

Juraj Nemec<sup>1</sup>

# Martin Potůček – 70 years Laudation

**RECEIVED** 3 December 2018; **ACCEPTED** 20 December 2018.

In September 2018, the Czech public policy ‘guru’ Martin Potůček celebrated his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. It is impossible to characterise this personality and his impact and the Czech reality in one article. So, the following text just highlights some major facts and the most outstanding achievements.

## FACTS

Martin Potůček was born on 2nd September 1948 in Prague. He got his first academic degree from Masaryk University Brno (at that time University J. E. Purkyně) – graduating in 1973 – and received the title PhD in Philosophy and Sociology in 1976. In 1989, he got a PhD degree from the University of Economics in Prague, focussed on management and planning. Habilitation in sociology (1992) and inauguration in public and social policy (1998) at Charles University in Prague were next in his academic career. Moreover, Martin Potůček holds an M.Sc. in European Social Policy from the London School of Economics and Political Science (1991).

After the first graduation, he worked as a researcher in the department of complex modelling at Sportpropag, and later on, in the Institute of Social Medicine and Healthcare Organisation. From 1990, he worked at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague. In the period 1994–2003, Martin Potůček was the director of the Institute of Sociological Studies, and from 2000 till 2018, he held the post of the head of the Centre for Social and Economic Strategies (CESES). He went for many medium and long term study visits at prestigious universities, like Oxford (1993, 1994), Konstanz (1997–2008), Institute for Human Sciences Vienna (1998), Central European University in Budapest (1998–2000) and Hertie School of Governance, Berlin (2014). He is a member of university scientific councils and editorial boards of many journals.

Martin is the author, co-author or editor of 86 academic books, 7 textbooks, 90 peer reviewed articles and about 120 research reports and policy papers.

His achievements made him a Laureate of the Sri Chinmoy Award ‘Lifting Up the World With a Oneness-Heart’ and a Holder of the ‘Alena Brunovska Award’ (NISPAcee). He was recently awarded a Silver memorial medal from the Charles University in 2018. Martin Potůček is married and has two children.

## TEACHER AND RESEARCHER

Research is the area, where I know Martin best. First time I met him at one of the meetings of the research group organised by Yvonne Streckova with focus on the so called human potential. Really, I do not remember the exact time and location of our first contact, but I very well remember the work of this group, which also launched my professional career, joining it in 1984. Prof. Streckova died in 2006, but many of the contemporary professors in public economics and public policy in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic still remember her personality and her role in starting the research of different dimensions of the public sector in not a very simple period.

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor, the Faculty of Economics and Administration, Masaryk University, Brno, the Czech Republic. E-mail: Juraj.Nemec@econ.muni.cz

Working at Sportpropag Department for Complex Modelling, chaired by the current Czech President Miloš Zeman and later at the Institute of Social Medicine and Healthcare Organisation, Martin received the chance to be part of the ‘grey academic zone’, consisting of people thinking and writing in relatively free working atmosphere, different from what characterised the official academic and research structures. His core works from this first period of research career are connected mainly with health care, public health and human potential. In the area of the health care studies, Martin and colleagues opened the way for critically oriented, economically, sociologically and legally supported research in management, and financing, and forecasting of the Czechoslovak health care system. Martin also delivered a lot in studying the processes of cultivation and assertion of human potential (using the word capital was impossible, but may be also inappropriate for the team) – especially via the comprehensive work in the frames of the State Programme of Economic Research (my faculty in Banská Bystrica was also involved in it).

Inspired especially by the studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science, the focus of Martin after 1989 broadened to social policy as a whole – the Czech and European policies (health, social insurance, education, housing, family, etc.). He established the Department of Social Policy, formatted the Bachelor’s and Master’s programmes in social policy and also published focused textbook for this programme.

