

Strengthening Social Democracy in the Visegrad Countries

The Czech Social Democratic Party

Jiří Koubek – Martin Polášek

February 2017

- The Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) needs to address the question of what its primary goal ought to be, both in the mid-term and the long-term perspective. Should it seek to dominate the whole left side of the political spectrum, trying to maximise electoral support, should it focus on cultivating the support of a specific electoral segment, or should it put its main emphasis on a particular ideological “mission” related to a grand social vision or to specific policy/policies? These three goals do not completely exclude each other. Still, in the mid-term perspective the ČSSD will have to prioritise among them (for the purposes of election campaigns etc.)
- The new challenges resulting from party system change may be faced primarily through the regeneration of the left-right axis and the restoration of its socio-economic meaning. This is not inconsistent with the fact that the ČSSD should be culturally progressive. The construction of political language (discourse) should play the key role in this strategy, as well as the ability to develop efficient messages – micro-narratives condensing the social democratic story and translating programme goals and delivered policies into rhetoric and into a set of images or metaphors. A political party does not merely mirror the will of its supporters. It also shapes its voters via its action – without much exaggeration, it “makes” its own voters.
- The challenges the ČSSD is facing – as a political party in general and as a social democratic party in particular – are of a European and global character.
- As far as the ČSSD’s organisation is concerned, the current arrangement within the party does not require and does not allow any radical structural changes. Neither, however, is it necessary to be too fixated on the mass party organisational model.

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1 The ČSSD as an organisation

History

The Czech Republic, formerly Czechoslovakia, is the only Central East European country in which a historically rooted¹ social democratic party has become the main left wing party. The Czechoslovak Social Democracy (Československá sociální demokracie, ČSSD) became a relevant political player after the post-1989 democratic transition. After the partition of Czechoslovakia it was renamed the Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická, with the same abbreviation, ČSSD). Together with German Social Democracy in the former East Germany, it is the only social democratic party in the region for which the Communists/ radical Left are a relevant and powerful rival. In the Czech case this rival is the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy, KSČM), in the German case it is the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), later the Left Party (Die Linke). The historical developments play the greatest role in terms of organisation: maintaining the form (not necessarily the scale) of a mass political party with a network of collateral organisations. History plays a much weaker role as far as the party's ideas, economy and party system context are concerned.

The economic background of the party²

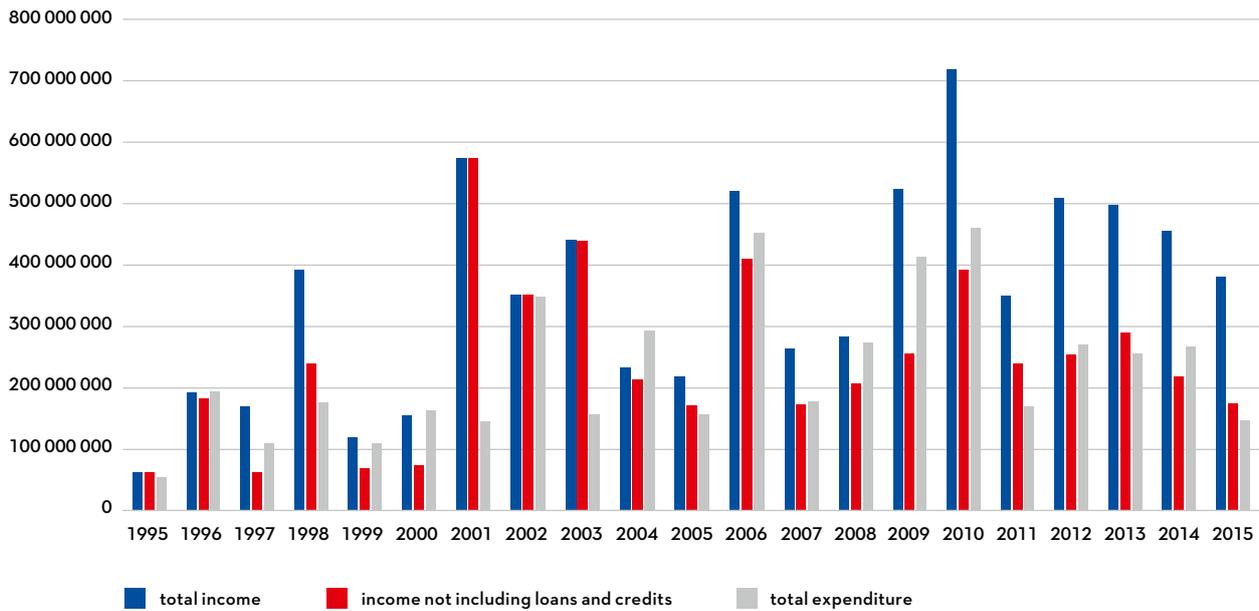
State budget funding is the main source of income for the ČSSD, as for the other Czech political parties. Internal financial resources resulting from property restitution had been exhausted by 2010 as a consequence of costly election campaigns. Since then, the ČSSD has been burdened with significant debts which it is able to pay back only gradually. This, however, puts significant constraints both on the party's electoral campaigns and on its internal functioning (e.g. the size and functions of the party apparatus). As for other resources, the most stable and largest amount comes from membership fees³. These, however, are unable to cover even the everyday functioning of the party, not to mention election campaign costs. The overall financial stability of the party thus depends on its election results.

¹ The origins of Czech social democratic political party organisation date back to 1878. During the First Czechoslovak Republic, 1918-1938, social democracy existed under the name Czechoslovak (previously Czech-Slavic) Social Democratic Worker's Party (ČSDSD).

² The economic data are largely based on the data stated in the annual financial reports which political parties are obliged to submit to the Czech Parliament Chamber of Deputies, PSP ČR (data available up to 2015).

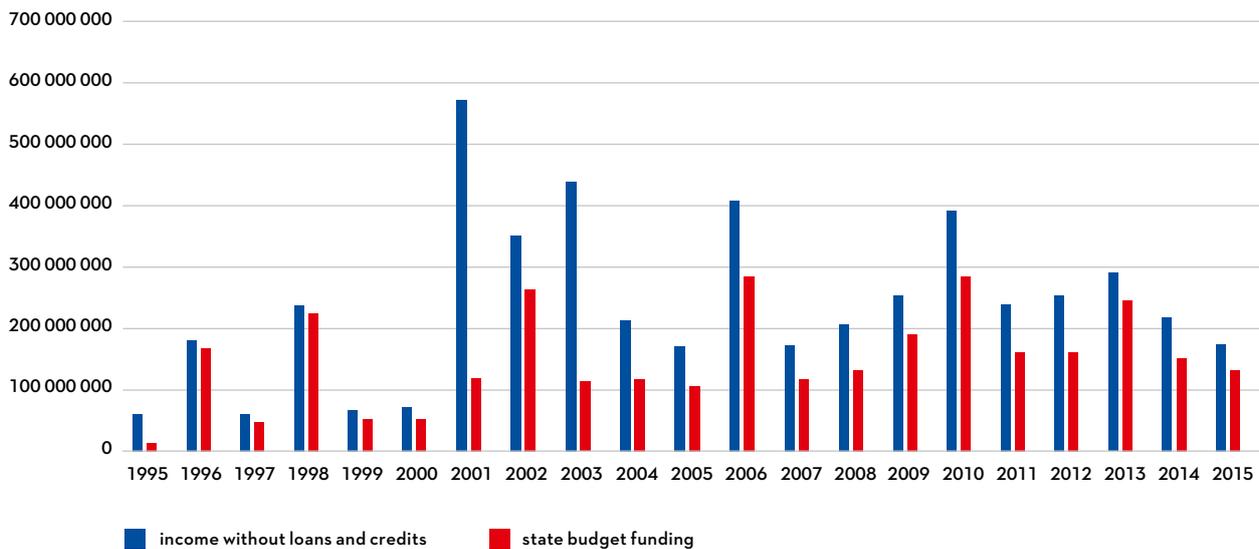
³ For example, the ČSSD membership fee revenues are approximately the same as those of the KSČM, even though membership of the KSČM is about twice as high as of the ČSSD. The ČSSD's membership fee revenues are approximately four times larger than those of the Green Party. The ČSSD currently receives from its members an amount more than twice as large as that received by its former main rival, the Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, ODS). On the other hand, even now, at the time of its greatest decline, the ODS receives several times more than the ČSSD in gifts (Czech right wing parties constantly receive significantly more money in gifts compared to left wing parties, even when they are in opposition, as currently).

Figure 1: Income and expenditure of the ČSSD in 1995-2015



Source: Annual financial reports of the ČSSD (1995-2015). The difference between “total income” and the “income not including loans and credits” is the debt that the ČSSD has. The high 2001 and 2003 incomes are the result of accounting for restitution of property that was the legacy of the historical social democrat party.

Figure 2: The share of state budget funding in the ČSSD’s income (without loans and credits) in 1995-2015



Source: Annual financial reports of the ČSSD (1995-2015). The difference between “total income” and “income without loans and credits” is the debt that the ČSSD has.

