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**Cremation and funeral ceremonies
in contemporary Czech Republic and CEE countries**

Anthropology of Cremation Summer School – Brno July 26, 2024



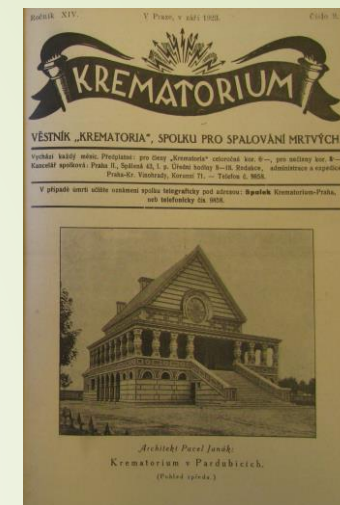


Overview

- Modern cremation in Czechoslovakia - 20th century
- European context (cremation rates)
- Cremation in CEE countries in 21st century
- Funeral ceremonies
- Cremation without any ceremony/direct cremation
- New trends – natural burial and ceremonies accompanying disposal of the ashes

The spread of cremation in the 20th century

- **Austria-Hungary** (constitutional monarchy in Central Europe between 1867 and 1918) - strong opposition from the Roman Catholic Church, influence on funeral legislation until the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, **cremation was not allowed**
- **Cremation Movement** - Society for the Cremation of Corpses (1899), Crematorium Society (1909) renamed to Society of Friends of Cremation (still exists today)
- **1919** cremation officially permitted ("Lex Kvapil") - **establishment of an independent Czechoslovak state**



Life of the Ancient Slavs (centre of triptych), 1891, Mikoláš Aleš

The first crematorium in the Czech Republic



Reichenberg/Liberec, completed in 1917, used since 1919.

Above the entrance there is a Czech translation of the original German inscription, "Pure, bright, primordial fire take the earthly body in your arms!"

Photo: Z. R. Nešpor 2010.

Building crematoria - current status



Currently (2024) 28 crematoria in the Czech Republic (13 + 11 + 4)



International context

Evolution of the number of cremations in Europe (% in brackets)

	1900	1920	1940	1960	1980	2000	2020
Czechoslovakia		657 (0,37)	7 700 (5,0)	30 402 (24,26)	86 646 (64,4)*	82 772 (75,9)*	108 704 (84,1)*
Denmark	28 (0,07)	555 (1,39)	4 756 (11,9)	13 113 (30,0)	30 003 (56,4)	41 651 (71,8)	46 910 (85,8)
France	301 (0,04)	560 (0,08)	1 117 (0,2)	1 054 (0,2)	5 640 (1,04)	93 412 (17,4)	238 762 (39,0)"
Italy	263 (N/A)	610 (N/A)			2 230 (N/A)	29 559 (5,3)	247 840 (33,2)
Germany	636 (0,05)	16 855 (1,81)		66 952 (10,4)+α	131 333 (18,4)+α	338 469 (40,1)"	709 304 (72,0)
Netherlands		177 (0,22)	1 061 (1,2)	3 501 (4,0)	39 947 (35,0)	68 700 (48,9)	111 946 (66,4)
Norway		537 (1,60)	2 739 (8,5)	6 446 (20,0)	12 370 (30,2)	14 039 (31,7)	18 881 (46,5)
Austria			4 526 (4,5)	5 400 (6,1)	11 530 (12,5)	16 663 (22,0)	36 008 (44,6)"
Sweden	70 (0,08)	168 (0,22)	5 224 (7,2)	19 925 (26,6)	47 130 (51,4)	64 867 (69,5)	81 226 (82,8)
Switzerland	136 (0,21)	2 315 (4,13)	7 309 (14,4)	12 417 (24,1)	28 561 (48,4)	45 104 (72,2)	68 184 (89,7)
United Kingdom	444 (0,07)	1 796 (0,34)	25 175 (3,8)	204 034 (34,7)	420 717 (64,5)	437 609 (71,5)	542 794 (78,5)

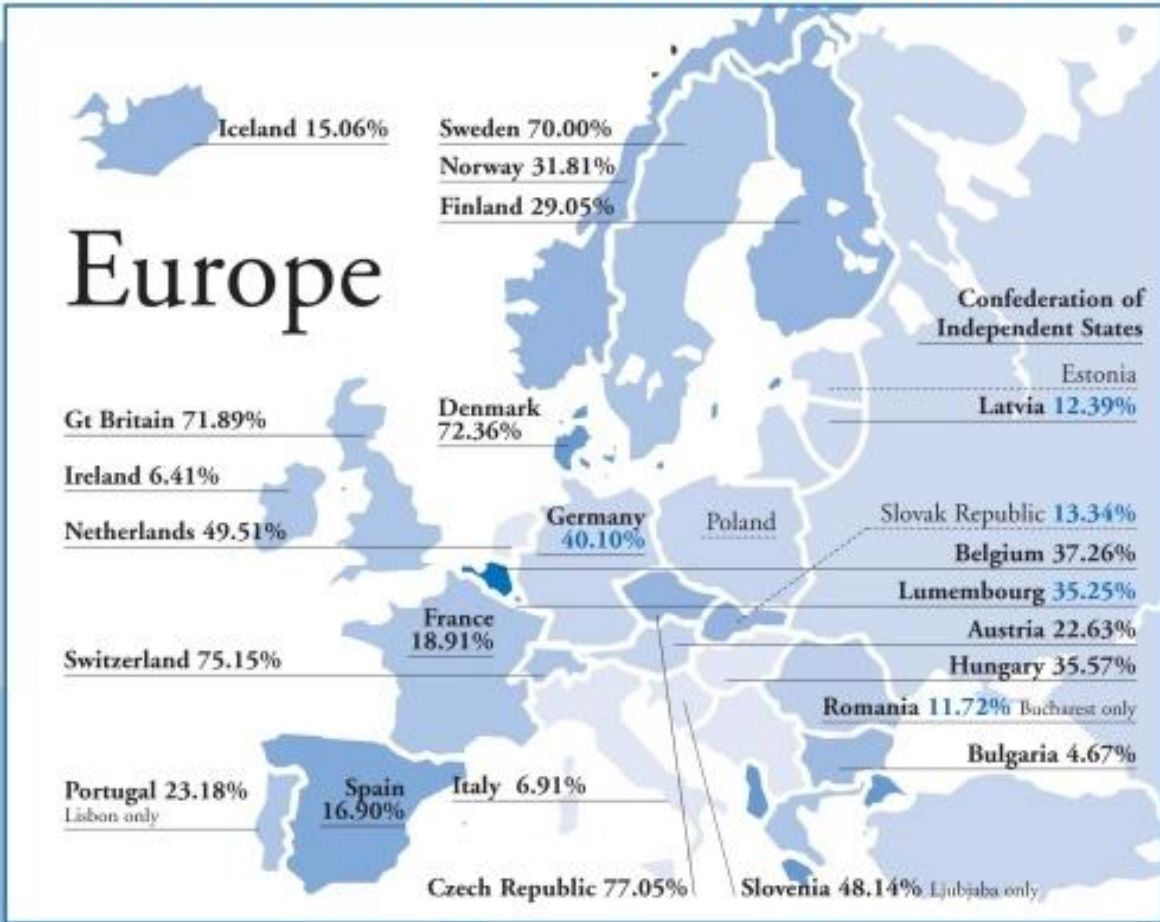
Source: Nešporová 2024, p. 142. Note: * data for the Czech Republic only; + data for West Germany only; " data for the nearest available year, France 2019, Germany 1999, Austria 2016



