

Stefan Gehrold: After the 2006 Election: Arrived in the West? On the Development of Party Politics in Slovakia and the Czech Republic

Throughout the 19th and 20th century, Bohemia and Moravia constituted an integral part of Western and Central Europe. Although the region was economically strong, the social question resembled a tinderbox. People called for parliamentary representation; the development of a party landscape began. As part of the Hungarian territory, Slovakia, on the other hand, remained unaffected by Western European influence. Here, however, parties formed as well, even though these reflected the agrarian, rural structure of the region.

From 1918 to 1938, during the years of the First Czechoslovak Republic, there was a democratic state with a parliamentary system. However, due to social and regional differentiations and the society's poly-ethnic character, among other things, the party landscape was severely fragmented. Because of their common experience of the inter-war period, Slovakia and the Czech Republic today share the same democratic roots, although recent party developments in the two countries took very different courses.

Between 1939 and 1945, Hitler's Germany established the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, whereas Slovakia posed as an independent state. After the end of the Second World War, the first Czechoslovak post-war government convened in the east Slovakian town of Kosice, only to be replaced one year later, in May 1946, by a leadership clearly dominated by communists. Until the sixties, when cautious liberalisation attempts gained strength, culminating in the 'Prague Spring' brought about by Alexander Dubcek in 1968, the main feature of the political situation were the unified election lists that were established during the years following the war. The invasion by Warsaw Pact troops, which suddenly blighted the spirit of freedom in the region, again resulted in an aggravation of the domestic-policy situation which, throughout the next two decades, expressed itself in a 'calm of silent conformity and political indifference'.

It was not until the Velvet Revolution of 1989 that the communist regime met its end, paving the ground for a party landscape that at first was rather unconventional – former reform communists, left-leaning liberals, monarchists, and representatives of other factions of the earlier opposition movement all raised their voices. Both the Czech and the Slovak part of the country were then dominated by nationalist revolutionary tones, the paramount objective being to overcome communism.

In 1990, the winners of the elections to both the federal parliament and the parliaments of the Czech and the Slovak constituent republics were the civic forum parties. Only two years later, however, the two parts of the country had drifted apart considerably. In Bohemia and Moravia, the parliamentary elections of 1992 were won by the civic conservative forces around Vaclav Klaus and his ODS, while in Slovakia, the left-nationalist HZDS of Vladimir Meciar triumphed. The tensions between Czechs and Slovaks grew more acute, so much so that the country was divided into two sovereign states in 1993: The Czech and the Slovak Republic had become the legal successors of Czechoslovakia.

During the years between the revolution and the end of Czechoslovakia, politics was dominated by intellectuals, reform communists, and representatives of the opposition. There was no question of proper competition in a functioning party system, as inability to compromise and mealy-mouthed argumentation prevailed. However, with their defined national borders and their established election and/or government systems, the two new states fulfilled the requirements needed to consolidate their party systems.

In both states, the long years of communist rule had left a difficult heritage behind. The one-party system of the time had left deep marks in the society, so that it was hardly possible to tie in seamlessly with the pre-communist era. Still, 1990 was not the zero hour on the path towards party development, although the classic conflict lines were substituted by new ones: Communists were confronted by anticommunists, traditionalists by 'Westernisers', market-radical reformers by etatists. Thus, there was potential for conflict, and the foundation for stabilising a differentiated party system was laid.

In fact, such a system had formed in the Czech Republic by 2006 – dominated by two great parties, the civic democratic ODS and the social democratic CSSD. The Christian democratic KDU-CSL, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia as well as the liberal parties, the US-DEU and the ODA, similarly struck permanent roots. Specific to the Czech Republic is the exceptional position of the communists who retained their name, objectives, and structure even after 1989, their potential voters amounting to as many as 20 percent of the population. What is also specific to the country are the difficulties in establishing a stable government and avoiding the deadlocks that arise from the given balance of power.

Until 1998, the formation of a party system in Slovakia was indissolubly linked to the person of Vladimir Meciar. His Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), which followed an anti-Western line and was critical towards reforms, always reflected the desire for a welfare state shared by many Slovaks. However, the authoritarian regime of Mr Meciar, which lasted for several years, lost the citizens' approval after 1998, although his HZDS remained the strongest party in 1998 and 2002. The situation in Slovakia differs greatly from that in the Czech Republic: The Slovak party system is more volatile than that of Czechia, and the citizens of the two countries do not share the same attitude towards democracy.

However, the two countries do have some things in common: In the elections of 1998, both experienced a sudden break and a change of government. And in both countries, the elections of 2006 led to serious changes, albeit under different premises.

The outcome of the elections held in the Czech Republic early in June 2006 was a deadlock in the house of representatives, with the left- and right-wing political parties now holding 100 seats each. All in all, the centre, i.e. the ODS and the CSSD, gained some strength, while the marginal parties such as the communists lost some. At the moment, two moderate political blocks of roughly the same strength but different ideological orientations are confronting each other. Although the current election procedure leads to results that reflect the actual balance of power only to some extent, it does by no means affect the continually advancing concentration process within the Czech political party system. In fact, those who feared that the close-run election might complicate the formation of a government were proven right. Early talks between the natural partners, the ODS, the KPU-CSL, and the Greens, did not result in a stable government. After much to-ing and fro-ing, Vlecek Seif, a representative of the CSSD, was elected speaker of parliament in August 2006, and it was not before September that Mirek Topolánek and his ODS presented a minority government. This government, however, stepped down again in October when Mr Topolánek, who was anxious to establish a policy aiming for tax cuts and friendliness towards Europe lost a vote of confidence in the Czech parliament.

Neither did the Slovak elections of 2006 bring victory to any of the two competing camps. The winners of the election were the social democratic SMER, founded by Robert Fico in 1999, and the nationalist extreme-right SNS, which became the third strongest force. The losers included Mr Meciar's LS-HZDS and the Christian democratic KDĽ, while the liberals and communists remained without parliamentary representation. Power-conscious Mr Fico soon succeeded in forming a

government even though, in view of the coalition's nationalist course, its expected hostility towards Europe, and the fact that it has no programme, his decision to form a coalition with the nationalist SNS and the left-populist LS-HZDS met with harsh criticism worldwide.

Against the background of Slovakia's current development, its political party system may by no means be regarded as sound. However, the process of consolidation seems to be continuing, especially as no new party succeeded in entering parliament. Because two parliamentary blocks are forming at the moment, the situation in the Czech Republic is clearer, and the current deadlock might well be an unfortunate episode rather than a permanent weakness inherent in the system. Given the manageable spectrum of political parties and their clear ideological classification, the Czech Republic may be expected to develop along Western lines. What deserves attention is the fact that, although the centre has become stronger, the political parties in the two countries are willing to accept even extremists as coalition partners. However, whereas it remains to be seen whether Slovakia's ruling coalition actually promotes radical forces, developments in the Czech Republic may probably be observed more calmly.