The ČSSD’s current main rival, the centre-right movement called ANO 2011, has a much greater financial capacity than the ČSSD. Although in the case of ANO 2011 state budget funding is also the main source of income, the movement further benefits from the financial backing of its “owner”, the billionaire Andrej Babiš. This is also one of the reasons why ANO 2011 currently runs costly election campaigns based on the principles of political marketing to a much greater extent than the ČSSD. After all, ANO 2011 works with the same foreign marketing companies and uses the same know-how that the ČSSD used to have in 2006-10. It is not possible yet to estimate what impact the newly-adopted law on the funding of political parties, in force from 2017, will

have in this respect. The spending limits established in the law may reduce the clout of financially powerful parties, thus diminishing the advantage of ANO 2011 over the ČSSD.⁴ On the other hand, even under the old, pre-2017 regulations some election expenses were hidden. It is therefore possible that capital will continue to play a powerful role; just the share of hidden expenses will rise. Theoretically, the ČSSD could also meet this challenge by pursuing the same strategy, i.e. inflating hidden expenses. Even without any legal constraints on election spending, however, the ČSSD can only afford very costly campaigns if it takes out massive loans, or through a comparatively massive influx of private money, i.e. gifts from individuals. The former scenario is possible; the latter one is not very likely and, moreover, it would necessarily pose questions about the private donors' relations with and expectations of the party. In either case, the use of large amounts of money for campaigns based on political marketing seems highly risky. On the other hand, the ČSSD might still take this path, if it is unable to rely in its campaigns on a sufficiently active membership base.

Membership⁵

The socio-demographic profile of the ČSSD membership does not significantly diverge from the memberships of other contemporary political parties in general⁶ and it shows that various problems are not specific to the Czech Republic's situation, but are symptomatic of the role of political parties in a present-day liberal democracy.

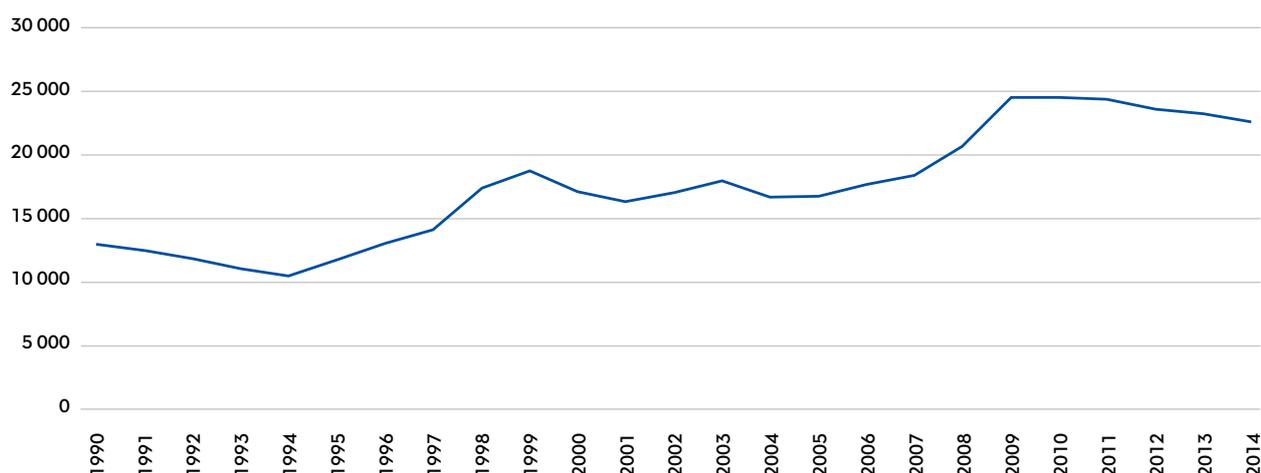
The ČSSD is one of the larger Czech political parties. There is a general tendency towards the levelling of membership numbers across the political parties in the Czech Republic, especially as a consequence of the persistent decline in the memberships of the two largest parties, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) and Christian Democratic Union - People's Party (KDU-ČSL). With its approximately 22 000 members, the ČSSD is the third largest party in the Czech Republic. The KDU-ČSL has sunk to the 20 000-30 000 category, and the KSČM to the 40 000-50 000 category. The memberships of the other parties are mostly below 10 000, with only the right wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS) still oscillating around 15 000. ANO 2011, currently the ČSSD's main rival, has fewer than 3000 members. The total share of party members in the voting-entitled population is relatively low in the Czech Republic and it continues to drop. In this respect, however, the Czech Republic does not significantly differ from the general European trend. Still, the country ranks in the bottom half of European countries in this respect (comparable to the United Kingdom or France, for example).

4 The limit set by the new law for elections to the lower chamber (House of Deputies) is 90 million Czech crowns (approximately 3,3 million Euro). In the 2013 election, the ČSSD spent approximately 88 million in direct election costs, ANO 2011 approximately 120 million in direct election costs, and the ODS approximately 98 million in direct election costs. In the 2006-2010 period, when political marketing was used massively by the ČSSD, its election expenses in an election year (House of Deputies election) exceeded 250 million.

5 The data on ČSSD membership (number, age, gender structure, regional structure) is mostly based on the information stated in the party congress documents (data available up to 2014). The data relating membership figures to the organisational structure are based on ČSSD statutes, as well as ČSSD election regulations. The data relating the membership figures to the administrative division of the Czech Republic are based on Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ) data.

6 Van Haute, Emilie; Gauja, Anika ed.: *Party Members and Activists*, London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

Figure 3: The number of members of the ČSSD in 1990-2014



Source: Official documents from the ČSSD party congresses (1990-2015), the figure always as of the 31st December of the respective year.

Although the ČSSD has shown a slight rise in the number of members since the 1990s it is a very modest increase, interrupted by temporary slight declines. Since its culmination in 2010 it has decreased moderately but consistently. Moreover, the data on the numbers of members, especially those signalling the sharper curve of the pre-2010 increase, must be viewed with caution. Part of this growth was merely virtual (“fictive members”, a typical example being the Ústecký region in north Bohemia in 2008-2009). More plausibly, the ČSSD membership has been showing long term stagnation at a figure of around 20 000. Internal party sources show that the duration of party membership is decreasing and that there is a relatively high fluctuation in membership, which is not solely caused by natural generational change.

The vast majority of the party members are people of middle-aged or older categories (the 40+ group accounts for approximately three quarters of the ČSSD membership). Disregarding the 80+ category, the least represented age category in the ČSSD is people younger than 30.

A significant majority of the party members are men, even though the share of women has grown slightly over the last fifteen years. In the last six years, women have formed approximately 35 per cent of the ČSSD membership. The ČSSD statutes requires all party bodies to have a certain share of representation for women, seniors and young people below 30. The representation of women and young people is explicitly defined for some bodies: a minimum of one out of the five top leadership members (vice chair/women) must be a woman; a minimum of three out of the ten members of the presidium elected by the central executive committee must be women; of the central executive committee members, the regional executive committee members, as well as of the conference delegates and congress delegates, a minimum of 25 per cent must be women, while 10 per cent must be young people below 30. In the bodies at the central and regional level of the party these rules are usually adhered to⁷, although with open reluctance, especially in the case of the provisions for women. These rules are also frequently used in tactical battles between various intra-party factions. The situation at the lower levels is rather difficult to assess. An intra-party referendum decided that from 2014, the minority gender (currently women) must represent at least 40 per cent of candidates the parliamentary and regional election party lists. The vote on this issue was particularly narrow in the referendum (52 per cent in favour, 48 per cent against).

7 In 2009-2011, nevertheless, the position of vice chairwoman remained vacant due to the failure to elect a woman. Anyway, not more than one, “obligatory”, vice chairwoman is usually elected; only in the current period after the 2015 congress have there been two vice chairwoman (which, however, has more to do with the structure of the current party leader supporters, rather than reflecting any change in the membership’s attitude to gender issues).

The ČSSD membership is distributed all over the Czech Republic's territory, although the party is very far from having a local organisation in every municipality. On the other hand, all other Czech parties are at least as far from this as the Social Democrats. The ČSSD is capable of forming party lists with exclusively its own members only in national and regional elections, not in the municipal elections. Only 8-10 per cent of candidates in the municipal elections run on the ČSSD party lists. Approximately half of these candidates are not even party members. Despite this, the ČSSD still ranks highly in this regard compared to the other Czech parties.⁸

In absolute numbers, ČSSD membership is largest in the following regions: Jihomoravský (South Moravia), Moravskoslezský (located in northern Moravia and Silesia), Praha (Prague), Středočeský (Central Bohemia) and Ústecký (located in north-western Bohemia). In terms of the total number of entitled voters in a region,⁹ the ranking is quite different: Ústecký, Jihomoravský, Praha + Liberecký (located in north Bohemia), Moravskoslezský, Středočeský + Karlovarský (followed by Plzeňský, Pardubický, Vysočina, Olomoucký, Zlínský, Jihočeský and Královehradecký).

If we compare the relative strength of the membership in regions to their election performance (based on the 2013 House of Deputies election but showing a large degree of stability over time) there is definitely no direct proportionality, not even any obvious correlation. Some regions with a relatively large membership, like Liberecký and Praha, are long-term weak points for the party electorally. The Ústecký region witnessed a significant decline in electoral support for the ČSSD in 2013. On the other hand, several electoral strongholds may be found among the regions with smaller memberships, such as the Vysočina, Olomoucký and Zlínský regions. Over the long term, the Moravskoslezský region has been the party's greatest electoral stronghold. Overall, the ČSSD performs better in Moravian regions¹⁰ (and until 2010 also in northern and north-western Bohemia).

Generally speaking, the size of the membership does not seem to be a significant factor electorally, no matter how active the members are during campaigns. Moreover, internal ČSSD analyses show that members who do not run in elections themselves, or who are not asked directly to take part in the campaign, are not very active. The most typical form of activity is attendance at their own party's electoral rallies.

