

Twenty Years after the Iron Curtain: The Czech Republic in Transition

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In November of last year, the Czech Republic commemorated the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, which occurred twenty years prior.¹ The twentieth anniversary invites thoughts, many times troubling, on how far the Czechs have advanced on their path from a totalitarian regime to a pluralistic democracy. This lecture summarizes and evaluates the process of democratization of the Czech Republic's political institutions, its transition from a centrally planned economy to a free market economy, and the transformation of its civil society. Although the political and economic transitions have been largely accomplished, democratization of Czech civil society is a road yet to be successfully traveled. This lecture primarily focuses on why this transformation from a closed to a truly open and autonomous civil society unburdened with the communist past has failed, been incomplete, or faced numerous roadblocks.

HISTORY

The Czech Republic was formerly the Czechoslovak Republic. It was established in 1918 thanks to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and his strong advocacy for the self-determination of new nations coming out of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after the World War I. Although Czechoslovakia was based on the concept of Czech nationhood, the new nation-state of fifteen-million people was actually multi-ethnic, consisting of people from the Czech lands (Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia), Slovakia, Subcarpathian Ruthenia (today's Ukraine), and approximately three million ethnic Germans. Since especially the Sudeten Germans did not join Czechoslovakia by means of *self*-determination, the nation-state endorsed the policy of cultural pluralism, granting recognition to the various ethnicities present on its soil. The political culture was defined by democratic and egalitarian values and equality of opportunity, rather than by state-controlled assimilation of differences. The policy of reconciliation eventually turned into a policy of concession to German demands encouraged by Hitler's rise to power. The Munich Agreement (referred to as the Munich Betrayal by Czechs) then marked the end of the first Czechoslovak democratic republic in 1938. The Czechs came under the German Nazi administration in 1939, when the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was established, whereas Slovakia became an independent Slovak Republic and one of the Nazi-Germany satellites.

The very short democratic period of the Czechoslovak Republic, reinstated after World War II, was replaced by four decades of a communist regime. The rise of communists to power has its background in the Second World War. The leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph V. Stalin, made his stance clear in 1943 at the Tehran Conference (one of the meetings of the Big Three: Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, and Franklin D. Roosevelt) when he demanded installation of communist-controlled governments in the Eastern European countries he planned then to liberate. From the Czechoslovak Republic's perspective, the Soviets were viewed as the chief liberators of Czechoslovakia. The facts that General Patton's troops liberated Pilsen and a substantial part of western Bohemia, and that Patton's staff was drafting plans for liberating Prague, were soon buried by pro-Soviet communist propaganda. Further, many members of the Communist party, and future hardliners such as the Communist president Gustáv Husák (in office from 1975 to 1989) were active in the resistance movement and the uprising against Nazism, which added credibility to the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia as a vigorous opponent of the Nazi occupation.

The popularity of the Communist Party was not, however, a foregone conclusion in 1945. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) alienated much of the electorate with its idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat (the leading role of workers in the transition from capitalism, which is based on antagonistic classes, to communism, which is without classes) and the policy of forced collectivization (the organization of private lands and labor into collective farms as a means of boosting agricultural production). Intellectuals did not trust a party that preferred workers and farmers and soon saw through the ideology that aimed at depriving them of private property. Under Stalin's pressure, the Communists resorted to undemocratic and unconstitutional means to gain control of the government. The final end of democracy and the onset of a totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia was determined by the Communist coup in 1948 when the Communists purged non-Communists from the government and gained control of the police and security forces, and when the President Edvard Beneš, in order to divert Soviet invasion, was eventually forced to accept the Communist-controlled government.²

The Communist government of the 1950s was characterized not only by one-party rule, but also by a centrally planned economy based on production quotas and the establishment of a media monopoly that enabled vast censorship and massive Communist propaganda. The Communists also resorted to coercive tactics and open threats targeted at the dissent; the Communist secret police used brutal interrogation methods and those who allegedly plotted against the regime were put on public trials where they faced a biased jury and were eventually executed or served many years in forced labor camps.

