

Three Czech National Atlases: Will There Ever Be a Fourth?

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A national atlas is among the most ambitious cartographic undertakings a state can produce. It is not merely a set of maps, but a systematically organised, polythematic, and representational work intended to provide the most comprehensive possible portrayal of a country, its natural environment, population, economy, culture, and territorial development. National atlases are typically prepared under state auspices, to a high scholarly and cartographic standard, and are intended to serve research, education, and public administration. At the same time, they are never fully neutral: the selection of themes, modes of representation, and language regime all reflect the political, cultural, and technological conditions of their time (Kent, 1986).

The aim of this paper is to compare these three atlas projects concisely yet analytically, to identify differences in their functions, content structure, and ideological framing, and to consider whether a “fourth” Czech national atlas might emerge after 2026. The paper therefore offers not only a historical overview, but also a reflection on whether current technological, political, and user-related conditions still favour large national atlases in the traditional sense, or whether their contemporary form would necessarily differ from that of the twentieth century.

The *Atlas of the Czechoslovak Republic* of 1935 was conceived explicitly as an atlas of a new state. Work began as early as 1919; compilation took sixteen years and produced a work intended to provide an objective and precise portrayal of the society and economy of the independent Czechoslovak state established in 1918. It was not merely a scientific undertaking, but also an instrument of political and cultural representation. The atlas comprises 550 maps in Czech and French. Its contents are structured into seven sections, ranging from introductory maps through the natural environment and population to industry, transport, and culture. The *Atlas of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic* of 1966 continued the high standard of Czechoslovak cartography, but within a fundamentally different ideological framework. The atlas contains 433 maps in Czech, English, and Russian. On the one hand, it represents a landmark state-scientific achievement; on the other, it clearly conveys the socialist self-image of the state and the country’s broader geopolitical positioning within the Soviet bloc. The *Landscape Atlas of the Czech Republic* of 2009 is not a national atlas in the traditional administrative-political sense, but an extensive atlas of the national territory conceived as a complex space of natural, historical, and societal relationships. It was compiled by 356 specialists from 133 institutions. The atlas contains 713 maps in Czech and English, and was issued also in the form of a DVD containing PDF files. It clearly marks a shift from the monumental state-bound volume to a hybrid expert information system.

From a long-term developmental perspective, this trio reveals three major shifts. First, the very object of atlas representation changes: from the state and its politico-economic structure to the landscape as a complex system. Second, the institutional model changes: whereas the first two atlases were strongly centralised and unequivocally state-led, the 2009 atlas resulted from a broad network of institutions and experts. Third, the medium changes: the atlas moves from the large-format printed volume to a multimodal, partly digital format. This corresponds to broader transformations in atlas production after 1989, when the Czech atlas market became pluralised, smaller publishers gained greater importance, and traditional state atlas production was substantially reduced.

From the political perspective, the present situation differs fundamentally from the periods in which traditional national atlases were produced. Such works were often associated with state-building, regime change, or major anniversaries (Yonge, 1957). In this respect, the years 1935 and 1966 were more conducive to the production of such a work than the present. Today, the democratic and pluralistic state relies more on distributed data infrastructures than on a single centralised image of itself. Even so, the national atlas can still be highly valuable for public administration, research, education, and strategic decision-making precisely.

Technologically, the present era is more favourable to national atlases than ever before, although primarily in digital rather than conventionally printed form. There is now an incomparably richer supply of spatial and spatio-temporal databases providing detailed information on natural, social, economic, and environmental phenomena. Together with GIS tools, Earth observation products, open databases, web cartography, and the possibility of continuous updating, it creates conditions under which one of the principal weaknesses of the printed atlas – its rapid obsolescence – can at least partly be overcome (Vozenilek, Vondrakova, 2017).

At the same time, it must be stressed that neither the sheer abundance of data nor the existence of web mapping services can replace the national atlas. Although numerous web GIS platforms and map portals exist today, their visualisation functionality is limited. In most cases, they are unable to produce truly full-fledged maps that are both information-rich and user-efficient, and even less capable of constructing systematic atlas compositions that support the comparison, analysis, and synthesis of multiple maps simultaneously. This is precisely where a new generation of national atlases may emerge: not as mere data interfaces, but as deliberately designed cartographic systems capable of transforming data into intelligible, comparable, and interpretively valuable representations (Sieber, Voženílek, eds., 2023).

A further argument in favour of the future of national atlases is the growing popularity of maps. Maps are no longer tools used primarily by specialists; they have become part of everyday information culture. An atlas that provides thematically organised maps conveniently in one place can therefore substantially accelerate and facilitate the user's path to information. This is especially important at a time when both expert and lay communities are becoming accustomed to an ever shorter interval between the impulse to seek information and the need to use it. In other words, users no longer want merely to retrieve data; they want to understand it quickly and act upon it. The atlas format, grounded in the systematic composition of maps and in the relationships among them, satisfies this need better than isolated map outputs or heterogeneous database portals.

From the user perspective, the present era weakens the position of the traditional printed national atlas. Contemporary users expect search, zooming, thematic layers, updates, data export, and the ability to combine content according to their own needs. A monumental volume weighing several kilograms is no longer a natural target format (Voženílek, 2015). Yet this does not mean that the idea of the national atlas has disappeared. On the contrary, it is being transformed into a much more complex form. The atlas of the future will be more than a map portal and more than a Web GIS. It will be digital, interactive, multimedia-based, continuously updated – ideally in real time – archivable, and adaptive to the needs of the individual user. It will be capable of offering not only individual maps, but also carefully designed map sequences, comparative compositions, analytical views, and synthetic interpretations.

The printed atlas will not disappear entirely, but its role will change. It will no longer serve primarily as the carrier of current information; rather, it will function as an educational, representational, and archival document. It will capture the state of phenomena and knowledge at a specific date or over a defined period, thus serving as a reference work and a cultural artefact. The digital atlas will assume the dynamic and operational role, while the printed atlas will retain the value of a stable, curatorially closed portrayal of the country.

What, then, would have to happen for another Czech national atlas to emerge in roughly the next thirty years? Above all, a strong social and institutional impetus would be required. Such an impetus could be linked, for example, to a major state anniversary, to the strategic need to integrate spatial data across government sectors, or to the ambition to create a publicly accessible reference work on the transformation of the Czech landscape, society, and economy in an era of climate change, digitalisation, and geopolitical uncertainty. Stable funding, central coordination, and a clear scholarly mandate would also be indispensable. Without long-term political support, such a project will not materialise; the very definition of a national atlas presupposes state auspices and the participation of leading national institutions.

Preparation would have to begin well before publication – realistically at least ten to fifteen years in advance. If one considers a horizon around 2035 to 2040, the preparatory phase should already be under way. The initiative would have to come from above, most probably from the state, but the substantive content would need to be carried by a broad consortium: the mapping agency, the statistical office, sectoral research institutes, universities, the academy of sciences, and possibly also regional and environmental institutions.

The three atlases from 1935, 1966, and 2009 show that a national atlas is not only a scholarly work, but also a product of its time. The first reflected the energy of a new state, the second the socialist image of Czechoslovakia, and the third a move towards an environmental and interdisciplinary view of space. Although each atlas was different, all aimed to provide an authoritative and representative picture of the country. A fourth Czech national atlas is therefore possible, but it would almost certainly differ from its predecessors. If created, it would need to be designed from the beginning as a digital, visually advanced, user-oriented, and institutionally supported atlas system.

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