If, in the concept of the mass party and liberal democracy's legitimising myth, a party's membership serves as a broad bridge connecting the party with society, then in the case of the ČSSD (and not only the ČSSD) this bridge has narrowed substantially. The membership is not a robust anchor of the party in society any more, even though a weakened link between the membership and the party's electoral core still exists. The membership plays very little role in running the election campaigns and its significance as a source of financial income has also sunk considerably (although at times of crisis, it may resume part of this latter role temporarily). In a very limited way, the membership serves for the recruitment of party officials, while perhaps its most important function is the reproduction of the legitimising myth within the party.

Organisational structure

The ČSSD is facing various types of problems that are characteristic of this type of organisation. These problems cannot be resolved without a fundamental change in the organisational arrangement. Such a change would, nevertheless, alter significantly some elementary functions of the organisation.

Firstly, in the system of representative democracy or liberal democracy a political party is expected to possess both representative functions (democratic integration, interest aggregation and representation) and proce-

⁸ Data on ČSSD membership from 2014 and data on the 2014 municipal election have been used for the calculation.

⁹ Data on ČSSD membership from 2014 and data on the 2013 House of Deputies election (the total numbers of entitled voters) used for the calculation.

¹⁰ A question that cannot now be answered is whether the dramatic weakening of the ČSSD's Moravian strongholds in the 2016 second order elections (regional and senate, which took place simultaneously) will prove to be a continuous trend.

dural functions (organisation of the government and policy-making). As a consequence of this, the ČSSD is constantly exposed to a tension between responsiveness and responsibility, or in other words, between being a government “by the people” and “for the people”.¹¹ It is increasingly complicated to be both at the same time, although this is precisely what the liberal democracy’s legitimising myth assumes.

Secondly, the ČSSD is – from the formal, organisational perspective – a mass political party. That means an organisation with hierarchical and territorial branches¹², in which power derives formally from the will of the membership base, being delegated, by means of a system of elections, from the lowest local level up to the regional level and up again to the highest national level. The party membership is precisely defined and associated with a number of rights and obligations that clearly distinguish a party member from a non-member. The mass party organisational form provides an additional reason for the tension between the two above-mentioned sets of goals (democratic representation of the membership and its participation in decision-making, versus maximum efficiency in performing various kinds of party activities, from running election campaigns to policy-making). A mass party is like a representative democracy on a small scale: to achieve one type of goal it is often necessary to use means that limit the achievement of the other. This is reflected especially in the latent conflict between the “party in public office” and the “party on the ground”. Another fact is that no matter how the ČSSD remains, formally and organisationally, a mass political party, it is actually losing, or even has lost, many of its mass party characteristics. After all, the same is true of most other political parties in general.¹³ The most significant change is the decrease in the membership size, although this affects almost all relevant political parties – particularly social democratic ones.

Thirdly, the ČSSD as an organisation is constantly faced with the cleavage of the organisational centre vs. organizational periphery (national party headquarters vs. regions). Until the mid-2000s, centre-periphery relations in the ČSSD were asymmetrically balanced in favour of the centre. This disequilibrium was a matter of fact, not something with a formal basis. After the 2008 regional election, which saw a landslide victory for the ČSSD, the situation started to change. Lower level organisations, in particular regional ones, amplified the intensity of their regional interests and came to possess much greater power resources. As a consequence of this, conflicts between regions and the centre became more frequent and intense. On the national level, represented by the centre, the ČSSD was in opposition during this period. Its resources were thus rather limited. This was further aggravated by the economic impacts of costly election campaigns combined with a poor election outcome in the 2010 House of Deputies election. On the other hand, the regional level saw different dynamics. The 2012 regional election brought losses for the ČSSD compared to the unprecedented 2008 performance. Still, the ČSSD continued to govern in almost every region, in regional coalitions. On the national level, the ČSSD remained in opposition until 2013, and even in that election its House of Deputies election victory was much more modest than expected. The centre-periphery relationship thus became symmetric after 2008 – despite the centre’s efforts to maintain or even solidify the current model – and it can therefore be characterised as a stratarchy rather than a hierarchy. Again, this is not so much an issue of form as a matter of fact. The 2014 intra-party referendum brought some change into this arrangement, deciding, inter alia, that the final composition of party lists in all types of elections except for those to the European Parliament must be decided upon by all the party members in the respective electoral district. The specific implementation was, however, a matter of agreement between the centre and regions at the 2015 party congress, and it was clearly a compromise. The result is thus more intensive negotiations on the regional level rather than any change in the centre-periphery relationship.

11 Mair, Peter: *Representative versus Responsible Government* MPIfG Working Paper 09/8; Mair, Peter. The Challenge to Party Government, *West European Politics* 31(1-2), p. 211-234.

12 The membership structure is bottom-up: local organisations – regional organisations – central organisation (the central executive committee, the presidium, the chairman and vice chair/wo/men, a party congress every 2 years). The bureaucratic structure is top-down: the party apparatus.

13 Krouwel, Andre: *Party Transformation in European Democracies*, New York: State University of New York, 2012.

Personal cleavages

Only one clear and long-term stable personal cleavage exists within the ČSSD: the cleavage related to Miloš Zeman, the former leader (chairman) of the ČSSD (1993-2001), former Prime Minister for the party (1998-2002) and currently the President of the Czech Republic (since 2013).¹⁴ Zeman is a political player who follows his own political interests and in so doing tries to influence the ČSSD's internal party life, as well as the ČSSD's actions vis a vis other players. Sometimes he does so directly¹⁵, at other times indirectly.¹⁶ Zeman is also used, however, as a symbol and a label in ČSSD internal party conflicts, with both positive and negative connotations. Zeman provides symbolical patronage for some important players in the ČSSD, and some other internal party players refer to him and his support. Still, there is no stable, coherent and programmatically defined "Zemanite" faction in the ČSSD which could aspire to be an ideological or organisational alternative. The symbolically-charged name "Zeman" rather serves to overlap, and at times intensify, some other intra-party cleavages, both structural and personal (concerning, for example, the hierarchy of the party's goals, the centre-periphery relations, some time-specific tactical issues, as well as purely personal animosities, individual interest conflicts etc.)

This cleavage is intensified by the fact that Zeman became the Czech President¹⁷ and at times he supports various of the ČSSD's rivals. In 2010-13 he clearly stood behind a party, now irrelevant, that even carried his name. The left wing Party of Citizens' Rights (Zemanites), SPO(Z), was a direct rival to the ČSSD. Before the 2013 election the SPO(Z) was widely predicted to become a minor but relevant party, a prediction that completely failed to materialise. Yet, before the 2013 election revealed the SPO(Z)'s real support, it had served as a career and political alternative for some Social Democrats, especially at the time of the Zeman-influenced caretaker cabinet in 2013. Since that year Miloš Zeman has focused increasingly on ANO2011 in seeking to push his political interests. After all, this movement has also partly overtaken the role of a political and career alternative to ČSSD.¹⁸

The SPO(Z) was probably never likely to replace, or even challenge, the ČSSD in the Czech party system. Along with another entirely marginal party called Národní socialisté/Lev21 (National Socialists/Lion21), also a ČSSD splinter group, it illustrates, however, the features of a large part of the social democratic membership, whose conservative character is a constraint to any ČSSD leader in foreseeable future.¹⁹

Networking and cooperation within the Czech Republic

Various types of interest organisations and groups are more or less officially connected to the ČSSD (leaving aside some interest organisations that are connected to the ČSSD in a purely non-official capacity, pursuing their economic interests through the ČSSD):

14 This cleavage has existed at least since the moment in 1993 when Miloš Zeman became the ČSSD chairman. It became even stronger after he left the position of party chairman in 2001, as well as the position of Prime Minister in 2002 to run for president unsuccessfully in 2003. Zeman left the ČSSD in 2007.

15 His secret meeting with some high ranking ČSSD officials, led by the then first vice chairman Michal Hašek, immediately after the 2013 House of Deputies election is an example of this. After the meeting, there was a failed attempt by the Hašek-led faction to topple party chairman Bohuslav Sobotka and isolate him from the negotiations on forming the new government.

16 E.g. his critical statements about all his successors in the post of ČSSD chairman; his sharp attacks, heavily covered by the media, on Bohuslav Sobotka concerning, for example, the refugee crisis, and his almost constant minor attacks on the culturally liberal faction in the ČSSD, one of the groups supporting Bohuslav Sobotka within the party.

17 Not elected, obviously, as the ČSSD candidate but supported publicly, even in the first round, by various social democrats against the official ČSSD candidate whom he particularly dislikes. Before the second round, the ČSSD officially pledged its support to Zeman but, again, with some dissenting voices.

18 E.g., the first vice chairman of ANO 2011 and its House of Deputies MP group leader is Jaroslav Faltýnek, in 1998-2012 a ČSSD member and regional politician.

19 On socio-economic issues, the ČSSD and the SPO(Z) do not differ significantly, while NS/Lev21 does not even have an elaborate programme and, unlike the ČSSD and the SPO(Z), does not directly refer to the social democratic tradition. Compared to the ČSSD, both the SPO(Z) and NS/Lev21 are even more conservative culturally (e.g. on issues such as the environment, sexual minorities and multiculturalism), currently even xenophobic. In the 2016 regional election, the SPO(Z) formed an electoral coalition with the right wing populist Party of Direct Democracy (SPD) led by Tomio Okamura, the same man who had run successfully on an anti-establishment, pro-direct democracy and anti-immigrant platform in the 2013 House of Deputies election and who often verbally supports Miloš Zeman; as for NS/Lev21, it even joined forces with a neo-Nazi group called Workers' Party of Social Justice (DSSS). Both SPO(Z) and NS/Lev21 represent, in fact, one of the faces of the ČSSD membership.