In 1968, following the process of de-Stalinization—unmasking the atrocities of Stalin's regime and removing the cult of his personality—Czechoslovakia embarked on its courageous, though short-lived, journey of political liberalization and democratization. This period of reforms, later referred to as

Prague Spring, was halted in August the same year by the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.³ The Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, who ordered the invasion, claimed to act on the call of Communist hardliners in Czechoslovakia who disagreed with the reforms. Additionally, Warsaw Pact troops were said to have offered help based on fraternity in order to save the people of Czechoslovakia from contra-revolution (that is, a revolution against the Communist revolution).

The invasion did not mean only the end of hopes for democratization. The rule of the Communist Party was further entrenched and the reformists were purged from power and positions in the state sector. Czechoslovakia was brought back to obedience and adherence to Soviet Communism. The Soviet army remained on Czechoslovakian soil to see to the country's commitments to the Eastern Communist Bloc. Although the Communist terror of the 1950s did not return, the regime demanded ideological conformity and penalized dissent, mostly through job loss or denial of employment. Ideological indoctrination found its place at schools. The citizens lived under the surveillance of party activists and even if they were out of big brother's sight, they quickly developed mistrust of one another. The totalitarian regime succeeded in planting authoritarian culture deep into Czechoslovakian society.

The year 1989 brought the Communist Party rule to its knees all over the Eastern Bloc. On November 17 of that year, a peaceful student demonstration in the city of Prague was brutally suppressed by the police. The event sparked demonstrations and a general strike throughout the country. Students and dissidents formed a political movement, the Civic Forum. Under the leadership of a dissident, playwright, and the future president of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, and with an overwhelming support of the public, the movement succeeded in overthrowing the Communist government. I will next address the success of the ensuing political and economic transition from Communism and, equally important, the extent to which Czechoslovakian society succeeded in uprooting the authoritarian culture.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC TRANSITION

The totalitarian regime was removed to make a way for a free market economy and legitimization of political institutions based on democratic values. The process of democratization is reflected today in the political system of the Czech Republic. The state is a parliamentary representative democracy. An electoral method of proportional representation—used for electing deputies to the lower chamber of the bicameral Parliament—endorses pluralism and a multi-party system in the country. Members of the upper chamber are elected to the Senate from single-seat constituencies in two-round, runoff voting and their task is to check and confirm (or possibly veto) the decisions of the lower chamber. The Constitution of the Czech Republic guarantees civil rights and liberties by integrating the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Basic Freedoms.

Whereas constitutional changes were taking place almost concurrently with the ousting of Communists from the government and the democratization of institutions was accomplished within a year

or two after the fall of communism, the economic transformation from a centrally planned to a free-market economy took the first half of the 1990s. There were two rounds of *voucher privatizations* in which shares of ownership of industry, public service, and enterprises previously held by the Communist Party were distributed for a low price to all citizens.⁴ Regrettably, the transfer of ownership from the state to private hands invited speculations that went unchecked due to an absence of laws, which in turn enabled the members of *nomenklatura* (the Communist elite members and affiliates in the key administrative and industry positions) to gain substantial shares in the state-owned companies. Despite shortcomings in the process of privatization, the Czech Republic managed to open its market to large foreign investments from the West, witnessed a surge in small businesses and new consumer services, and has been recognized as one of the most developed industrialized economies of the former Eastern Bloc. The Czech Republic symbolically completed the political and economic transition by entering the European Union in 2004.

A question remains whether the Czech political culture has kept pace with the successful establishment of democratic institutions and the successful economic transformation. There are reasons for apprehension that Czech society has been delayed, mostly by the legacy of the country's Communist past. Following Ralph Dahrendorf's idea that a transition to a pluralistic democracy and free market economy implies transformation from a closed to an open civil society, the Czech political culture should boast today an autonomous civil society of politically active citizens.⁵ I next discuss whether Czech civil society meets those desirable conditions that would mark the transition of its political culture as complete.

CHANGES IN CZECH POLITICAL CULTURE: THE TRANSFORMATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The transformation in the Czech society proved to be at large successful, particularly when viewed from the perspective of the communist past when citizens were deprived of basic freedoms, such as freedom of expression, freedom of movement, etc. Fearing punishment, they did not dare to voice dissenting opinions or otherwise challenge the Communist Party or the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. Many people were simply free-riders trying to take advantage of the loopholes in the system.⁶ They were minding their own business, which mostly meant keeping a job and providing for family, without interfering or otherwise becoming entangled with those in the power. Furthermore, many people were not acting out of fear, instead they truly believed in the Communist dictates—a result of Communist propaganda and indoctrination.