In this period, I received the chance to work with Martin (and also with the former Slovak Prime Minister Iveta Radičová) on the research resulting into the publication ‘Sociální politika v Čechách a na Slovensku po roce 1989’ (Karolinum, Praha 1998). First, the Czech and Slovak national studies were prepared by the teams of authors, and in the final stage, this comparative book was published. As Martin and Iveta state in the introduction, the goal of this research was to establish what happened with the former very compact and homogeneous social policy in the socialist Czechoslovakia after the split in 1993 – ‘to what extent two independent states, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, follow frameworks inherited from the previous federal Republic, how fast and visible are divergence trends, in which areas such divergence is visible and what is its purpose?’ (Potůček and Radičová, 1998, p. 7).

The most symptomatic book for this period is Martin’s book ‘Sociální politika’ (1995). This book tries to combine social policy, as the practical activity and as the scientific discipline. It defines the main social policy tools, core actors of social policy and does an in depth evaluation of the core social policy sub-areas (employment policy, social security, health policy, educational policy, housing policy and family policy). Another, very inter-connected book from this period is ‘Křižovatky české sociální reformy’ (1999), analysing social policy problems in the light of the concrete socio-political changes in the 90s in the Czech Republic. The second part of the book includes polemics with the concrete personalities of the Czech public policy (like V. Klaus, L. Brokl and Z. Konopásek).

For me, the most interesting book from this period is the publication ‘Nejen trh’ (1997), with the subtitle ‘Role trhu, státu a občanského sektoru v proměnách české společnosti’, which was published in an updated English version by CEU Press as ‘Not only the Market’ (1999). Martin may or may not agree, but for me, this book is the direct reaction on the ultra-liberal concepts presented by J. Kinkor in his book ‘Trh a stát’ (1996). Kinkor (serving during this period as the advisor to the minister of finance of the Czech Republic) tried to argue that the core task is to minimise the role of the state in the national economy. Following the political philosophy of Ayn Rand, he criticises the state in most of its current functions and argues that free market is the only solution. As a part of the ‘anti-Kinkor’ movement, I really appreciated the publishing of the book with the aim to also show the reverse side of the issue; to argue that the state has its immanent functions, which cannot be executed by free market regulations.

At the end of the last century, Martin again extended his focus and included in his scientific and teaching interest the area of public policy (one of the results was the creation of the Master degree and PhD degree in ‘Public and Social Policy’) and also important prognostic attempts. In public policy area, his main visible output is the NISPAcee textbook ‘Public Policy in Central and Eastern Europe: Theories, Methods, Practices’ (Potůček, LeLoup, Jenei and Varadi, 2003), converted later to the Czech language book ‘Veřejná politika’ (2005). This textbook represents the collaborative work of the social scientists in CEE with the assistance of several American colleagues to map out the emerging world of public policy analysis since the economic and political transition. The book encompasses a range of topics: approaches to public policy, various theories of public policy, the role of the state and bureaucracies, ethics, the public interest, the policy process, coordination, non-profit actors, budgeting, implementation, and substantive policies of education, health care, and social policy. The approaches are interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. The chapters benefited from the two authors’ conferences that took place in Prague and Budapest in the late 1990s as the contributors shared ideas and gained insights from others.

During this period, I received the chance to work with Martin on the multi-stage project with a focus on mental health care, financed by the Fogarty International Centre and the National Institutes of Health. In the first phase, the project mapped the mental health reforms and mental health situation in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. The most visible tangible result from

the first phase is the book ‘Mental Health Care Reform in the Czech and Slovak Republics: 1989 to the Present’ (2008), edited by Richard Scheffler and Martin Potůček. In the later stages, the project was extended to many other countries of our region – and delivered a lot, especially from the point of view of educating and training the new young generation of mental health researchers and of removing stigma in this area.

