

## BACK TO THE FUTURE? THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

*Hubert Gehring / Mathias Paul*

Opinion polls in Central and Eastern Europe in recent years have identified considerable nostalgia for the Communist era among the population. The German term "Ostalgie", coined in the course of public debate on the subject, shows the importance that researchers attach to the phenomenon. A return to Communist rule is a conceivable or even desirable option for the citizens in question. This positive and revisionist retrospective assessment of the former regime, which trivializes its flagrantly negative aspects by failing to mention them, is especially problematical given the democratic consolidation of the former Soviet satellite states. In this context, consolidation represents recognition and habitual acknowledgement of democratic norms and values, especially at the individual citizen level, leading to majority acceptance of democracy as the only game in town when it comes to choosing a form of government.

Looking at the Czech Republic in this context, polls show on the one hand that the clear majority of citizens (about 70 per cent) support and accept democracy as a form of government. The country's membership of NATO and the EU is one manifestation of this. On the other hand, no other post-Communist country still has such a strong Communist Party as the KČSM, which has not undergone any noticeable reform since 1989 yet is still accepted in society.

In any attempt at explanation, we would expect to find a clear divide between older people, who were socialized under the socialist system, and the younger generation, the majority of whom were aware only of the Soviet Union's break-up. Survey data from the New Europe Barometer in 2001 and 2004 confirms the validity of this assumption. Asked whether they desired a return to Communism, 29 per cent of Czech citizens aged 50 and over answered "Yes" in 2001. The figure in 2004 was still 22 per cent. The comparative figures for 18–29 year-olds were 8 and 6 per cent, and for 30–49 year-olds 12 and 9 per cent. A generational difference is apparent here. The older the respondents, the more likely they were to favour a return to Communism.

The poll findings suggest that it is entirely conceivable that the Communist nostalgia phenomenon will markedly diminish and decline in importance in the future as a result of the generational difference. However, although the younger generation is by no means uncritical of the contemporary political situation in the Czech Republic, a return (even just an intellectual one) to the former system, which they perceived above all as inhumane, is completely

out of the question for them. In this sector of the population, there is scarcely any potential for Communist nostalgia. Rather, younger people are fully aware of the gains in terms of freedom and new (human) rights in a democracy and will try to address and solve any problems by working within the system using the given democratic means.

Besides socialisation under the old regime, the factors behind the nostalgia for Communism appear to be primarily economic. The interesting question now becomes whether economic dissatisfaction among the population, which seems to be the main reason for voting KSČM, is also affected by generational differences. An analysis of the electorate at the 2006 parliamentary elections shows that, in general, social class and age were major determining factors in how an individual voted. Those who voted KSČM were largely older, poorly educated people on low incomes: 20 per cent of the total electorate aged 55–64, and 33 per cent of the over-65s, voted for the Communists in 2006.

It is nevertheless surprising that even the younger generation appears so indifferent to the fact that the KSČM is part of the political reality in the Czech Republic. Although the party has openly promoted only the positive aspects of pre-1989 Communist rule and has yet to admit to, let alone apologize for, the crimes committed in this era, it has assumed a normal position in public life. Many citizens accept the party as an essential part of the country's political spectrum. Nevertheless, with 25 seats in parliament, the KSČM prevents stable majority coalitions from being formed at national level. As such, it is an obstacle to stabilization of the Czech party political system. Hence, the governing coalition formed in 2002 had a majority of only one seat. After political stalemate in 2006, a governing majority was only achieved thanks to defections. The collapse of the Topolanek government in March 2009 clearly showed just how unstable such coalitions are. At national level, the democratic parties are regularly forced to specifically seek KSČM support for legislative proposals and parliamentary votes requiring a constitutional majority.

The younger generation seems to have internalized the concept of democratic pluralism. However, that does not mean that these citizens do not also feel a certain social pressure, or that they are unreservedly satisfied with the current political and economic situation. Rather, they too recognize these shortcomings but try to deal with them constructively, for instance by getting actively involved in political and social discourse through NGOs. From this it can be assumed that the tendency to nostalgia for Communism, and with it the KSČM, will die out over time. The party's membership numbers clearly reflect this, having fallen continuously from some 350,000 in 1992 to 77,115 in 2008.

Despite its general decline in importance, the KSČM joined the social democratic ČSSD to form governing coalitions following elections to the regional legislatures in Carlsbad and Moravia-Silesia in 2008. The ČSSD also lets the KSČM prop up its minority governments in other regions. However, voters have questioned the credibility of the ČSSD leader. The very fact that any kind of governing alliance has been formed with the KSČM in the regions suggests such doubts are justified. Given Paroubek's strong bid for power in the May 2010 parliamentary elections, it remains to be seen whether the ČSSD can ignore the Communists if a potential governing coalition at national level would command a majority. The strength of the KSČM in the 2010 elections, and the performance of the other parties in relation to it, depends very much on the level of voter turnout. As is typical for an extremist party, the KSČM has a very loyal, easily mobilized electoral base. If turnout stays the same, the party is expected to win between 12 and 14 per cent of the vote. A significantly lower turnout is, by definition, of benefit to the Communist Party and offers the potential for it to pick up where it left off in 2002, when it won a record 18.5 per cent of the vote on a turnout of only 58 per cent. If the developments and positions outlined above do indeed lead to the KSČM having a share in government after the national parliamentary elections in May 2010 – a possibility at least for the KSČM's pragmatic wing headed by the party leader, Vojtěch Filip – then this would not, in itself, result in a general reorientation of Czech politics. However, pressure on the public finances could be expected as a result of rising social costs. The Czech Republic would also, given the KSČM's close ties with Russia, China and even Venezuela, and its negative attitude to the EU and NATO, also forfeit trust within these alliances.

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