Although the Czech political culture has generally made a remarkable step towards protection of civil rights and liberties (e.g., citizens today can fully exercise their freedom of expression, they can move or change their job without constraints, etc.), some of the traits of totalitarian culture became too embedded in the society to disappear entirely as the structures of Communist regime did. This is visible in

many perspectives that work to deny credit to the Czech Republic as being a full supporter of an open and autonomous civil society.

The Czech civil society has been experiencing low political activity: citizens are reluctant to mobilize for political causes beyond participation in general elections and there is hardly any pressure on politicians from the bottom up. Movement organizations, NGOs, and interest groups with a global and non-political agenda prevail over those concerned with Czech political issues. Further, the volunteer sector is not broad, especially in comparison with other countries in Western Europe. Intellectuals are not recognized nor considered for public debates of social and political issues. While their role in society should be to voice opinions and influence public opinion on various public issues, this function has been largely taken over by leaders of the political parties in Parliament.

On top of that, the current president of the Czech Republic, Václav Klaus, rejected on several occasions the very notion of an open and autonomous civil society. For example, he objected to the interference of civil society groups with politics. He also applied the term *eco-terrorism* to environmental groups because they allegedly threaten individual freedoms by adhering to the “ideology” of global warming and referred to environmental groups as a new form of communism.⁷

The communist legacy makes the current picture of Czech civil society even gloomier. The Czech Communist Party has been a stable parliamentary party on the Czech political scene since 1990. The Communists were also successful in the 2009 elections for the European Parliament. The party receives solid support from elderly citizens who comprise a significant part of the electorate.

The first free Czechoslovak parliamentary election was in 1990 and had voter turnout of 96.8%, with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia receiving 13.2% of the popular vote and becoming the second largest parliamentary party after the victorious Civic Forum (creating majority government with 49.5% of seats). As the following table shows, even after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the newly emerged Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia saw their members repeatedly elected to the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of the Czech Parliament) and holds the third largest number of seats.

The table reveals that the Communist Party continuously receives support from voters, with the percentage of the popular vote hovering around 10 to 12 percent. An exception occurred in the 2002 election when the Communists gained 18.51% of the popular vote and forty-one seats. There is a possible relationship between the significantly low voter turnout in 2002 (58%) and the rise in the percentage of votes for the Communists: by not casting ballots, the nonvoters gave a chance to the Communist Party which continued to receive its usual support from the elderly, who remained disciplined and faithful supporters, plus the party received additional votes from those dissatisfied with political developments that occurred in the process of organizing Parliament after the 1998 election.⁸

Electoral Support for the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia in the Chamber of Deputies ⁹			
Year	Percent of Popular Vote	Seats Gained (out of 200)	Voter Turnout (%)
1996	10.33	22	76
1998 (Early elections)	11.03	24	74
2002	18.51	41	58
2006	12.81	26	64

Elections to the Senate, the upper chamber, yield considerably fewer votes for the Communists, yielding many fewer Senate seats than they leading political parties hold. Most of the criticism of the Communist Party is heard from the Senate, where the Communists have only three seats out of eighty-one seats. It is worth noting, however, that the upper chamber, established to resume the political tradition of the First Czechoslovak Republic, cannot compete in political importance with the Chamber of Deputies. Numerous opponents of the Senate consider its existence futile and redundant. The general public views the Senate as only another burden to the state budget, a stance that is also reflected in low voter turnout for the Senate election (39.5 % in the first round and 29.85% in the second round of the most recent election in 2008). Furthermore, the two-round runoff voting method used for electing Senators also discourages the electorate from going to the polls.

WHY IS THE CZECH REPUBLIC STILL IN TRANSITION?

Unlike transition in the structures of government and politics, change in people's minds and cultural change requires more time. Such change is a long-lasting process that will be accomplished, perhaps, with future generations. There are several hindrances that help account for the incomplete transformation in Czech political culture. All of them stem from the nature of the economic transformation and the political emancipation.

