

The seminar: E.U. and the left in times of crisis, Potaria, July 2012

Country report – Czech republic, Jirí Málek, SPED

It is not possible in the short time that is available to paint a comprehensive picture of the reality in the Czech Republic. Consequently, I will attempt in a few points to capture some key aspects of the situation. Naturally, this is being done at the expense of in-depth, precise information.

1) From a long-term perspective, the Czech political structure is exceedingly stable. As I have mentioned several times, the right-left distribution is roughly half and half. On the left, the dominant political entities are the social democrats and the communists. In the last elections (2010), the so-called right-wing governing coalition won a relatively large majority of 118 out of 200 parliament seats, but the Public Affairs “centrist party” (which a portion of dissatisfied left-wing voters seeking a new alternative in a new party also voted for) unequivocally adhered to the right after the poll. At present, besides internal conflicts and political scandals, this has led to the party splitting into two with overall support now well below the 5% threshold necessary for getting into parliament. These “expurgated” voter preferences demonstrate that no substantial changes in the right-left balance actually occurred in the last elections.

How does the Czech radical left look? Despite their high number, the role of alternative movements, NGOs, and politically radical left-wing entities is immaterial to Czech politics. It concerns a group of people of different ages and social structures where the young and middle-aged are likely to dominate. The only relatively well known initiative is NE ZÁKLADNÁM (NO TO BASES), which emerged as a platform of opposition against the establishment of a U.S. radar base in the country. According to current research, this group is known to around half the population. The leftwing environmental movement DUHA (which is the Czech branch of “Friends of the Earth”) is also relatively well known, but this only concerns one quarter of the population. Awareness of other groups is closer to single-digit figures. Their ability to influence events in society looks the same accordingly. Trade union movements are beginning to play a more visible political role (more on this anon). One specific phenomenon comprises state-favoured “right-wing” NGOs such as People in Need. Besides successful charity activities, this organisation also acts as a significant element for anti-communist “education.” An NGO’s shift to the left carries a distinct risk of its being marginalised, because it will not receive money for grants, projects, etc. that are influenced by the politically dominant structures.

There has been a gradual shift in the social acceptance of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). The majority found the Communist Party to be unacceptable in the 1990s. Now, its position is better. In the long term, roughly one quarter to one fifth of citizens fundamentally reject the Communist Party. The percentage of those who have a neutral (indifferent) attitude is similar. Overall, one third of citizens view the Communist Party in a positive light, even though a larger portion of them do so with reservations. What has changed, however, is the “acceptance” of the Communist Party on the part of opinion makers, particularly those from the media, academic, and even political spheres. Although attempts have been made to legally ban the Communist Party, it was not possible to find any viable means of doing so in a state that applies a constitutional order without substantially damaging the rule of law. Throughout its existence under the new conditions, the Communist Party has also taken great pains not to come into conflict with the legal system. Because the advent of the economic crisis and the lack of public interest in anti-communism as well as a real lack of radical non-communist left-wing options has not provided any scope for meaningful attacks on the Communist Party, the political elites have gradually reconciled themselves to its existence and its position (which realistically stands at around 15%). Some left-wing critics of the policies of the Communist Party and its political practices emphasise the constant “battle” between orthodox, so-called Stalinist forces and progressive elements within the Communist Party. Although

these fractional conflicts have persisted in the Communist Party for the entire duration of its existence after the Velvet Revolution, it is not possible to conclude that they would have significantly influenced Communist Party supporters and voters in their decision-making processes. Even in the Communist Party itself, it appears that, although it puts forward revolutionary rhetoric, pragmatic and reformist approaches rationally predominate considerably in political practice, regardless of the party's established leadership.