The focus on prognostics and the strategic visions of the Czech Republic is for sure connected with the establishment of the Centre for Social and Economic Strategies at the Charles University (CESES). The set of publications (Martin as author, co-author and editor) connected to the topic is gorgeous – especially ‘Vize rozvoje České republiky do roku 2015’ (CESES FSV UK, Praha 2001); ‘Průvodce krajinou priorit pro Českou republiku’ (CESES FSV UK, Praha 2002); ‘Putování českou budoucností’ (CESES FSV UK, Praha 2003); ‘Zpráva o lidském rozvoji: Česká republika 2003’ (CESES FSV UK, Praha 2003); ‘Millennium Development Goals: Reducing Poverty and Social Exclusion. Czech Republic’ (Bratislava 2004); ‘Jak jsme na tom – a co dál? Strategický audit České republiky’ (Sociologické nakladatelství, Praha 2005); ‘Strategické vládnutí a Česká republika’ (Grada, Praha 2007); ‘Poznávání budoucnosti jako výzva’ (Karolinum, Praha 2010); ‘Cesty z krize’ (Sociologické nakladatelství, Praha 2011).

Surprisingly or not, during this prognostic period also our ways crossed again. Martin served as one of the reviewers (and advisors) for the project of creating the national strategic documents for the Slovak Republic. Two core documents were prepared by the Slovak Academy of Science under the leaderships of Prof. Šikula – ‘Dlhodobá vízia rozvoja slovenskej spoločnosti’ (2008) and ‘Stratégia rozvoja slovenskej spoločnosti’ (2010). Martin’s comments to the draft text really helped to improve all its parts, and I especially enjoyed our discussions about the chapter focusing on the role of the state in the modern Slovak society. Our positions slightly differ: Martin’s main arguments are frequently connected with the term ‘public interest’ – however, this term has a bit limited meaning for me as ‘neo-classically oriented’ economist, but the final ends of our polemics were always fully constructive and forward driven.

## NISPAcee

NISPAcee is the Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe with the core task to promote the development of public administration disciplines and training programmes in post-Communist countries by increasing the quality of instruction and research and assisting in school/institute development on international, regional and national levels. NISPAcee was established in 1993 for the purpose of providing an institutional framework and a professional association, which would serve to encourage the processes of modernization and transformation of the administrative systems of the region, as well as to encourage the spread of democratic principles and standards.

Maybe Martin was in Bratislava in 1994, when NISPAcee was formally established (I was in Bratislava, but I really do not remember all faces from the Bratislava meeting). However, what I really remember was the first NISPAcee summer school in Portorož in 1994. Not only for the contents, but also for some specifics – broken car on the way there, prices for drinks in the hotel, but also wonderful Adriatic Sea.

In 1997, Martin was elected as the NISPAcee Steering Committee member, and in 2000, as the President of the organisation. Many thanks to him for proposing me as a Steering Committee member for the 1998 elections – as a really important milestone in my professional development. Many thanks to him also for organising the NISPAcee annual conference 1998 in Prague – and for ‘creating’ the NISPAcee anthem, which was performed for the first time by singing and dancing participants the Švejk’s pub ‘U Kalicha’ in Prague in March 1998. Because Martin is ‘back’ with NISPAcee again, we hope that this anthem will be performed once again in the capital of the Czech Republic in 2019, when Charles University is one of the two core local organisers (together with our Masaryk University Brno).

In December 2003, Martin organised the NISPAcee the High Level Meeting in Prague, with the aim to bring together high civil servants from the ten Central and Eastern European countries preparing themselves to join the European Union, and top academics, both from the West and the East, to discuss the problems and challenges of strategic governance in the region. The Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Mr. Vladimír Špidla opened this major NISPAcee event and personalities like Prof. Yehezkel Dror from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (Israel), the author of the influential report to the Club of Rome ‘The Capacity to Govern’ (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass 2001) participated.