One such hindrance was the oft-corrupted process of privatization, which was implemented without proper laws in place and without proper knowledge of its effects. Having been accustomed to the ways of a totalitarian regime, citizens could not lean on anything like Max Weber's notion of a Protestant ethic when dealing (for the first time in their life) with the hard beginnings of capitalism. The high expectations that Czech society would have somehow revived the democratic and economic ethic of the First Czechoslovak Republic were never met, simply because four decades of communism was too long a

break to return to the political culture of 1920s and 1930s. Further, the economic transformation meant a significant change in citizens' lifestyles and standards of living, which in itself involved a dramatic turn in cultural values. Where previously citizens were mandated to endorse the values of collectivism—sharing with others, giving priority to the common good over a private benefit, relying on the assistance of the state as a caretaker—the newly arrived capitalism demanded from citizens the very opposite: individual responsibility, self-reliance, and the like. As a consequence, the society shows traits of nostalgia for the socialist welfare system (rather than for the Communist regime per se) that would bring back the times of egalitarianism, general employment, generous state pensions, and a reliable social safety net. This nostalgia for the caretaker state is one of the chief reasons why voters, especially the elderly, prefer to vote the Communist Party or, less radically, for the centered-left Social Democrats.

The political emancipation of civil society and the legitimization of political institutions after 1989 might be ascribed to the shortcomings in the transformation of civil society. The establishment of Civic Forum, a political movement and student initiative led by Václav Havel, could be considered as the first political action on the part of the newly emerging civil society. The Civic Forum reached some of its goals (the resignation of the Communist government) and its leader became the first President of the free country. But once the movement captured a landslide victory in the Czechoslovak Parliamentary Election (1990), its ideas, organization, human resources, etc. started to be incorporated into the institutionalized structures of government and politics. The Civic Forum soon split into political parties (out of which a right-centered Civic Democratic Party took the lead), which practically marked the end of an otherwise-promising beginning to citizens' free association for political action.

Further, major changes in political power were implemented by means of collaboration and negotiation between the former oppressors and the oppressed. It was the *Communist*-dominated Parliament that announced on November 29, 1989 that it would strike from the Constitution the leading role of the Communist Party and the mandatory education of Marxism-Leninism. This and other acts of political legitimization in the time of transition have thwarted the ambition to *fully* cope up with the totalitarian past. Other efforts by politicians to draw a thick line and place Communism behind it failed as well. For example, lustration laws—enacted to prevent communist functionaries, secret police agents, and their informants from positions in the state sector—met with opposition not only in the Czech Republic but also in Poland.¹⁰ The laws have also proved inefficient on several occasions. Only recently the Czech media discovered that a deputy elected to the Chamber of Deputies for the Communist Party is a former prison guard who served under the Communist regime.

Above all, the Communist Party of today serves as a direct reminder of the totalitarian past. The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia—a follower of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia—has not explicitly and officially rejected the violence of Marxism-Leninism. At the same time, the members of

the party could be said to behave as silent observers in Parliament. Their force lies in their inconspicuousness: they do not vote for social reforms that are necessary but unpopular with the public. Being an opposition party, the Communists are often the first to criticize the government decisions and are able to distance themselves from inside deals, potentially corruptive activities, and government failures. This brings additional popularity to the Communist Party, especially among the young generation born after 1989. Being disillusioned by the actions of government, the young members of electorate either turn to radical and extreme- right political formations or (unaware of the totalitarian past) they follow the left-wing ideas and policies endorsed by the Communist Party.