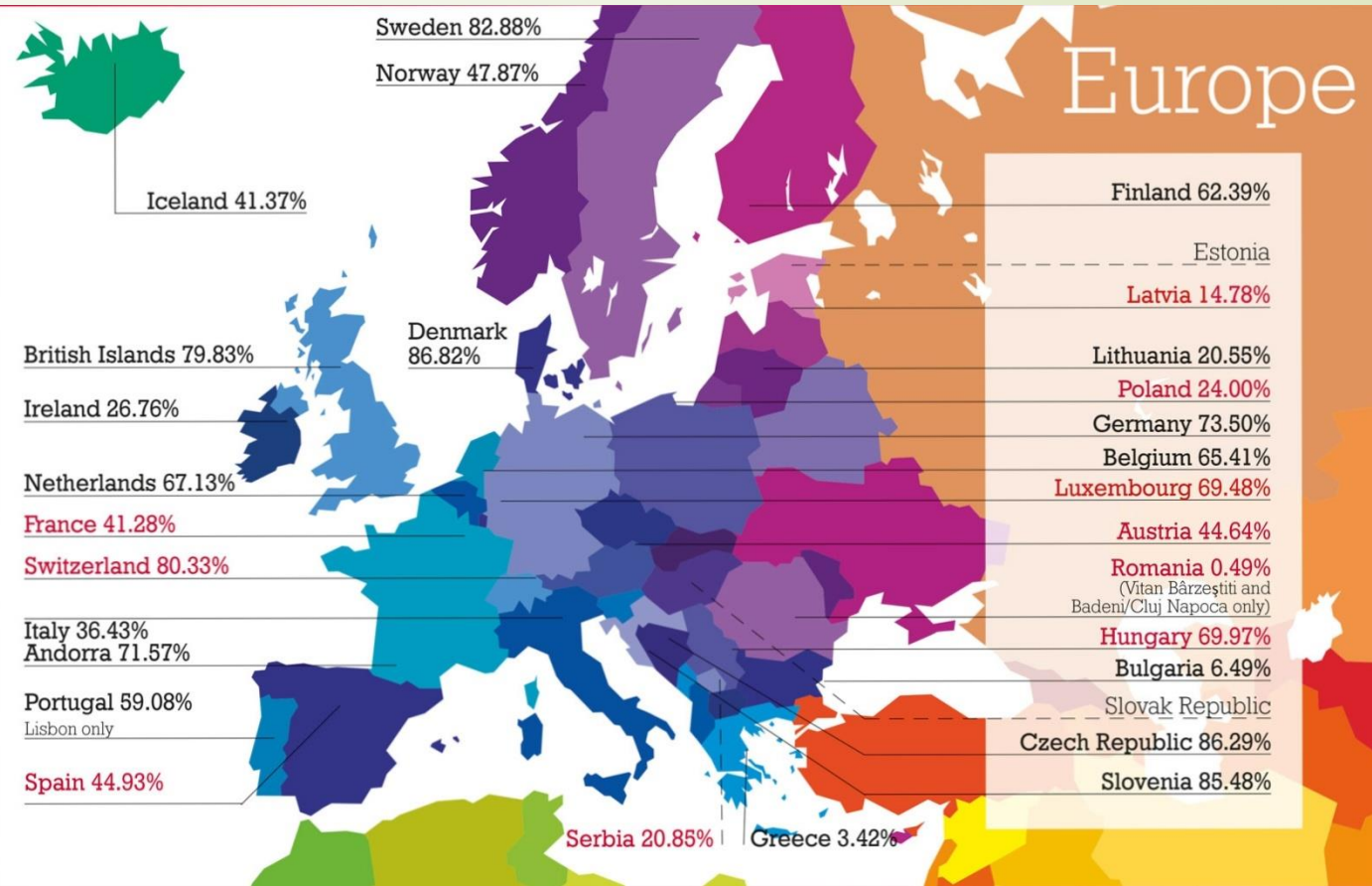
Funeral reform in Czech Republic during Communist Period (1948 - 1989)

- Cremation was promoted (antireligious ideology, Marxism-Leninism)
- Civil funeral ceremonies were introduced
- Church funerals were tolerated, but their number was decreasing steadily
- Change of place of
 - death – from home to hospitals
 - funeral ceremony - from churches and cemeteries to crematoria and secular funeral halls

International Cremation Statistics 2002



International Cremation Statistics 2022



Numbers in blue or red are from the previous year (2001 or 2021) or nearest available data

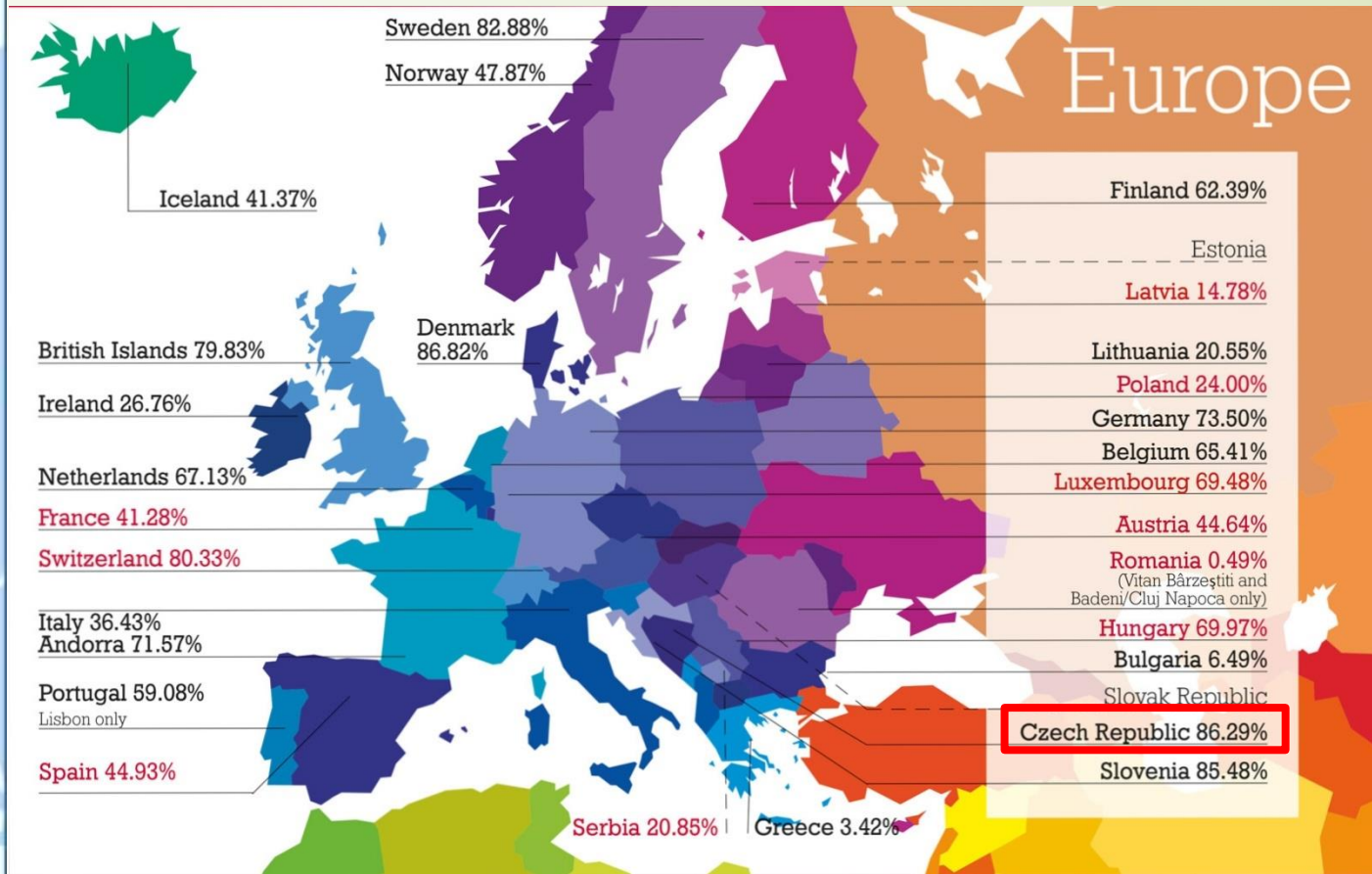
Source: The Cremation Society (of the Great Britain)

