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Czech Republic

The Czech communists' road to Europe

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The Czech Communist Party will bring to the European parliament its peculiar mix of progressive social and economic policies and an unattractive attachment to authoritarian and nationalist sentiments. But the decline of anti-Communism at home, and exposure to the libertarian currents of the Western left are likely to transform the party into a modern anti-capitalist force.

As well as punishing the ruling Social Democratic party, Czech voters expressed their strong concerns with the current process of European integration. Over 60% of voters supported "Eurosceptic" parties, mainly the conservative ODS of President Vaclav Klaus (for whom the European Union has replaced Communism as the main "socializing" threat to individual liberties and national interests) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, which is opposed both to the neoliberal reforms promoted from Brussels and the greater economic and political influence which Germany in particular will have over the Czech Republic within an integrated Europe.

After two years of weak and indecisive government, a clique within the social democrats used their electoral defeat as a pretext to force a leadership change, propelling the media-savvy Interior Minister Stanislav Gross into the leadership of the Party. He now has several weeks to form a majority government. The paradox of Czech politics since the mid-90s is that there is a clear left plurality of votes, but the Social Democrats have so far refused to consider an alliance with the Communists, who have a stable 15-20% of parliamentary seats. While Gross desperately courts the minority centre and Catholic parties, a growing part of his own party is urging him to break the "cordon sanitaire" that has prevented coalitions with the Communist Party ever since the 1989 "velvet revolution" ended 50 years of totalitarian rule.

Zdenek Jicinsky is one Social Democratic MP who believes that ignoring the Communist Party weakens the left as a whole. "Our party re-established itself in 1989 on an anti-Communist basis. But our current attempts to rebuild credibility and increase our influence shouldn't be based on anti-Communism. Back in 1989, anti-Communism was a natural reaction of most of Czech society to the previous regime. The right wing currents, which formed very quickly, deliberately promoted anti-Communism to establish their ideological and political hegemony."

That hegemony enabled them to carry out otherwise unpopular reforms, which Jicinsky calls the "wild capitalist transformation".

During the 1990s, however, Jicinsky believes that Czechs have lost their illusions, and examine their political options more carefully. The anti-Communist hegemony is weakening. "There is a growing difference of opinion about the newly-forming political and socio-economic system" At a deeper level, Jicinsky believes that, with the passage of time, Czechs are now better able "to compare the positive and negative aspects of the new system with the previous system. We see that nothing is black-and-white. The old regime was not the "empire of evil" which the rightist fundamentalists portrayed it as. And the new regime is not the best of all possible societies."

During the anti-Communist consensus, the Czech media repeated ad nauseam that electoral support for the CP was sure to shrink to insignificance over time, as the only people who supported the party were former bureaucrats, secret police agents and a handful of nostalgic pensioners who could not adapt to freedom and free choice. In this hostile atmosphere, the party played into the hands of the anti-Communist ideologues, by refusing to drop the word "Communist" from its name, or to distance itself categorically from the crimes of the totalitarian period.

But times change. According to former dissident Petr Uhl, voters are no longer so responsive to anti-communist

messages. "Many people are more interested in the CP's critique of the anti-social policies of the British Labour Party and German social democrats, which the Czech social democrats are trying to import and support for Bush during the war against Iraq. Many people, including non-Communists, look at the CP, with its programme and its internal functioning and consider it as a more left wing, more social and even more democratic alternative to the Social Democrats."

Like other left-wing social democrats, Zdenek Jicinsky recognises that the CP has become "the main protest party." The pensioners who vote Communist are not just motivated by nostalgia for the "grey certainties" of the previous regime, but by the daily humiliation of living on an inadequate pension. The Roma minority, facing 90% unemployment, residential segregation and virulent racism from the majority population, vote Communist not just because "in the old days, everybody had a job and an apartment" but because, quite simply, the CP is the parliamentary party with the strongest record of voting against privatisations and social security cuts, and in favour of spending on health, education and poverty-reduction.