The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) is not respected, though it is a tolerated player on the Czech political scene. The major parties have so far ruled out the possibility of forming a governing coalition with the Communists. The government has, however, refused to go so far as to dissolve the KSČM. Calls for its dissolution are heard in the Senate (which has exclusive constitutional authority) where Senator Jaromír Štětina, in cooperation with Human Rights Minister Michael Kocáb, proposed to examine whether the Czech Communist Party violates the Constitution. The two ardent anti-Communists based their charges on the constitutional law relating to support and propagation of movements that suppress the rights and liberties of citizens. The government refused to support the invocation and did not file a request to the Supreme Administrative Court to decide the constitutionality of KSČM.¹¹

Isolated and unsuccessful attempts at banning KSČM underline the shortcomings of the transition period. Furthermore, it is debatable whether the dissolution of KSČM would undo the errors of the past. The ban does not have the support of a broad cross-section of public and perhaps would be even undisable under the Czech democratic system. What is more, the incapacity to cope up with the legacy of Communism is just one, albeit significant, trait of the immaturity of Czech civil society.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

On the twentieth anniversary of the start of the Velvet Revolution (November 17th, 1989), a student initiative named *Inventura Democracie* (Democracy Czech-Up) was established to offer critical reflection of the post-revolution developments in society and politics.¹² Its list of grievances includes: unregulated lobbying of policymakers, non-transparent business deals undertaken by the government, corruption, parliamentary immunities (such as constitutional protection from prosecution), and others. A handful of students pressing politicians on various issues may seem to many to be a futile endeavor. But without doubt, it is a sign of improvement for Czech political culture. Only politically active citizens creating free associations that enjoy recognition from the political institutions and public figures will set the Czechs back on the path to complete the democratization of their society.

NOTES

- ¹ A few years later, in 1993, Czechoslovakia dissolved into its constituent states: the Czech Republic and Slovakia.
- ² See, for example, Karel Kaplan, *Pravda o Československu 1945-1948*, (Prague: Panorama, 1990).
- ³ See, for example, Jaromir Navratil, *The Prague Spring 1968: A National Security Archive Document Reader*, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998).
- ⁴ See, for example, Jan Mladek, "Privatizing the Czech Republic," *World Policy Journal*, 12 (1995): 124-128.
- ⁵ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, (London : Chatto & Windus, 1990).
- ⁶ Such loopholes emerged particularly in the economy where the bureaucratic machinery could not possibly control all spheres of the economy as required by the Communist government. A "grey market" system emerged where citizens could purchase commodities that were difficult or illegal to obtain under Communist rule. Part of the grey economy was trade with hard currencies, such as the U.S. dollar, since the Czechoslovak currency (the crown) did not have meaningful value outside the country's borders.
- ⁷ See, for example, Cliff Kincaid, "Environmentalism as the New Face of Communism," *WorldTribune.com*, June 10, 2008.
http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2008/ss_politics0228_06_10.asp. See also, Czech News Agency, "Klaus Uvedl Svou Knihu o Panice z Oteplovani," *iDnes.cz*, May 27, 2008.
http://zpravy.idnes.cz/klaus-v-usa-vedl-svou-knihu-o-panice-z-oteplovani-fsf-zahranicni.asp?c=A080527_220121_zahranicni_lf.
- ⁸ Political maneuvering in the wake of the 1998 parliamentary election caused many non-Communist voters in the 2002 election to turn their backs on the political parties they would have normally supported. Specifically, after the 1998 election, the victorious, left-centered Czech Social Democratic Party and the second largest, right-centered Civic Democratic Party drew an opposition agreement under which the Civic Democrats tolerated the minority government of the Social Democrats in exchange for a share of key civil service and government positions. This was interpreted as a betrayal by many voters who did not approve of this pact. Many of the nonvoters in 2002 did not take part in the election to demonstrate their disapproval with the opposition agreement.
- ⁹ Adapted from the election server of the Czech Statistical Office. http://www.volby.cz/index_en.htm. March 1, 2010.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Roman David, "Lustration Laws in Action: The Motives and Evaluation of Lustration Policy in the Czech Republic and Poland (1989-2001)," *Law and Social Inquiry*, 28 (2003): 387-439.
- ¹¹ Czech News Agency, "Czech Senator Wants New Government to Ban Communists," June 2, 2010.
http://www.financnioviny.cz/tema/zpravy/stetina-vyzval-premiera-fischer-a-aby-se-jeho-vlada-venovala-kscm/380317&id_seznam=298?id=380336.
- ¹² The English translation *Czech-Up* is a reference both to the phonetic reference ("to get a check-up") and to the name of the country. For more about *Inventura Demokracie* see <http://www.inventurademokracie.cz/>.