<https://www.cremation.org.uk>

International Cremation Statistics 2002

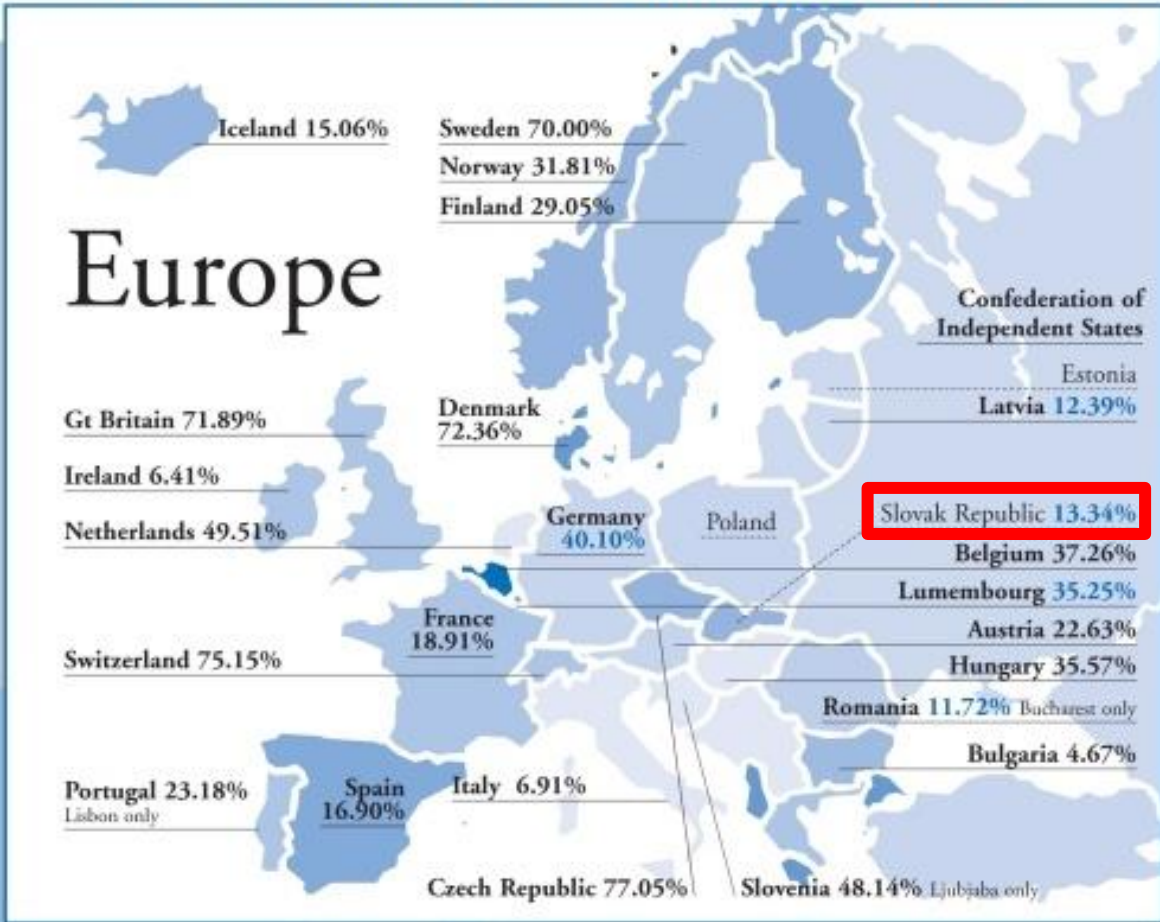


International Cremation Statistics 2022

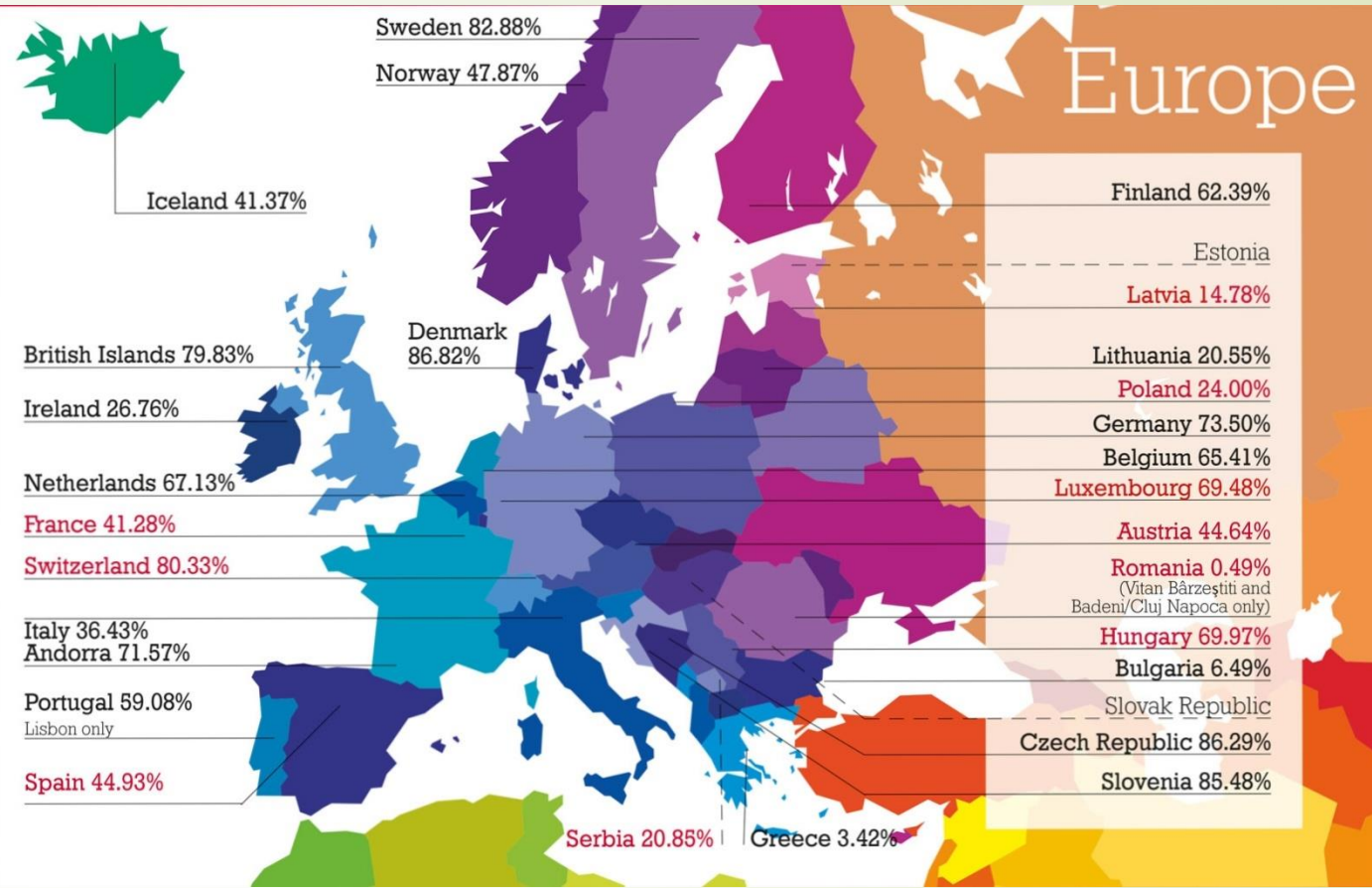


Source: The Cremation Society (of Great Britain)