In this overview, it is necessary to also mention another political entity – the Party of Democratic Socialism (SDS). Historically, this party is linked to “euro-communism” and it is based on a radical left-wing vision of Europe. Its domestic political significance is negligible, and it is only thanks to the participation of its members in joint candidacies for regional elections that it has some representatives in important local councils. One specific characteristic of the SDS is its membership of the Party of the European Left. It is a regular member of this entity as opposed to the KSČM, which is only an observer. The SDS also acts as a pro-European party, which does not mean it is pro-EU. Its members are also active in some left-wing civic structures and organisations, and they partially influence the content of their activities. On the whole, this party has succeeded (in part because many of its members came from the Communist Party) in creating a certain bridge between the Communist Party and non-communist, radical left-wing structures and vice-versa. It is more of a politically radical, left-wing club that strives to establish communication with various partners than a political party with more considerable electoral ambitions. However, its domestic political role in the radical left is quite substantial, precisely because of its being anchored in Europe.

2) The radical left in the Czech Republic and the economic crisis

As has already been the case many times in the past, the expectations of politically naive left-wingers that the economic crisis would energise Czech society and take it in the correct (i.e. left-leaning) direction have proven to be false. The advent of the crisis has not resulted in the rise of the left in the Czech Republic. In regional elections (just before the crisis in 2008) the social democrats (SD) won in all regions and even established an open coalition with the communists in two of them, but this was not due to the crisis, but more down to disgruntlement among the majority in society with the right-wing government represented by the Civic Democrats (ODS). It was certainly not a rejection of capitalism (even in its Czech form) but was rather a “punishment” for an unworthy right-wing party. The SD pay great attention to ensuring that they do not fundamentally disrupt the capitalist structure of society. The concept of systemic changes in society is not on the agenda. Even in the manifesto documents of the last Communist Party congress, the need for systemic changes is only mentioned in a cursory manner. In specific measures, it has more to do with a radical concept of the “welfare state.” In the long term, a broad objective has therefore been formulated – i.e. socialism where people will be remunerated according to their work and where everything will be done for the benefit of society.

Although they vehemently denied it, the trade unions were strong-armed by the “voice of the people” into becoming a political force. People's dissatisfaction with their current economic situation, growing social insecurity among increasingly larger social groups, and the inability of the government to communicate its intentions all combined to force the trade unions into responding more actively. The protest events of this spring have shown that they are now the only relevant force capable of organising large demonstrations. In order to maintain this political dynamism, they must reflect the political reality even though their membership base fully reflects the political diversity of the whole of society and in many respects the trade unions cannot act and negotiate strongly in a left-wing manner. In a situation where 80% of citizens are in an anti-government mood, it is not difficult to organise activities calling for the government's resignation. It is a lot more difficult, however, to formulate any kind of alternative socioeconomic programme that is supported by the majority. Nonetheless, it is the trade unions who have a team of economists and are the only institution capable of formulating alternative solutions without being influenced directly by a right-

wing government. At the start of July, the unions published their “vision.” This concerns an analytical document looking at the current state of the Czech economy while also subsequently looking at the social sphere, including the proposal of certain corrective measures. It is necessary to emphasise that this is an “apolitical” document, which avoids any criticism of the system and does not seek redress outside of the existing system. It compiles a number of arguments and alternative solution proposals, but it appears that the unions are leaving it up to political representatives as to how to make use of this document. In terms of content, it is closest to the social democratic vision of reality. Radical left-wing entities (whether it be the KSČM or other parties and civic movements) have gone further in their own internal deliberations and they are also seeking redress in fundamental systemic social changes. In the trade unions, there are growing divisions between the increasingly radical public sector groupings and the less radical unions of large and prospering firms like Škoda Auto (partially because they are more successful in collective-bargaining negotiations). It is not clear, however, how this “politicisation” of trade unions will manifest itself in specific election contests. Thus far, it appears that the unions, at least in the formal sense, wish to remain on the sidelines of the pre-election battle.