1) Organisations that are remnants of the collateral organisations of the ČSSD's historical predecessors and that are typical of all social democratic parties. Some of them are currently integral parts of the ČSSD, although most of them are autonomous. Some of them possess various institutional privileges within the party (e.g. a consultative voice in top party bodies etc.). These are the Young Social Democrats (Mladí sociální demokraté) representing youth²⁰, Social Democratic Women (Sociálně demokratické ženy)²¹, Seniors' Club (Klub seniorů) representing ČSSD members aged over 60, the Masaryk Democratic Academy (Masarykova demokratická akademie, MDA) which is a cultural-educational institution²² that has recently been focusing increasingly on programme issues, and the Association of Workers' Sports Unions (Svaz dělnických tělocvičných jednot). Currently, the MDA seems to have the greatest potential for further development, since as a result of the amended law on political parties it might transform itself into a political foundation comparable to the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). This could at least partly balance the current clear domination of right wing parties in this type of institution, as they have significantly greater resources nowadays than the MDA.

2) Some relationships between minor associations and groups and the ČSSD could be labelled as "alliances of affection". Such groups, both formal and informal, are "spiritually" allied to the ČSSD, focusing mostly on single issues and reflecting the party's wide variety of opinion: the Orange Club (Oranžový klub) focusing on gender issues, the Idealists (Idealisté), an environmental platform called Rampion (Zvonečník), the Christian-social platform and the European platform. Their members are mostly, though not solely, ČSSD members.

Some of the above-mentioned groups (both under type 1 and 2) have a fairly strong influence within the party, particularly as the result of personal linkages and efficient tactics or to institutional privileges. These groups are, however, fairly small and their influence in the wider public sphere is currently not very strong.

3) A movement of party supporters called the Friends of Social Democracy (Přátele sociální demokracie) is situated on the boundary between the organisational components of the party and interest groups. The original intention was an attempt to re/construct the Social Democrat social and cultural milieu. It actually came into being only after right wing rivals successfully implemented the same idea, and was soon reduced to a mere political marketing instrument of the party. Since political marketing was abandoned in 2010, this movement has gradually weakened, and in recent years it has been virtually inactive. Even at its peak, however, it never exceeded 2000 members and it did not have any significant impact on the public sphere.

4) There are also interest organisations in the public space whose relationship to the ČSSD could be classified as an "alliance by choice". They cooperate with the party but their interest is different from the interest of the party. They are often personally linked to the ČSSD (the informal personal aspect plays a key role in this case, although the connections at times become institutionalised, namely at the party congresses): e.g., the Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions (Českomoravská konfederace odborových svazů, ČMKOS), the Association of Tenants of the Czech Republic (Sdružení nájemníků ČR, SON), the Union of Patients (Svaz pacientů), the Union of Bohemian and Moravian Housing Cooperatives (Svaz českých a moravských bytových družstev), as well as a wide variety of agrarian sector-related interest groups (hunters, gardeners, beekeepers, animal breeders, etc.).

Of all interest organisations, ČMKOS, i.e. the largest Czech trade union confederation, has the most privileged position vis a vis the ČSSD. The ČMKOS is a self-standing union confederation, independent of the party and emphasising since the early 1990s that it represents employees' interests across the political spectrum, rather than any specific political party interests. At the same time, however, the ČMKOS has openly declared, since

20 Young European Socialists member.

21 PES Women member.

22 It co-organises, inter alia, the Czecho-Slovak Academy of Social Democracy (Akademie sociální demokracie), one of the few forms of cooperation between Visegrád social democratic parties cooperation in the areas of programme and human resources.

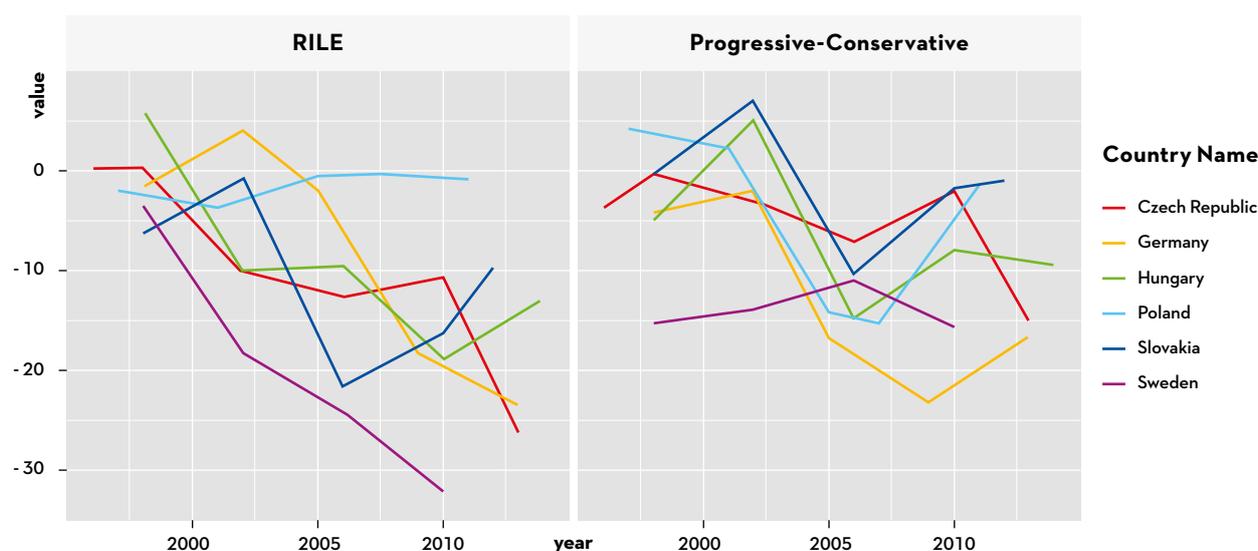
the early 1990s, the proximity of its own interests to those of the ČSSD, stressing the special relationship with the ČSSD. Since the early 1990s, it has also openly asked its members to support the ČSSD. Institutionally, though, ČMKOS is not in any way linked to the ČSSD. However, some personal links do exist (ČMKOS leaders regularly run on the ČSSD party lists and represent the party in both chambers of the Czech Parliament). The ČSSD also regards the trade union confederation as a privileged partner. Since the early 1990s, it has promoted the idea that trade unions should play a stronger role in economic and social policy-making. Social democratic governments actually did strengthen the functions of the tripartite/social dialogue. Although a fairly large ČSSD-ČMKOS membership overlap is generally assumed, the actual degree of the interlinkages between the ČSSD and the ČMKOS membership bases is not known. The cooperation between the ČSSD and ČMKOS mostly takes place on the level of expertise (e.g., the party work commissions, the exchange of various analytical materials, direct trade union participation in law-making, especially when the ČSSD is in government).

5) In the past decade, the ČSSD has managed only once to establish a certain form of cooperation with a relevant social movement, namely with ProAlt in 2010-13. This cooperation was limited, however, by cautiousness on both sides. ProAlt emerged in 2010 as a movement of resistance against the neoliberal policies of the right wing government, and it represented mostly the alternative left (anarchists, etc.) and the culturally liberal left (which at the same time supported the traditional socio-economic postulates of social democracy). It was not a genuinely mass movement, but it was able to establish itself as one of the most significant public opponents of the government. As such, it did not have any ambition to run in elections itself. After the fall of the right wing government in 2013, the movement gradually dissolved in a more or less controlled way. Its legacy was a relatively broad network of people who are still publicly active and who openly declare themselves to be left wing. As far as the ČSSD as an organisation is concerned, the most important effect of the cooperation was probably that some ProAlt activists started to be active within the ČSSD as well. These people brought to the ČSSD their own activist know-how, even though it could not be developed very much in the context of the party's relatively rigid institutional structure of the party. The fairly conservative profile of the ČSSD membership has been another limiting factor.

2 Programme, values and policies of the ČSSD

In terms of its programme the ČSSD belongs to the social democratic party family. Compared to the other Visegrád countries, it stands more clearly on the left. It is also the only social democratic party in the Visegrád group to have been consistently left-wing over the long term, more comparable to the social democratic parties in Germany or Sweden. It is also evident, looking at the long-term perspective, that the programme profile of the Visegrád social democrats is more conservative in comparison to the German and Swedish ones. It was only after 2010, and more markedly after 2013, that the ČSSD moved along the progressive - conservative axis to stand closer to its German and Swedish partners rather than the Visegrád ones.

Figure 4: a comparison of the ČSSD's and other social democratic parties' positions on the right-left axis and the progressive – conservative axis



Source: Visualization by the Party Manifesto Project
<https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/information/documents/visualizations> (accessed 31st January 2017).

A qualitative content and discursive analysis would require more time. Similarly, it has not been possible to identify through systematic research how the membership actually understands the party programme. The following theses concerning the programme profile are thus based on purely anecdotal evidence and must be therefore understood as provisional.

Firstly, with regard to the left-right axis, it may be assumed that the concept of the welfare state is a stable, even a key part of the party's programme, as well as of the party members' political thinking. Both in the programme and – even more clearly – in the mindset of members, this welfare state is residual rather than universal. This is very well illustrated by the strong emphasis on “help for those in need” as a specific variant of the “deserving poor”. On the other hand, the policies of actual social democratic governments have been closer to the universal welfare state model.