<https://www.cremation.org.uk>

International Cremation Statistics 2002



International Cremation Statistics 2022



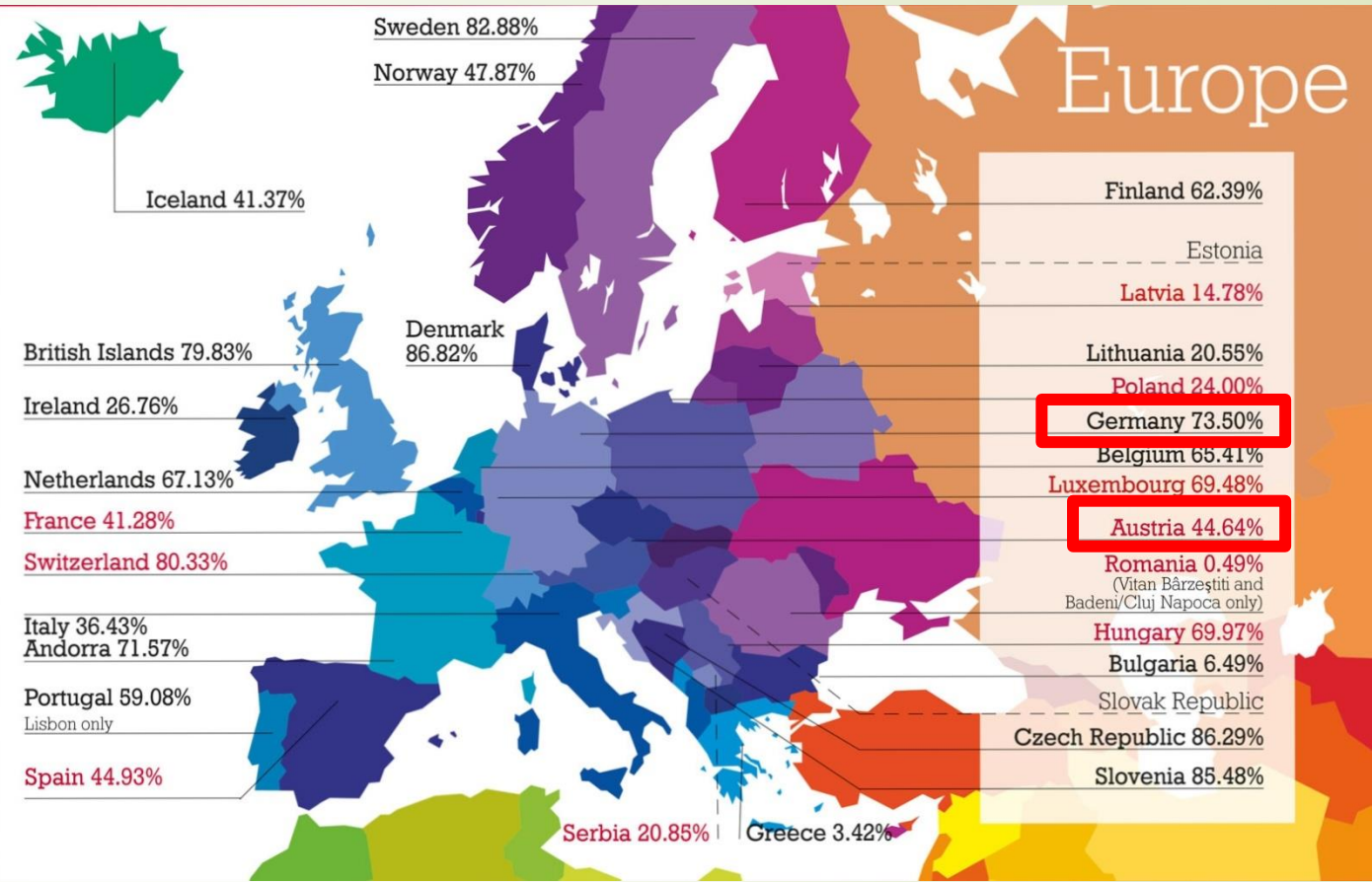
Slovak Republic 32% in 2018
(Author's estimate, Nešporová 2021: 58)