According to Uhl, who himself spent nine years in prison under the Communist dictatorship, "there is increasingly something ridiculous about attempts to use "Communism" to scare people". Society has evolved. "It is 15 years since the fall of the old regime. And the last 20 years of that regime were not the same bloody dictatorship as the 1950s, which almost nobody can actually remember." In the 1980s, while dissidents like Uhl were persecuted, marginalized, imprisoned or forced to emigrate, "many people got by better than nowadays."

With 20% of the vote, a strong representation in municipal and national government, and now six of the country's 22 European MPs, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia is one of the most stable anti-capitalist parties in the enlarged European Union. But while anti-Communism at home seems to be fading slowly away, the party will not find it easy to integrate with the West European left. The party's strong opposition to privatization, support for labour rights and social security, and defence of pensioners and the unemployed will strengthen the United European Left caucus in the European parliament.

But there will be an embarrassed silence (or, given the nature of the left, a fractious and accusatory debate) in the face of the Czech Communists' obsession with German revanchism, the decline in public security since 1989, and the crime and hygiene risks associated with immigration. In fact, a large part of Czech society is characterized by an uneasy combination of progressive views on social and economic issues, but an authoritarian outlook on personal liberties. Petr Uhl explains this as the legacy of the totalitarian period. "The last 15 years have seen a major evolution in our value system. People are gradually abandoning old schemata of personal, family and social life. We are gradually overcoming our previous acceptance of the submission of the individual to the state, the party or whatever collective group, the unequal position of women, authoritarian and paternalist relationships, the obligation for the individual to accommodate himself/herself to the needs of the collective, the suppression of differences, unity at all costs, a generalised culture of secrecy, and an acceptance of collective responsibility and collective guilt."

This fundamental cultural change, which has parallels in other societies that have undergone totalitarian rule, has been embraced by the Social Democrats and some of the small centre parties, which take their inspiration from Western liberalism and the local dissident tradition of thinkers like former President Vaclav Havel. This sets the Social Democrats apart from both the conservative ODS of former prime minister, now President Vaclav Klaus, and the Communists.

According to Uhl, both the conservatives and the Communists have tried to consolidate their opposition image by an aggressive and populist defence of "traditional values". The ODS promotes neoliberal economics, but rejects liberalism in the broader sense. And the Communist Party has tried to build on its wartime resistance role by theorising an authoritarian, intolerant form of Czech nationalism. Always present in society, this nationalism became stronger after the division of the Czecho-Slovak Federation in 1992.

For Uhl, the real test for the Communist Party is "multiculturalism, based on the respect and acceptance of people of various ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups. [Such] multiculturalism is naturally overcoming intolerant nationalism, and is of course completely compatible with local, national and European patriotism. What worries Uhl is that while the Czech Communist leader, Milan Ransdorf admits that "we are not multicultural" he and his party don't necessarily see this as a problem.

As Uhl points out, "for fifty years, this society has faced a challenge of integrating Roma and other minorities... of assimilation or emancipation. If the Czech CP can embrace this challenge, it can free itself of intolerant nationalism - which is practically absent among west European Communists."

Otherwise, Uhl warns, the CP could follow the Russian Communists, who continued to stress nationalism, to the point where they adopted chauvinism and anti-Semitism. "Communists have followed both the Western and the Russian path. Which way will the Czech Party go?"

In any case, the decline of anti-Communism opens a new period for Czech Communism, and all those who would build a left alternative in the country. How long will it take? As Uhl comments, "the Communist Party is gradually freeing itself from its historical baggage, just as the Catholic Church has done. But let's hope that it doesn't take the Communists hundreds of years!"

Uhl sees a chance for the Party among its youth members. "Many young Communists have evolved from anti-globalists to alter-globalists. They remind me of the French youth of the late 1960s, offering Communist ideals in a modern formulation, as an alternative to capitalism and nationalism - and to globalization." The CP leadership should pay more attention to this current of the party, it could represent a stronger and more inclusive project for the Czech left.