Secondly, at least in the way they understand their own party's programme, a significant part of the membership is inclined to take a national-social perspective – which does not have as strongly negative connotations in the Czech context as it has in Germany, for example – rather than a civic/social or even an international perspective. Again, however, the policies of actual social democratic governments have corresponded more to the latter type.

Thirdly, the opinion profile of the membership is not identical to the programme profile of the party. This is particularly true of the progressive-conservative axis: a large part of the ČSSD is much more conservative

than the actual party programme. The recent debates on migration showed this clearly. Further examples of this include party members' conservative opinions on the adoption of children by homosexual couples, gender issues, issues related to ethnic minorities (e.g. Roma) and religious minorities (in the context of migration this refers in particular to Muslims, no matter how negligible their number in the Czech Republic, as well as their institutional status²³). This all poses limits to the possibility of cooperation with the Green Party and the "new social movements". Any impulses for cooperation on the part of the Social Democrats usually come from the party's centre, i.e. from the party leaders, rather than from regional leaders or the membership base. Since 2013 the ČSSD has been in government and the ČSSD leader (chairman) is the Prime Minister. The ČSSD managed to negotiate a coalition agreement which is very close to the party's own programme. This was partly caused by the lack of preparedness of the second most powerful coalition partner, ANO 2011, which did not have and still does not have its own consistent programmatic vision. The ANO 2011 election programme for the 2013 House of Deputies election was largely inspired by the ČSSD programme. On the socio-economic axis, the only significant difference concerned tax. Moreover, ANO 2011 also lacked the people and expertise to help with the negotiations. For ANO 2011 this was not a major problem, though, as the movement profiles itself primarily in terms of anti-establishment sentiment, and much less on issues of substance. Thus far the ČSSD seems to have been fairly successful in implementing its programme. Between 2008 and 2016, the ČSSD also governed at regional level.²⁴ The degree of coherence between the programmes pursued at the national and regional levels cannot be evaluated without a thorough analysis that is beyond the scope of this paper. There is also no research available in the Czech Republic that might serve as a basis for such an analysis.

Compared to other Czech parties, the ČSSD has a relatively effective system of generating the expertise needed for policy-making. This means that the party is able to articulate a more or less knowledgeable position on an issue and in some cases can even be a competitive alternative to the public administration (e.g. pension reform). Fundamental to this is the system of expert commissions (at the central level, but on a smaller scale also at the regional level), complemented by experimental policy-making through the use of Green and Orange Papers (the latter roughly equivalent to White Papers) with the participation of the wider public and members' policy-making forums. Considering the great significance that policy-making has for a political party, the ČSSD's expertise background seems fairly fragile (for example, the expert commissions are formed on an entirely voluntary basis, the paid supporting staff carries out purely technical tasks, many of the commissions depend on the activity of several long-term members, etc.).

²³ We refer to "religious minorities" in general, though, since even Catholicism – by far the strongest and most institutionalised religion – has a clear minority status in both the Czech Republic and the ČSSD.

²⁴ Mostly in coalitions, but in the great majority of regions. After the 2016 regional election the ČSSD continues to co-govern in 9 out of a total of 13 regions (leaving aside Prague, which is both a region and a municipality) – in 5 of them as the senior coalition partner, in 3 of these bypassing the regional winner, ANO 2011.

3 The ČSSD in the context of the Czech party system

The long-term party system context

For most of the independent Czech Republic's existence, the main features of the Czech party system were its stable four-party core and bipolar format, both being most strongly evident in 1996-2010. Three out of the four core parties were historical parties and one of them, indeed the strongest one, was the Social Democratic Party. In the above-mentioned period, the Czech party system displayed remarkable stability, not only by "post-communist" Central and East European standards, but even compared to consolidated West European liberal democracies. The system's dominant axis was a left-right conflict based primarily on socio-economic issues, the ČSSD representing the main force on the left side of the spectrum.

Since 2010 – and much more dynamically since 2013 – the system has been undergoing some significant changes, discussed in detail in the chapter below. The ČSSD was also a significant actor in the pre-1996 period, but this was in the conditions of an early post-democratic transition country undergoing democratic consolidation, whose system was only just crystallising and forming. This initial period is discussed briefly in this chapter below.

In the broader historical perspective, the social democrats were one of the main pro-republic (pro-system) political forces in the inter-war First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938). Except for formally nonpartisan caretaker cabinets and the right wing 1926-29 coalition, it constantly participated in governing coalitions. Previously, under Austria-Hungary, it had also been a significant political force, but one that was only gradually moving forward and integrating into the system. An indispensable part of this integration consisted of efforts to change fundamentally a system which was essentially closed, elitist, with a highly exclusivist suffrage (at least before 1907) based on the census and curial electoral system and, finally, with an enormous deficit in executive power accountability. The social democratic party was an anti-system force at that time and was treated as such (e.g. "electoral cartels" or i.e. coalitions were formed against it in the two-round electoral system used for the Austrian Imperial Council).

The activities of the social democratic party in Czechoslovakia were forcefully interrupted by the merger with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) in 1948, although the social democrats were active in exile for the whole period of the non-democratic regime. After the restoration of competitive democratic politics in Czechoslovakia, in the 1990 federal election the social democrats ended up just below the 5% legal threshold for entering parliament, but went on to become a relevant though minor player in the next, 1992 election (achieving 6.5 per cent of the vote in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia).

The 1992-1996 parliamentary term, which spanned two different states, the Czechoslovak Federative Republic and the Czech Republic, is characterised by a high degree of party fragmentation, intra-party instability, a considerable degree of movement by deputies across parliamentary factions and overall redistribution of political forces – logical symptoms of crystallisation and the gradual consolidation of an emerging competitive multi-party system. This chaos was particularly characteristic of the left-centre sector of the spectrum, where the ČSSD belonged and which was generally overloaded with groups like the Liberal Social Union (LSU)²⁵, the Movement for Self-Governing Democracy – Association for Moravia and Silesia (HSD-SMS)²⁶, as well as various splinter groups that left the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) after the conservative faction stopped an attempt at a social democratic mutation in Polish or Hungarian style (or also Slovak, Lithuanian, Bulgarian, Romanian, etc.). As far as extra-parliamentary but influential groups are concerned, the

²⁵ The LSU was a coalition of the Czechoslovak Socialist Party, the Green Party and the Rural Party.

²⁶ The HSD-SMS was a Moravist movement, boosted by the dramatic discussions about the future arrangement of the Czechoslovak federation. Under a shorter name (HSD), it also managed to be elected (as one out of four groups only in the Czech part) in 1990.

Civic Movement (OH) falls into the same left-centre sector²⁷. This movement deserves a mention because the vast majority of its elite joined, the social democrats sooner or later, one of the examples being Miloš Zeman. Not least, this plural centre-left had to compete for part of its electorate with the increasingly conservative Communists (KSČM) and populist xenophobic Republicans (SPR-RSČ).

The ČSSD emerged as the winner out of this dynamic ferment on the overcrowded centre-left – partly because it managed, under Miloš Zeman’s leadership, to capture much of the protest and populist potential that was strongly present in a society polarised by political, economic and social transformation and frustrated by the partition of Czechoslovakia. In the late 1990s, this potential was further compounded by the economic crisis of the time. Miloš Zeman distanced himself in a verbally radical way from the transformation, describing it as an essentially criminal project characterised by massive pilferage, corruption and what became known as “tunnelling”.²⁸ Approximately one year after he became the party leader in 1993, i.e. in the middle of the 1992-1996 parliamentary term, the polls started to show a consistent tendency for the ČSSD to rise as the major opposition force against the Václav Klaus-led Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, ODS) and his right wing governing coalition (ODS, KDS, ODA, KDU-ČSL). Or, at least, these polls suggested that the Social Democrats were becoming the main rivals of the Communists in struggling for this role. In other words, the once chaotic centre-left sector was becoming much more structured and organised.²⁹ The 1996 House of Deputies election showed a clearly asymmetric outcome of the struggle between the ČSSD and the KSČM for the opposition leadership (the ČSSD gaining 26 per cent of the vote to the KSČM’s 10 per cent), and also showed that there was space in the opposition sector for only one more group: the radically anti-system Republicans (approximately 8 per cent of the vote).

The 1996 election marks the beginning of the period in which one feature was constantly valid: the ČSSD was one of the two main political forces in the country. This constant feature seems to have been undermined by new trends after 2010 and especially 2013; nevertheless, the outcome of these trends is still open.

Taking a closer look at the stable 1996-2010 period, it is notable that the ČSSD was the winning party for most of the period, namely 1998-2006.³⁰ This assertion holds true, of course, for elections to the lower chamber (House of Deputies) on which our analysis is focused and which represented at that time – until direct presidential elections were introduced in 2012 – the only first-order electoral arena. In the other arenas (senate, regional, municipal, European Parliament) the ČSSD typically ended up defeated. These were often dramatic losses with a considerable impact on intra-party stability, resulting in changes in the party (and country) leadership, such as the replacement of Vladimír Špidla by Stanislav Gross in 2004.

Another typical feature was that the victory margin, i.e. the gap between the winning ČSSD and the runner-up, the right wing ODS, was always very narrow (indeed, this is true even beyond the stability period,

27 The OH, the left wing faction of the Civic Forum (OF, Občanské fórum), absorbing its most famous dissidents, narrowly failed to meet the 5% legal threshold in the 1992 federal election. It thus ended up defeated by Václav Klaus both in intra-party terms (the previous struggle for the OF) and electorally (the struggle for the general direction of the social, political and economic transformation).

