relational responsibility.

The central research question guiding the article asks how feminist student activists in Czech universities diagnose the conditions that render academia unsafe, imagine alternative institutional futures, and motivate collective efforts to transform the university. The article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework, outlining the contribution of framing theory and feminist imaginaries. This is followed by a methodology section that explains the research design, data collection, and analytic approach. Then, the findings are organised into three parts corresponding to diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the implications of feminist student activism for the future of academic institutions in post-socialist contexts.

Framing Student Activism

Understanding contemporary feminist student activism in Czech universities requires an analytical approach capable of holding together structural critique, political imagination, and everyday organising work. To this end, the article brings two bodies of scholarship into conversation: framing theory, particularly Snow and Benford’s (1988) tripartite model of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames; and feminist theories of imaginaries, which illuminate how movements articulate alternative futures and cultivate the affective conditions necessary for collective action.

Framing theory offers a way to analyse how social movements interpret social problems, imagine solutions, and cultivate the motivation necessary for collective action. Snow and Benford’s model identify three interconnected tasks – diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing – that together illuminate the interpretive work activists undertake. This study’s findings show that for feminist student organisers, diagnostic framing involves identifying gender-based violence and related harms as systemic and institutional, embedded in the everyday cultures, hierarchies, and power relations of Czech academia rather than as isolated or interpersonal incidents. Prognostic framing then, in turn, concerns the strategies and visions activists articulate to address these conditions. These range from demands for transparent reporting mechanisms and survivor-centred institutional policies to the development of feminist pedagogies and the creation of safer, more inclusive learning environments within departments and student collectives. Finally, motivational framing captures how activists generate the affective and moral impetus for action. Emotions such as anger, care, and solidarity play a central role here, enabling activists to frame participation as a collective form of survival within an institution experienced as unsafe or indifferent to harm.