## POLITICIAN AND POLICY ADVISOR

Living in Slovakia, I do not follow all the ‘political’ activities of Martin in details. Without doubts, his impacts on the Czech political scene are comprehensive. Already, in the late eighties, he served as the chairperson of the social committee of ‘Občanské fórum’, which prepared the programmatic documents for the engagement of this first independent political association in the first free general elections in Czechoslovakia in May 1990. During 1998–2006, he served as the advisor to the Vice Prime Minister and the Minister of Social Affairs. From 1999 to 2004, he was appointed as the Vice-chairman of the ‘Rada pro výzkum a vývoj vlády ČR’. And maybe, the most important advisory position was his appointment as the advisor to the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic in 2002–2004 and 2014–2017.

Two areas with important impact must be mentioned here – the pension reform and the public administration reform. In the beginning of this century, Martin supported the process of preparing the core documents for the comprehensive public administration reform – for the team chaired by the vice-minister for the reform Yvonne Strečková. Not all the ideas and plans were realised, but many crucial changes for the EU membership happened during the given period. During the period 2014–2017, Martin was the chair of the governmental Expert Committee on Pension Reform, which drafted the concrete reform proposals with the aim to react on more and more urgent pension system problems.

The highest ambition of Martin was to be elected as the Czech President. In 2002, he was running for the nomination by the Socio-Democratic Party (ČSSD) – but he did not succeed in the competition with the other three candidates: Ombudsman Otakar Motejl, ex-minister of Justice Jaroslav Bureš and ex-Prime Minister Miloš Zeman. When media asked him why he decided to try, the response was symptomatic: ‘I deal with the area not so well known in the country – public policy. And my aim is to transfer my theoretical knowledge to practice; this is why I accepted the proposal to try to be the ČSSD presidential candidate’ (News Idnes2002). Such response really well represents Martin – Martin as I know him, from all our professional and social contacts.

## FAMILY

During his professional career, Martin has never forgotten that the family is the main priority for humans. His son Ondřej Potůček acknowledges this in following sentences:

‘What father is my dad? First I have to say that he is extremely hardworking and productive (my mother and his wife would say too much hardworking). For me as his son[,] such [a] dad is really inspirative, despite to the fact that I may never achieve his level of productivity. This sentence leads to the core – my dad is the ideal model for me, even if this sounds as a cliché. He always was and also is today available for me, and for any aspect where the son needs his dad. It can be the moment when I need to see how to work with a drill, when a father’s slap is needed, when I need to help to understand something new, when I need advice, support, or moral personal example/navigation. I really enjoy dad’s life optimism, sense for justice, honesty, friendliness, humanity, tolerance, diligence, purposefulness and for obviously also his wisdom – and I must stop here, or nobody could trust me. I really do not understand how he managed to combine the role of top researchers and the role of a good dad. How he managed to build for his children a great wooden castle in our garden and at the same time to work on his excellent academic carrier. I feel that there is only one explanation – his internal engine was fostered by his internal trust – and will - that it is possible to make this world better – better for life and better for people.’

## CONCLUSIONS

Martin Potůček is now 70 years old. He has done a lot for the Czech (Czechoslovak) academia and practice. And I am sure that he still has the capacity to do much more – just recently, he published the new books on public policy (Potůček, M. a kol. 2016 and Potůček, M. et al. 2017) – the electronic English version of the books is available at [www.press.uchicago.edu/for](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/for). This winter, his new book on pensions and pension reforms is due, and next year he will be (with Guy Peters and other international ‘gurus’) one of the core players of the annual NISPAcee conference in Prague.

Martin, I wish you a lot of health and energy!  
Prof. Ing. Juraj Nemec, CSc.

## REFERENCES

News Idnes (2. 10. 2002). ČSSD má pro Hrad nového kandidáta. Available at [https://zpravy.idnes.cz/cssd-ma-pro-hrad-noveho-kandidata-d40-/domaci.aspx?c=A021002\\_130916\\_domaci\\_has](https://zpravy.idnes.cz/cssd-ma-pro-hrad-noveho-kandidata-d40-/domaci.aspx?c=A021002_130916_domaci_has)

Potůček, M. and Radičová, I. (1998) Sociální politika v Čechách a na Slovensku po roce 1989. Praha: Karolinum