28 A strong populist element was present in this radical critique, although it is to be noted here that we do not use the term populism as a universal delegitimising label (as it is often used in the Czech discourse) but as a legitimate strategy in democratic politics, or as its indispensable part resulting from the constant tension between the liberal-constitutionalist and democratic-popular aspect of democracy. An analogy may be drawn between Zeman and his Slovak political friend Robert Fico, both in their general tendency to use populist style and strategies, and, more specifically, in the motif of a radical critique of economic reform (in Fico’s case against the neoliberal policies of the second Dzurinda cabinet, 2002-2006). This was of a similarly formative significance for Fico’s Smer-Social Democracy as was Zeman’s radical turn in the 1990s for the ČSSD.

29 This was accompanied by explicit calls from Miloš Zeman to the other opposition parties’ followers to concentrate their support in the hands of the ascending dominant opposition force. To the Communists, he used a paraphrase of the inter-war social democratic leader Hampl and his famous call “boys, home from the hike”. Of the Republicans he said that they were “social democrats gone wild”.

30 The ČSSD was also nominally victorious, albeit narrowly, in the 2010 election. However, a right wing majority government coalition was formed, bypassing the election winner. An even narrower electoral victory was achieved by the ČSSD in the 2013 election. This time, however, the social democrats formed the government.

i.e. the 2010 and 2013 elections³¹). Conversely, the 1996 and 2006 elections were characterised by a narrow margin between the ODS and the ČSSD. Another constant feature of the 1996-2010 period was the relatively low rate of voter volatility, which went hand in hand with the overall stability of the four-member core of the five-member party system.

One important qualification should be mentioned, though, as far as the stability of the period is concerned. The stability in question was mostly stability of format, and of the persistent identity of the individual parties as the units of the system. In terms of the things that make a party system a genuine system, i.e., to borrow Sartori's terms, the mechanics, coalition patterns, the pattern of interactions between the parties³², the system was clearly not stable by a long way. In short, the parties in the country were stable, but the way in which they governed was not. In terms of the mechanics and coalition patterns, three important and interrelated constant features held true. First, one of the relevant parties³³, the KSČM, was (and still is) systematically excluded from coalitions on the national executive level. Second, this means that the governing coalitions have always had a centripetal layout: the government has always been formed by one of the larger parties (the ČSSD or the ODS), and always with two minor centre-right parties, one of which has usually been the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL). The "opposition agreement" period of 1998-2002 was an exception. During this period, the ČSSD formed a single-party minority government based on an explicit and defined toleration agreement with the ODS³⁴. Thirdly, the government coalitions almost always displayed chronic fragility. They had very narrow majorities in the House of Deputies (in 2002-2006 the government had the narrowest possible majority, 101 seats out of 200, while in 2006-2010 it had a 102-seat majority but this included two deputies who were elected as social democrats but who later defected). Another source of instability were the frequent and destructive intra-coalition conflicts (although the most conflict-ridden coalition was, ironically, the numerically most robust one, the right wing coalition of 2010-13).

At least a third of the features actually reveal an element of the system instability. The same applies, however, to the second feature, i.e. the alliance patterns. In terms of innovative coalition formulas, the 1996-2010 period scored very high. Every parliamentary term saw a different model. The 1996-1997 minority right wing (right-centre) coalition was followed, after a caretaker cabinet intermezzo,³⁵ by the right-left format of the 1998-2002 opposition agreement (although this was not, we should stress once again, a government coalition). This was replaced in 2002-2006 by a left-centre³⁶ coalition formula (ČSSD, KDU-ČSL, US-DEU). After this, another right-centre coalition governed in 2006-2009 (ODS, KDU-ČSL, Green Party), followed by another caretaker cabinet in 2009-2010³⁷.

31 In 2013, the second largest party was not the ODS, though, but ANO 2011.

32 Sartori, Giovanni: *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 43.

33 Indeed, the KSČM has the most stable record of all Czech parties after the democratic transition. It has constantly been represented in parliament since 1990, usually as the third largest party (including at present, although this makes it the largest opposition party).

34 Legislatively, however, a centripetal voting alliance - the ČSSD, the KDU-ČSL, Freedom Union – usually prevailed, quite in line with our general argument.

35 In Czech, the same term is used for caretaker cabinets as was used during the First Czechoslovak Republic, suggesting their non-partisan or even non-political character, however inaccurate this parallel actually is. Anyway, the political background of Tošovský's 1997-1998 cabinet was left-centre – supported by the ČSSD, KDU-ČSL and an ODS splinter group, later the Freedom Union (US).

36 Yet there was a significant overlap of this left-centre formula to the right. Namely the US-DEU defined itself resolutely as a right wing party. The Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL) also underwent a dramatic right turn after electing Miroslav Kalousek as their leader - he was later the co-founder of the clearly conservative and right wing TOP 09. On the other hand, it is to be stressed that the Czech Republic was in the final stage before EU entry and that pro-European orientation was a significant connector for this essentially left-right alliance. This was also what distinguished them, quite dramatically, from both the ODS and the KSČM. Another thing worth mentioning again is that some hints of this alliance had already existed in the previous term when the ČSSD-ODS opposition agreement was accompanied by a frequent ad hoc legislative alliances between the ČSSD, KDU-ČSL and US.

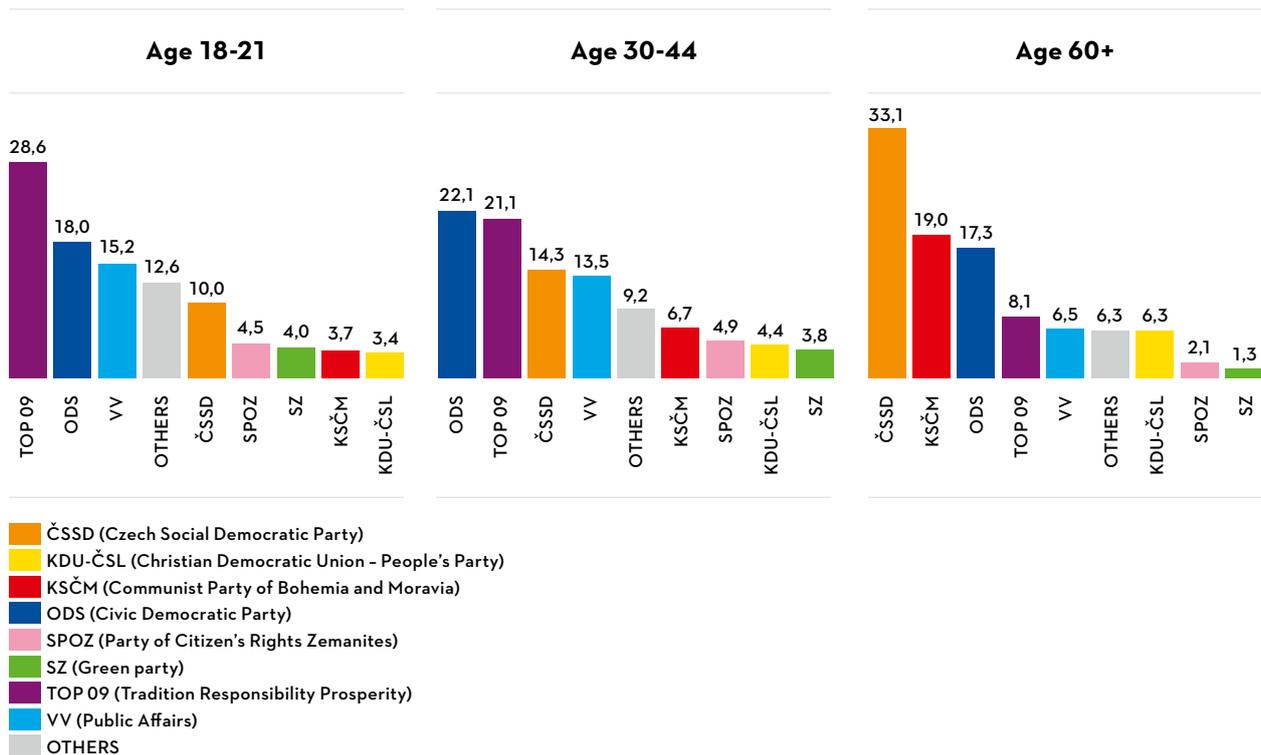
37 The Prime Minister of this caretaker cabinet was Jan Fischer, who in 2013 stood in the first-ever direct presidential election; although initially the favourite, he failed to make the second round. The political background of his 2009-2010 cabinet was right-left: there was an informal agreement between the ODS and the ČSSD, complemented by the Green Party (SZ, Strana zelených).

As for the first feature (the exclusion of the KSČM from governing), on one hand this is a truly stable element of the Czech party system, but on the other hand it ironically contributes to the instability reflected in the remaining two features (the KSČM's seats are systematically “out of the game”, which adds to the governing majorities' fragility, and thus to the frequent changes of government coalition formula). For the ČSSD this specifically means the exclusion of the “orange-red” option and the need to search for partners in the centre or even on the right of the spectrum. A partial shift in this respect could be observed before the 2006 House of Deputies election. It was partial because the KSČM seemed to be accepted by the ČSSD as a potential (and possibly preferred) outside supporter of a minority social democratic cabinet (which is why the 2006 outcome was interpreted as a 100:100 stalemate between the “left” and the “right”, the latter also including the Green Party because of its anti-communism). The purely left wing variant was also considered relevant before the 2013 election. In the end, it was entirely precluded by the surprising election outcome, especially the unexpectedly high score for ANO 2011, but throughout the 2010-13 term the polls had suggested the left-wing variant was arithmetically robust and very likely to happen).