Source: The Cremation Society (of Great Britain)
<https://www.cremation.org.uk>

International Cremation Statistics 2002



International Cremation Statistics 2022



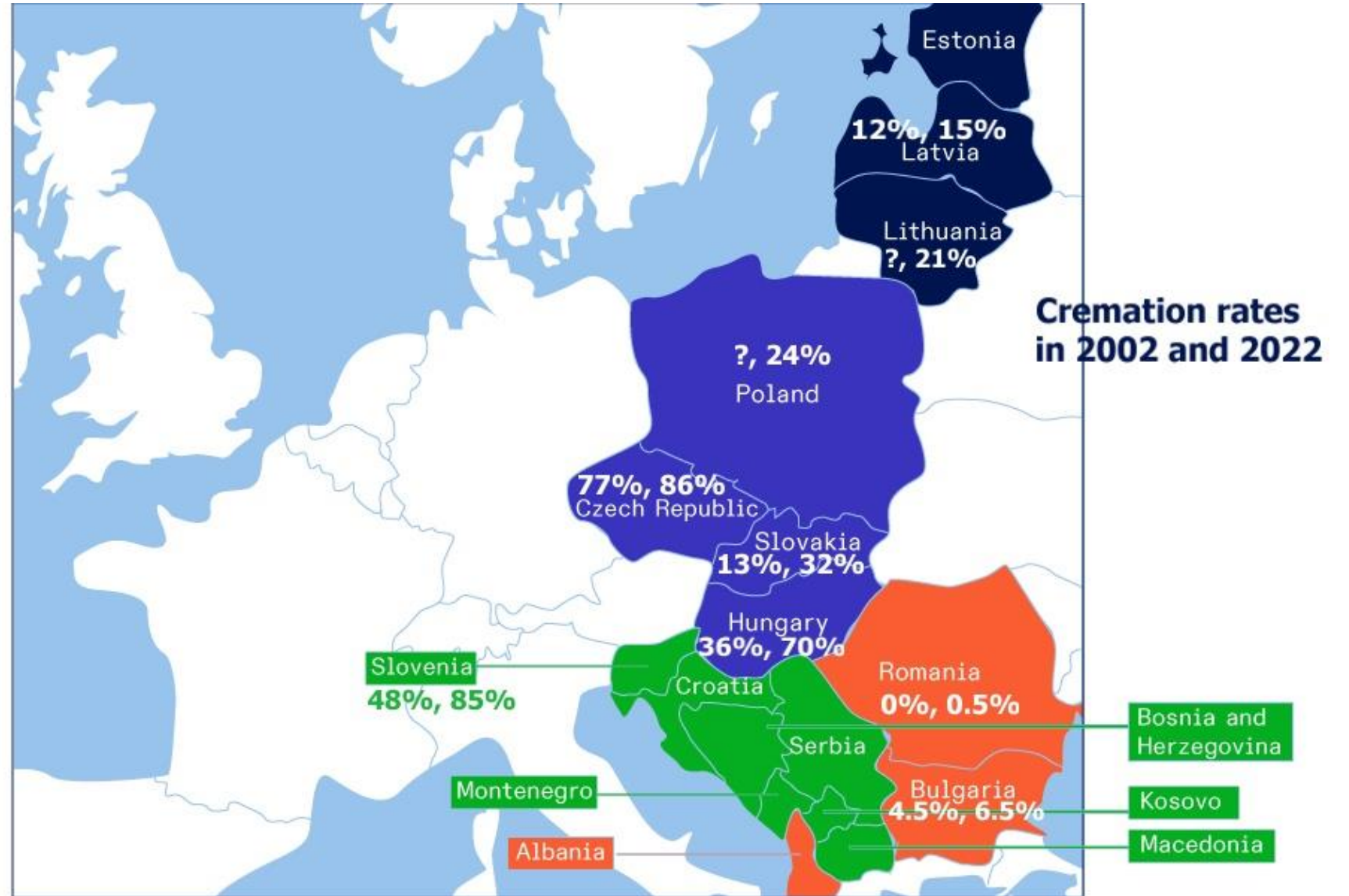
Source: The Cremation Society (of Great Britain)
<https://www.cremation.org.uk>

■ CENTRAL EUROPE

■ BALTIC STATES

■ SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

■ BALKAN COUNTRIES





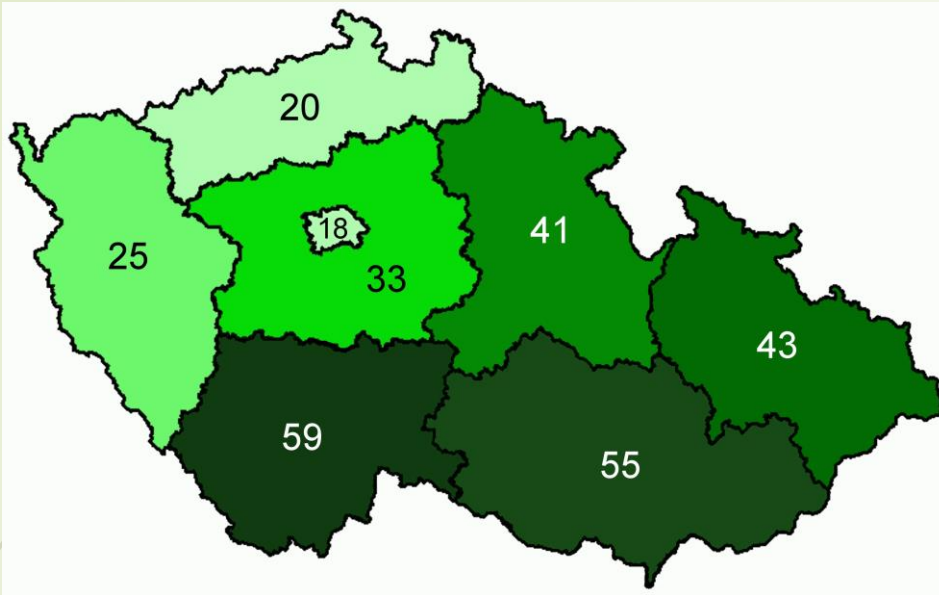
Funeral ceremonies – types and distribution

Religious/church - until the mid-20th century almost the only option

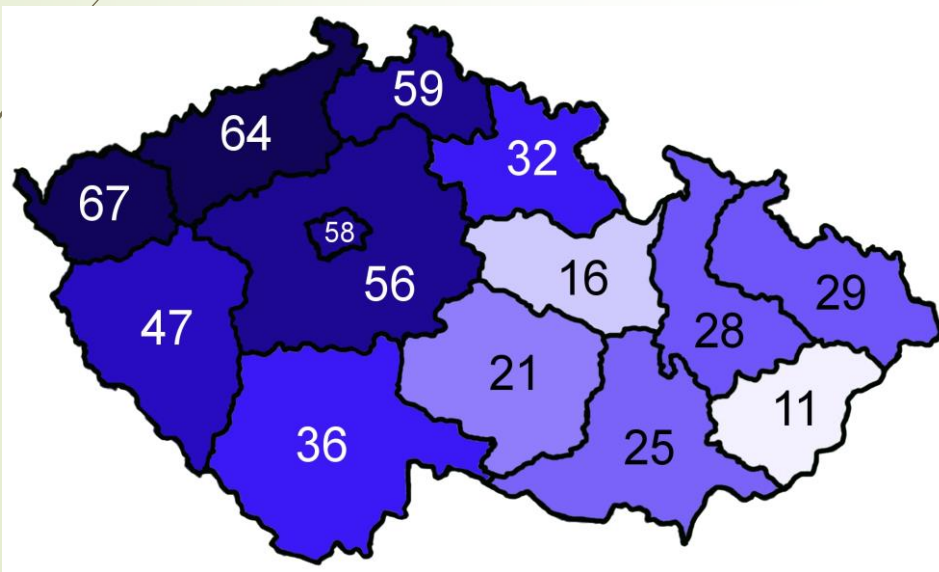
Secular - so-called civil funerals expanded in the second half of the 20th century, reform of funeral practice applied from above in the period of state socialism

Mixed - a combination of secular and civil ceremonies, promoted during communist rule, especially in areas with a more religious population

Burial/cremation without ceremony - significantly expanded since the 1990s



Proportions of **church (Roman Catholic) funerals** of the total number of burials in the regions of the Czech Republic in **1987**, in %.