Surveys show (and the political climate confirms this) that, rather than resulting in a shift to the left, the crisis has triggered a move away from a party perception of politics and resulted in people declaring that they are abandoning political parties. It appears that there has been something of an upsurge in the number of people sympathising with smaller political parties or movements. Naturally, the question remains as to how this shift will be reflected in the elections. To date, no significant growth in preferences for extreme right-wing parties and movements has been recorded in Czech society. But there has been an increase in tension between the majority of the population and so-called maladjusted groups, particularly the Roma community, regardless of people’s left/right-wing leanings.

In society as a whole, it is primarily people employed in the public sector who are becoming more radical (both on the left and on the right). These people were severely affected by cuts in the state budget. At the same time, this group has been socially marginalised by the governing coalition, which only considers the private sector to be the productive part of the population. Some years ago, former Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek declared that the middle class “has had prepaid yet.” This class, however, is more displeased with the current governing elite and its political boorishness than it is with its strategic goals.

Nonetheless, our experience up to now shows that in specific elections, at the parliamentary level and to a large degree at the regional level, the standard party approach to things ultimately predominates and this leads people to gravitate towards the larger, well-established, and well-known political parties and groups. Today, it appears that the KSČM is rather more open to the participation of candidates from other left-wing entities in its candidacies. On the other hand, however, many civic initiatives cannot or are unable to get their people to occupy this space that has opened up.

3) The radical left and Europe:

The KSČM has been manoeuvring under pressure from various forces inside the party and with a relative lack of interest among the wider public in this issue. Europe is not the lifeblood of Czech society. The right still does not know who is their most loyal friend – the United States and Euro-Atlantic civilisation or the suspicious European “socialist” project, which is not liberal enough for them. In a large portion of society, past resentments still persist from the times of the camp of socialisms. That is also a possible reason for the KSČM’s more marked leanings toward national and patriotic issues. At the very least, one can more keenly feel a wariness of Germany and its European ambitions. This approach certainly resonates with the feelings of a significant portion of the

population. Paradoxically, certain radical left-wing currents are in harmony with Eurosceptic and nationalist strands in the right-wing ODS and other quasi-right-wing groupings. Even though the Czech left has always been international, and in the first half of the last century played a significant role in the European left, nowadays, with the exception of the SDS (which has declared its commitment to the European integration of the radical left), the other left-wing groupings have been skirting around this issue or have been very lukewarm about it. The European issue does not appear to be an important point in the pre-election campaign. The aforementioned marked feeling of mistrust towards Europe is gathering strength in society and even more so in regard to the European structures presented by Brussels. A united European left is not even a fundamental objective for the Czech radical left. In the congress documents of the KSČM, only one short paragraph is devoted to the European issue, and it deals with it in very general terms. Civic initiatives and organisations almost entirely ignore the European issue and the European dimension. It is not part of their argumentation and they do not deal with the concept of the European idea in their manifestos, or else they do so only marginally.

4) Conclusion: Even though Czech society has a year of elections before it, with senate, regional, and presidential polls, there has been no indication that elections could lead to socio-political changes. For many people, it would be enough satisfaction if the unpopular Nečas government were to leave the scene. The prevailing feeling is that anything else would be better. The ODS's right-wing rival TOP09, which made a breakthrough in the last elections (a new party guided by "old political structures") realises this. They are saying in the back corridors of power that this party could be the one that causes the fall of the government and the announcement of early parliamentary elections as of the moment when a good result looks to be on the cards. The SD are preparing for parliamentary elections, but they have a problem in terms of how they "deal with" with the possible need to either cooperate with the communists or to create a "grand coalition" with their current political arch-enemy. If they proceed with enough pragmatism, the communists will maintain their position or strengthen it slightly, but they will not be able to significantly influence political events in the future. The previous experiment with new parties, which was meant to give rise to a new political spirit, did not succeed and it is not likely that there will be any significant change in the structure of Czech politics. Consequently, amid the expectation of great changes, it appears that everything essentially remains the same as before. I personally believe that actual changes are only possible in a European context if important European political players get involved in them. And until the radical European left becomes one of these players, there is no chance of a new wind from the left blowing through countries like the Czech Republic.