In 1996-2010 the ČSSD arguably functioned as the “pivot” of the party system. By this we mean that it was often the ČSSD that had a strong influence on the shifts of alliance linkages and that played a significant role in seeking and finding new governmental coalition formulas (or, more precisely, alliance formulas, when one includes the opposition agreement). This pivotal role partly resulted from the ČSSD's position as one of the two major forces, but also (and unlike the ODS) from the fact that it has the largest number of open alliance links. The pivotal position had some advantages (an active role in the party system, high coalition potential), but also some handicaps (with every alliance shift it risked alienating part of its support, or leaving voters confused as to its likely future behaviour, which does not necessarily imply an unclear programme or ideas). Quite in accordance with the pivotal role of the ČSSD was the fact that the social democrats resembled, more than any other relevant Czech party, a catch-all party.³⁸ This is true, at least, as far the profile of the party's electorate is concerned: support cuts across a variety of different sociological and demographic groups. On the other hand, since around 2010 some specific characteristics have come to the forefront, making the ČSSD slightly more similar (solely in terms of electorate profile) to the KSČM. A clear overrepresentation of higher age categories in the ČSSD's 2010 electorate is a good example of this, illustrated by the figure below.

38 Kirchheimer, Otto: “The Transformation of the Western European Party System” in LaPalombara, Joseph, Weiner, Myron (eds.): *Political Parties and Political Development*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966. In the ČSSD catch-all proximity thesis, we focus, however, on one particular aspect of the catch-all party concept, leaving aside some other, at least equally significant party organisational aspects. Even here, some catch-all tendencies may be observed (rising power of the party leadership). Also some key elements of a cartel party may be identified (state budget funding, dis-attachment from the civil society). For the latter concept see, e.g., Mair, Peter: *Party System Change. Approaches and Interpretations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. For the Czech application of the concept see, e.g., Polášek, Martin, Vilém Novotný, Michel Perottino et al.: *Mezi masovou a kartelovou stranou. Možnosti teorie při výkladu vývoje ČSSD a KSČM v letech 2000-2010*, Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství. 2012).

Figure 5: Voting by age categories in the 2010 House of Deputies election (percent of vote)



Source: SC&C spol.s.r.o. (Praha), SPSS CR, Česká televize. EXIT POLL 2010. Ver. 1.0. Praha: Český sociálněvědní datový archiv, 2013. DOI 10.14473/CSDA00058.

Comparing both Czech left wing parties, the ČSSD and the KSČM, more specifically in terms of their positions in the party system, the fundamental difference is that while the ČSSD is constantly a governing or potentially governing party, the communists are constantly isolated from governing. This means that they are cut off from the obvious benefits related to participation in executive power, but also from some disadvantages – e.g. corruption scandals that regularly harm the social democrats. Another advantage for the KSČM is that it is able to offset some of its structural problems (especially the demographic decline of the membership and core electorate) by its constant protest appeal, resulting from a permanent opposition role. Conversely, the ČSSD is able to use only in a very limited way, and with much lesser credibility, the protest-populist appeals that made the party so popular in the late 1990s.

Since 2010, and especially since 2013, one of the KSČM's comparative advantages, i.e. its status as a "natural" protest party, has been weakening. The new outsider or anti-system actors that have emerged recently are able to articulate certain radical and protest appeals much better, more easily and with greater vigour than the KSČM. However, their success has led to the weakening of the social democrats as well, even more markedly than in the case of the communists. This is why the 2013 House of Deputies election brought the narrowest ever percentage difference between the ČSSD and the KSČM since 1996, only 5 percentage points.

The party system change after 2010

As suggested in the chapter above, significant quantitative and qualitative changes have taken place in the Czech party system since 2010 and especially since 2013. These changes have had a great impact on the social democrats, on their electoral performance and their position in the party system. Overall, this impact seems to be rather negative so far.

The challenges the ČSSD is facing, along with the whole of the Czech party and political system, are very similar in many respects to those that may be identified in other Western democracies, including the U.S.

People's feeling of crisis and alienation from current political structures has led to powerful attacks by various anti-establishment challengers. New players have arrived, distinguishing and distancing themselves generally and fundamentally from all traditional parties and the political class as such. These new actors typically use populism of all kinds, appeals to direct democracy, radical criticism of corruption with promises of its elimination, an emphasis on the role of "independent personalities" in politics as opposed to political parties, and so on.

With some delay, and in the wake of the "migration crisis", the Czech Republic has seen some additional sources of anti-system politics that West European countries have known for several decades: anti-immigration positions combined sometimes with xenophobia, more specifically with Islamophobia, and, after the Brexit referendum, also Euroscepticism. The anti-immigration agenda had previously been almost absent in the Czech Republic, above all because it had not been raised as a major and salient issue and because the Czech Republic has not been (and still is not) a target country for mass migration. Xenophobia has been an issue, though, in particular with regard to the Roma minority.³⁹

As for Euroscepticism, so far in the Czech Republic it has been a reliable path to electoral failure. This is true of the ODS and its disappointing 2002 performance, of the first direct presidential election, in which both Eurosceptic candidates ended up at the very bottom of the pile, scoring less than 5 per cent of the vote between them⁴⁰, as well as of various marginal parties such as a group called Suverenita (Sovereignty) in the 2010 election, and Svobodní (Party of Free Citizens) in the 2013 election⁴¹) and utterly obscure groups such as Hlavu vzhůru (Head Up), in the 2013 election⁴². Czechs have not responded to the Eurozone crisis in a Eurosceptic manner⁴³ – perhaps, among other reasons, because they are not part of it. Euroscepticism has not become a salient issue in the country so far. It is, however, also true that Euroscepticism has not yet undergone any first order⁴⁴ election test after the refugee crisis and after the Brexit referendum, both of which might boost Euroscepticism significantly.

39 In the 1990s, the radically anti-system Republicans had a xenophobic agenda. It featured in a much weaker way in the programme of the Dawn of Direct Democracy (Úsvit přímé demokracie) in 2013 and with some hints also the Public Affairs party (Věce veřejné, VV) in 2010. For Dawn and VV, though, the mobilisation of anti-Roma sentiment was not their primary or even secondary or tertiary issue. Those were direct democracy, the fight against corruption and strong opposition against the establishment parties (in Dawn's politics also Euroscepticism).

40 One of them was the official candidate of the ODS, then the governing party, Přemysl Sobotka.

41 Both groups succeeded in a limited way in some second order elections – they managed to be elected to the European Parliament.

42 It is remarkable that in 2013 Hlavu vzhůru was supported publicly by the then Czech President, Václav Klaus, a man who is the main symbol of Czech Euroscepticism. In light of this, their performance (0.42 %) seems particularly noticeable.

43 The response was more neoliberal, i.e. accepting the "anti-debt" rhetoric and voting for the austerity politics promised by TOP 09 in the 2010 election.

44 Not even the 2016 second order election test (regional and senate elections) brought any increase in Euroscepticism.

Table 1: Overview of the Czech Parliament's House of Deputies in 1990-2013 (the Czech National Council pre-1993)

	ČSSD		ODS		KSCM		KDU-ČSL		others*					
	v	s	v	s	v	s	v	s	v	s	v	s	v	s
1990	4.11	–	–	–	13.24	16,00	8.42	9,50	49.50	63,50	10.03	11,00		
1992	6.53	8,00	29.73	38,00	14.05	17,50	6.28	7,50	5.93	7,00	5.98	7,00	12.39	15,00
1996	26.44	30,50	29.62	34,00	10.33	11,00	8.08	9,00	6.36	6,50	8.01	9,00		
1998	32.31	37,00	27.74	31,50	11.03	12,00	9.00	10,00	8.60	9,50				
2002	30.20	35,00	24.47	29,00	18.51	20,50	**14.27	11,00	**14.27	4,50				
2006	32,32	37,00	35,38	40,50	12,81	13,00	7,22	6,50	6,29	3,00				
2010	22,08	28,00	20,22	26,50	11,27	13,00	4,39	–	16,70	20,50	10,88	12,00		
2013	20,45	25,00	7,72	8,00	14,91	16,50	6,78	7,00	11,99	13,00	18,65	23,50	6,88	7,00

v = percent of vote, s = percent of seats

* others:

1990 the OF (Civic Forum), the HSD (Movement for Autonomous Democracy)

1992 the ODA (Civic Democratic Alliance), the SPR-RSČ (Coalition for Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia), the LSU (Liberal-Social Union), the HSD-SMS (Movement for Autonomous Democracy – Party for Moravia and Silesia) (the data for the LSU and the HSD-SMS have been conflated for the sake of the table's format and clarity),

1996 the ODA, the SPR-RSČ,

1998 the US (Freedom Union),

2002 the US-DEU (Freedom Union – Democratic Union),

2006 the SZ,

2010 TOP 09, VV,

2013 TOP 09, ANO 2011, Úsvit přímé demokracie (Dawn of Direct Democracy)

** 2002 the KDU-ČSL and the US-DEU in a coalition (although the votes cannot be distinguished according to the parties in the coalition, the seats can, by virtue of the party that proposed each candidate)

The table above illustrates the change in the Czech party system format after 2010. The erosion of the format is apparent at first sight, in particular after the 2013 House of Deputies election when the Czech Republic becomes a seven-party system.⁴⁵ An important change happened earlier, though, i.e. in the 2010 election, when one of the by then constant features of Czech politics ceased to exist, namely that the two strongest parties had significantly more votes than the rest of the parties combined. The fall in support for the ODS and the ČSSD is particularly conspicuous when compared to those parties' 2006 performance, even though such a comparison might partly be an "optical illusion", since the degree of party support concentration was absolutely exceptional in the 2006 election. Anyway, what may be observed in 2010 is not a pair of powerful parties at the top of the ladder, but a trio of medium-sized parties: the ČSSD, the ODS and TOP 09, the latter two then joining forces against the former. In the 2013 House of Deputies election, there was a massive decline in the ODS' electoral support, leading it to concede its position as one of the two most powerful Czech parties: the ODS was replaced by ANO 2011. Most of all, however, the weakening of the party system of "leader parties" continued. The combined share of the two electorally-largest parties shrunk below 40 per cent for the first time and as many as five more parties followed the winning couple, with more or less even intervals in their percent scores. In other words, the 3+2 configuration (3 medium-sized, 2 minor), which in 2010 had replaced the 2+3 configuration typical of the stability period, was followed by the 4+3 configuration (this means that the greatest interval lies between the fourth party, TOP 09, and the fifth, ODS, although all intervals were similarly small).