Proportions of **burials (cremations) without ceremony** out of total number of burials in the regions of the Czech Republic in **2016**, in %.

Source: Nešporová, Olga. 2019. Religious traditions and their absence in contemporary Czech funeral practice (in Czech). *Ethnographic Review*, 29 (2): 144 - 153.

Cremation without any ceremony

Burying a dead body **without any** accompanying funeral rites.

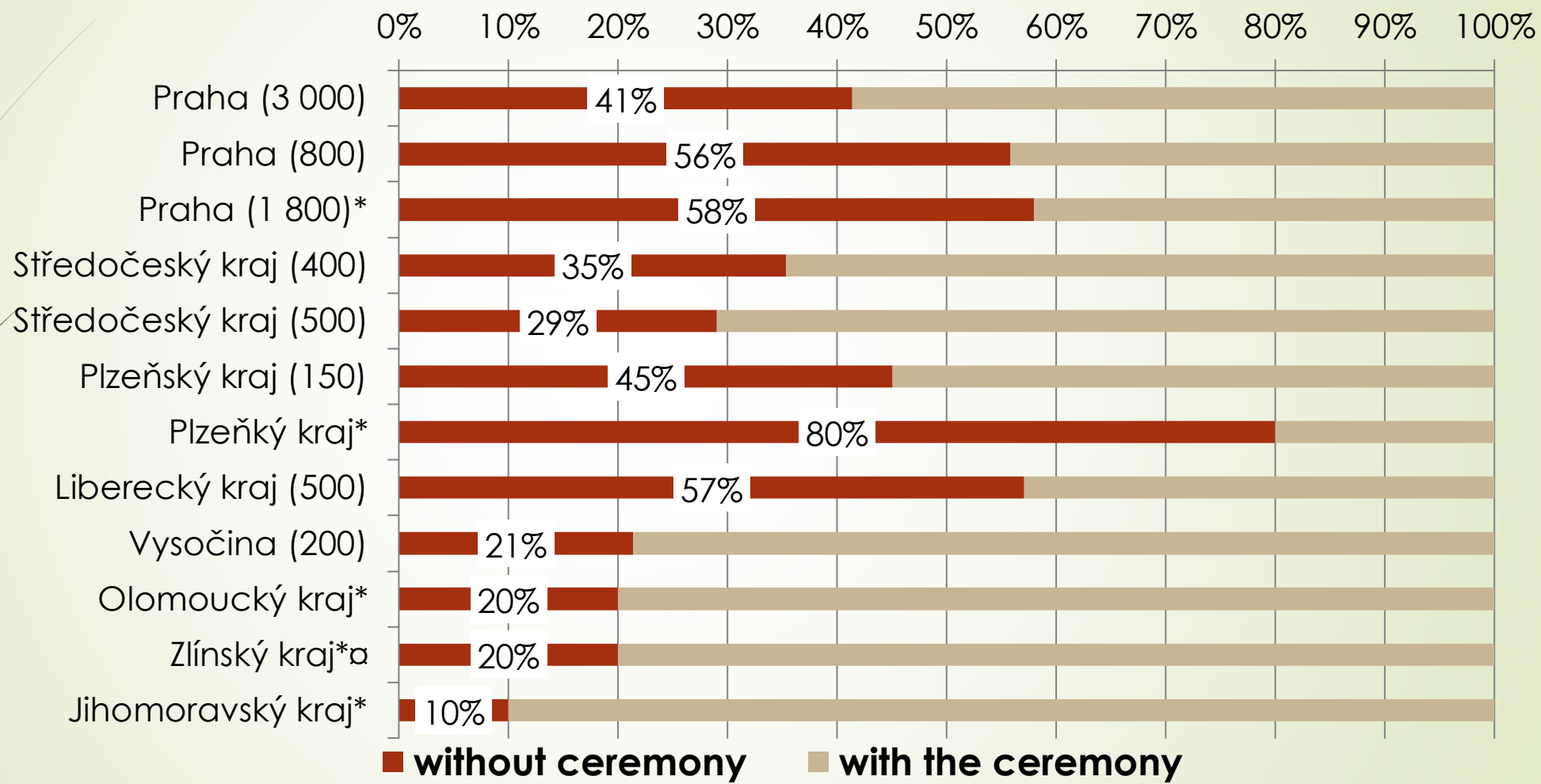
Funeral ceremony do not necessarily have to be provided by a funeral service, but can be organised independently by the bereaved (without the dead body present or when is the final disposal of the ashes).

- ❑ Historically: foreigners, criminals, infidels, or in times of war or plague

"Burial rituals affirm social and individual relationships and values; to bury or cremate a body with little or no preceding ceremony can be viewed as a degradation of human life and a devaluation of ethnic, religious and national identities."
(Howarth 2007: 246)



Proportions of burials without and with ceremony in selected funeral firms (2010-11)



Source: field research of the author. Each line of the graph contains data from one funeral organisation in the region, the numbers in brackets indicate the approximate number of burials by the company per year.

* this is an estimate, α Burials without a ceremony include ceremonies held in a close family circle

A sociological perspective on funerals

□ THE BASIC SOCIAL FUNCTION OF FUNERALS AND FUNERAL RITES: TO MAKE DEATH PUBLIC

During funeral ceremonies survivors assume (experience, live) a new role (widow, widower, etc.), which is thus clearly communicated to their social environment, which also participates in the ceremonies.

The Czech sociologist Josef Alan defined **a funeral as a primarily social affair** that is "*an expression of recognition and appreciation of the life of the person who has died*" [Alan 1989: 403-404].

"At a funeral, the person who has died dies as if a second time, this time for others who acknowledge his passing, evaluate his life, and at the same time build a social character of remembrance and commemoration of the dead that extends his life beyond death" [ibid:404].

Factors in favour of cremation without any ceremony



Social

Sociodemographic

Psychological

Sociocultural

Economic

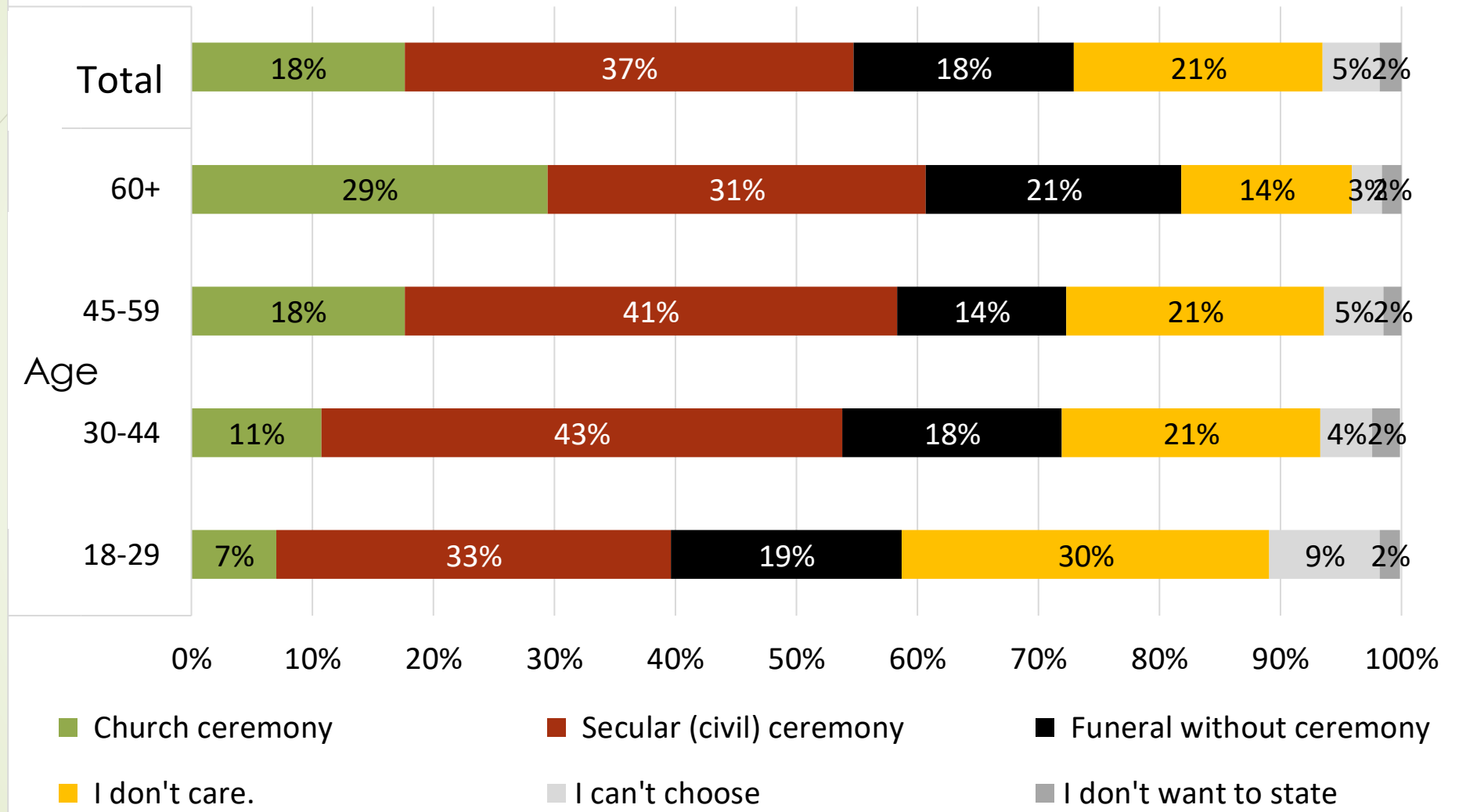


What does the high proportion of cremations without any ceremony say about Czech society?

POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS:

- ❑ Disrespect for life (i.e. appreciation of the life of the deceased)
- ❑ Emphasis on life (i.e. no need to deal with the dead)
- ❑ Atomization of society, the social dimension becomes irrelevant
- ❑ Absence of appropriate meaningful funeral rites - a transitional state (religious and civil rites introduced under communism no longer appeal, vacuum during the social transformation after 1989) → new forms will emerge

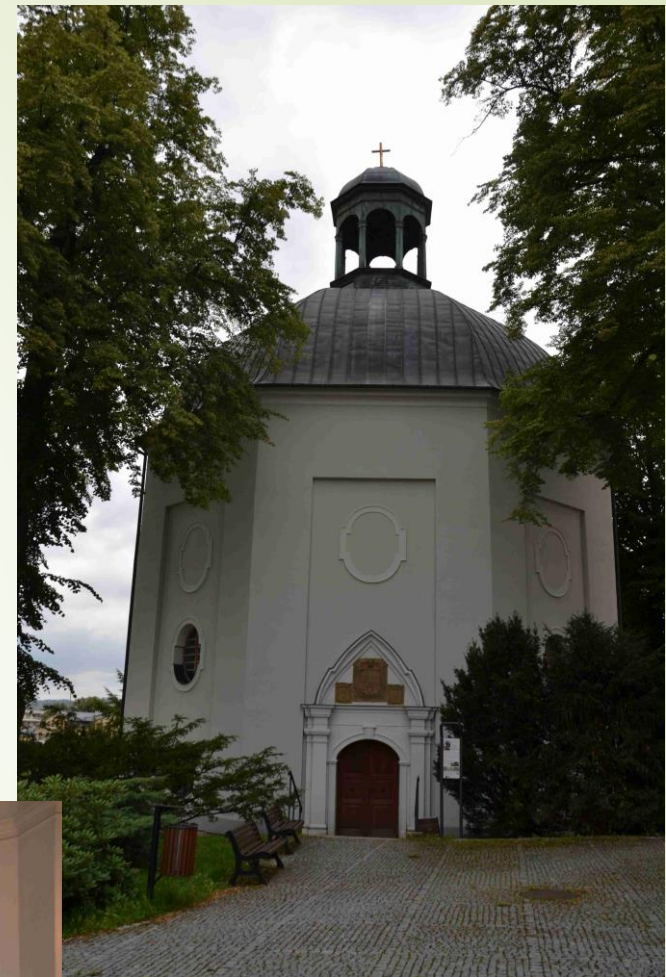
Preferred type of funeral in 2018, in %



Data: 2018 ISSP, representative sample of the Czech adult population, N = 1 383



Hořovice, Central Bohemia Region, 2010.



Bruntál,
Moravian-Silesian Region, 2019.



New trends in funerals and funeral ceremonies



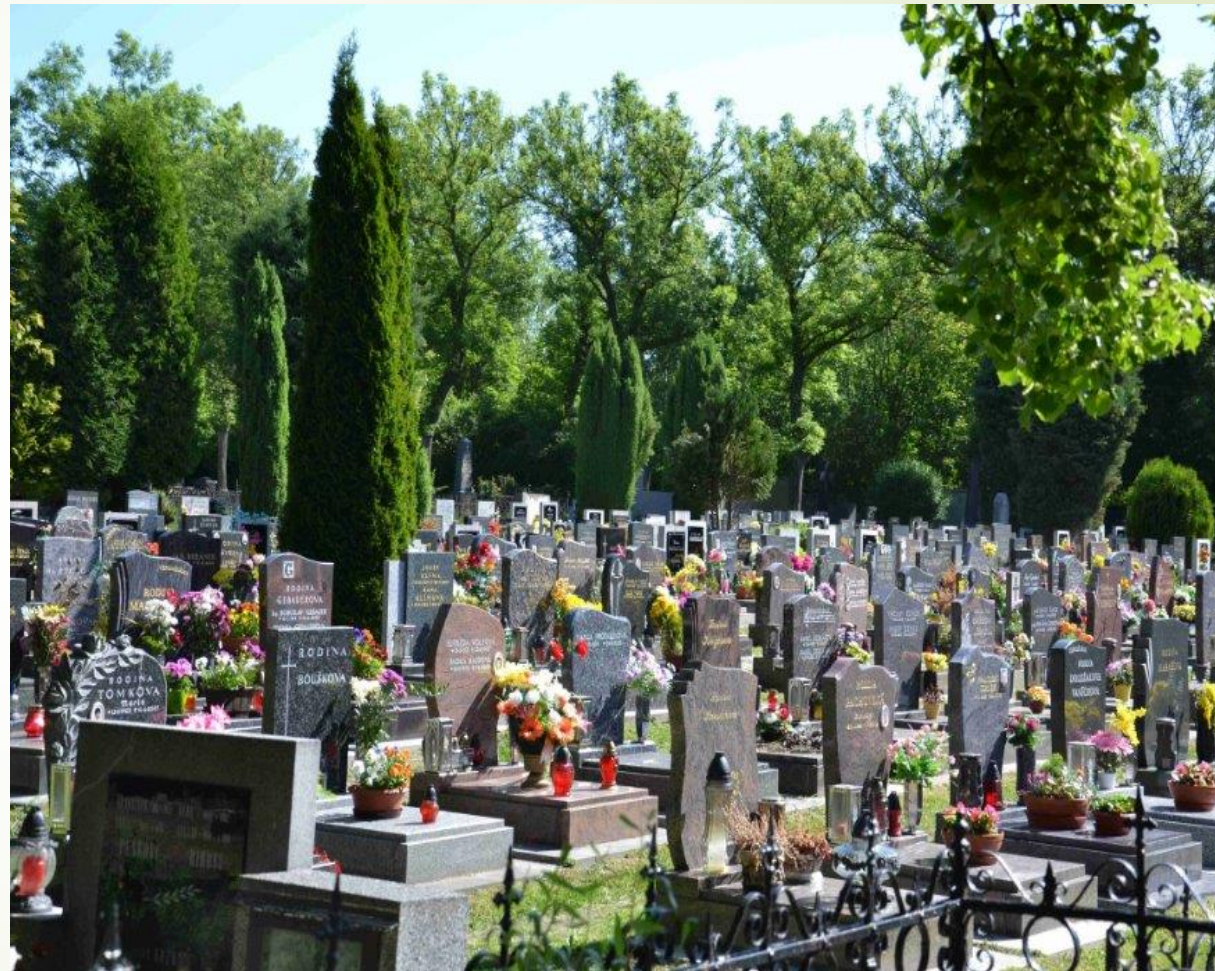
Natural burial



- ▶ It is spreading in countries with high cremation rates and Protestant religious traditions - e.g. Great Britain, the Netherlands, Germany



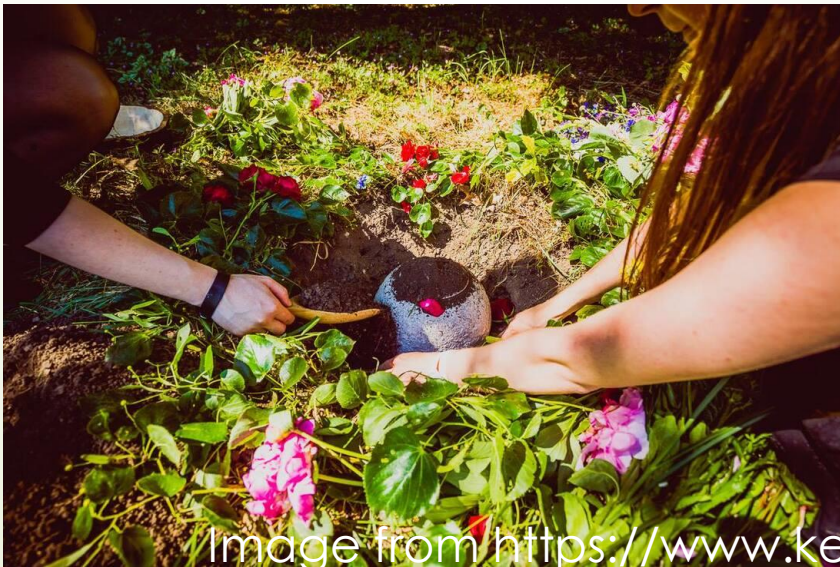
Olney, UK, natural cemetery, 2013.



Česká Lípa, Czech Republic, regular cemetery with urn graves, 2012.

To the roots - natural burial z.s.

- The first Czech "natural cemetery" within the Prague cemetery in Ďáblice since 2015, the so-called Forest of Memories
- Depositing ash to tree roots into the hole (alternative to digging the ashes under the piece of loam)
- Ceremonial component very important, alternative to ceremonies in secular funeral halls
- Motto: *"We work to make Czech funerals distinctive, meaningful and nature-friendly."*





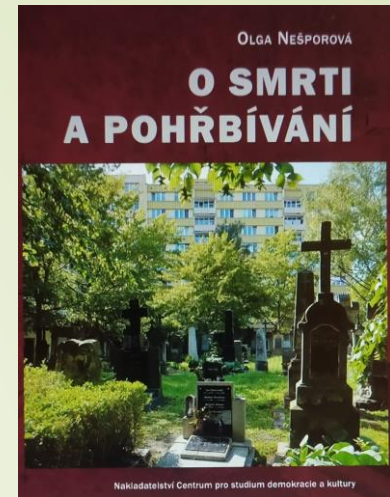
Conclusion

- Czech Republic was and is leading European country with respect to modern cremation
- The current situation is a direct continuation of the previous
- The model of civic (socialist) funerals is no longer appropriate and requires a major transformation
- Personalised funerals, tailor-made funerals
- Even a non-church funeral can have a spiritual/religious dimension
- Significant role of the officiant (may or may not be from the funeral service) is still underestimated by many Czechs
- Alternative funeral ceremonies with more active involvement of the bereaved - e.g. based on the natural burial model

Thank you for your attention!

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<https://www.eu.avcr.cz/cs/pracovnici/olga-nesporova>



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Nešporová, Olga. 2024. *O smrti a pohřbívání (On Death and Burial)*. Brno: CDK.