The table below shows some aggregated quantitative indicators illustrating the overall deconsolidation of

⁴⁵ We are leaving aside the fact that the Dawn of Direct Democracy started disintegrating soon after the election and has now fallen apart completely. A group led by the original Dawn leader, Tomio Okamura, Freedom and Direct Democracy (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, SPD) managed to be elected into 10 out of 13 regional councils in the 2016 regional election – scoring narrowly above the required 5% legal threshold, mostly in coalition with the pro-presidential Party of Citizens' Rights (SPO). For more about the latter party see above in the section on Personal cleavages. In any case, the real relevance test for various "post-Dawn" groups will be the next House of Deputies election.

the Czech party system after 2010. The share of wasted votes has increased (for parties failing to meet the 5% legal threshold). Voter volatility has grown. The share of the party system core (the ČSSD, the ODS, the KSČM, the KDU-ČSL) has shrunk. And the party system format has become more fragmented, i.e. the number of relevant parties has risen, which the effective number of parties index (ENP) documents very well.

Table 2: Stability and deconsolidation of the Czech party system

	ENP	Volatility index	Wasted votes share (% votes)	Party system core share (% seats)	Party system core share (% votes)
1990	2,22	14,07	18,81	89,0	75,27
1992	4,80		19,11	71,0	56,59
1996	4,15	18,87	11,16	84,5	74,47
1998	3,71	14,22	11,32	90,5	80,08
2002	3,81	8,10	12,55	95,5	87,45
2006	3,10	14,71	5,98	97,0	87,73
2010	4,51	30,60	18,85	67,5	57,96
2013	5,62	25,20	12,62	56,5	49,86

The party system core = the core in the period of stability (1996-2010): the ODS, the ČSSD, the KSČM, the KDU-ČSL

ENP = effective number of parties (Laakso, Taagepera, 1979) – an index showing the weighted number of parties. It shows, in fact, how many parties there would have been in the system if they all had been equally strong electorally. Mathematically, the formula is as follows: $ENP=1/\sum p^2$, i.e. one divided by the sum of the squares of the parties' seats (or votes) percentages (counted as decimals, i.e., a party with 25 %, e.g., counts as 0.25²) The calculation for the Czech Parliament House of Deputies/ Czech National Council (1990, 1992) is based on the percentages of seats.

Volatility index = Pedersen index (Bartolini, Mair, 1990). Calculation based on the percentages of votes.

Changes in the mechanics and logics of the Czech party system are even more significant than the changes in format, in particular after 2013. After the 2010 election, there was still an element of continuity in that a right-centre ODS-led governing coalition persisted (after a caretaker cabinet intermezzo), although with a markedly changed composition compared to the 2006-9 coalition⁴⁶. On the other hand, an entirely new phenomenon came into post-1989 Czech politics after 2013 – that of the grand coalition⁴⁷. Its main members are the ČSSD and ANO 2011, but to make up the numbers, because of the format erosion described above, it had to invite a third member, namely the KDU-ČSL.

Another important symptom of the change in the logic of inter-party competition is the increasing tendency to question the left-right socio-economic axis as the main compass of Czech politics. Especially in response to the surprising 2010 and 2013 election results, there have been frequent suggestions in the Czech media and political discourse that this traditional left-right division is being replaced by the polarity of “old parties versus new movements”. Obviously, the new players themselves actively contribute to this depiction of the left-right division (as well as the whole of party politics as such) as something fundamentally outdated – obsolescent, if not utterly obsolete. In response to all the troubles of Czech politics, they offer competent, independent, managerially skilled and/or morally pure personalities that are not existentially and economically dependent on politics. These may be figures who have proven their merits as moral authorities (Karel Schwarzenberg – TOP 09), celebrities (Radek John – VV) or successful private businessmen or entrepreneurs

⁴⁶ Two then new groups, TOP 09 and VV, entered the coalition (we are leaving aside the question of authenticity of TOP 09's “newness”). On the other hand, the ODS' two pre-2009 coalition partners, the Green Party and the KDU-ČSL (note: one of the four core parties) failed to be elected to the parliament. The KDU-ČSL's successful House of Deputies comeback in 2013 might be seen as a partial, and slightly counter-tendency, an element of party system continuity. This would also then be true of the party's fairly good electoral performances in 2014 (senate, municipal, European Parliament elections) and 2016 (senate and regional elections).

⁴⁷ We are working with a rather loose definition of this concept: by a grand coalition we mean one in which the main party system rivals become partners. On the other hand, however, we are also aware of the fact that in a certain sense the ČSSD – ANO 2011 – KDU-ČSL grouping may be regarded as a minimum winning coalition.

(Andrej Babiš – ANO 2011, and to a lesser degree Tomio Okamura – Úsvit)⁴⁸. In the Public Affairs (VV) 2010 electoral campaign, the traditional politicians were even referred to as dinosaurs. More (ANO 2011, Úsvit) or less (VV) explicitly they are depicted in essentially criminal terms as thieves, corruption barons, etc. A further major target is the alleged incapability and incompetence of the established parties (the fundamental message of ANO 2011 is basically as follows: all the established parties have already governed, all of them have failed, all of them have proven they lack the qualities to govern, ergo all of them are actually the same). As already mentioned, in the most recent, post-2015 stage, various populists have increasingly been raising issues related to the refugee crisis and Brexit. In moderate versions (ANO 2011, President Zeman, etc.), they position themselves as the only trustworthy and legitimate defenders of the national interest. In more radical versions (various post-Dawn factions), they call for the closure of the national borders, leaving the EU or a strict ban on Muslims. The country's allegedly incompetent and alienated political elite is put on a par with the (allegedly) chronically incompetent and alienated European (i.e. EU) elite.⁴⁹

Social democrats seem to be particularly vulnerable to these challenges, as similar processes to those taking place in Western politics since the 1980s can be identified – an exodus of disappointed or even frustrated Old Left supporters (the traditional socio-economic left) towards the New Right (the populist right offering nationalist solutions). The Brexit referendum was a clear example of this, with a number of traditional working-class Labour strongholds, especially socially deprived ones, voting massively in favour of leaving the EU. In a similar vein, Donald Trump has systematically, and successfully, targeted the frustrated white male older “blue-collar” workers in the de-industrialised “rust belt” states, the principal losers in the global neo-liberal system that, ironically, gave birth to Trump. A similar paradox, personified by Andrej Babiš, may also be found in Czech politics. Social democratic parties seem to be in a certain limbo all across Europe. In the south, they have been pushed out (Greece) or there are efforts to push them out (Spain) by the radical left. Elsewhere, they have been stagnating or declining under pressure from the populist right (in the east powerful conservative-populist mainstream right).⁵⁰

The second aspect of this chapter's analysis is the question of what *internal* condition the ČSSD is in as it faces all these challenges. Centrifugal forces have existed within the ČSSD since its post-1989 renewal. Currently, though, they are becoming more conspicuous as a consequence of the party's worsening post-2010 election performance. The dynamics are beginning to resemble a vicious circle or downward spiral. The external pressures from anti-system and anti-establishment actors have been weakening all the classical parties, including the ČSSD. The worsening of its election record has triggered nervousness and rebelliousness within the party, which, in turn, has a negative effect on its election campaign efficiency, damaging the party's resistance and resilience vis a vis outer pressures. After all, the alleged “boycott” or even “sabotage” of the 2013 House of Deputies election campaign (not to mention that year's presidential election and the party's abandonment of its official candidate) by the “anti-Sobotka” faction⁵¹, as well as the intra-party “coup” at-

48 ANO 2011 is primarily identified with this emphasis on managerial success. It is to be noted here that several groups had anticipated this earlier, among them the (nominally) left wing pro-Zeman SPO party. Their appeal was broader, also including a successful record at the lower political levels (popular city, town or village mayors as well as regional presidents), experience in public institutions (e.g. the Czech National Bank) and – most of all - their “expert quality”. The similarity lies in the effort to replace established political actors by defining a new set of key qualities that are, basically, apolitical.

49 Analogous motifs may be identified in Donald Trump's presidential campaign and his frequent attacks on “Washington”. The imperfection of the E.U.-U.S. analogy helps understand that even in the U.S. where the “national” and the “union” level is the same (unlike Europe) such powerful attacks may be found.

50 A long list of cases could include – randomly – the Austrian Free Party (FPÖ), the French National Front (FN), the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), the Danish People's Party (DF), the Finnish True Finns (PS), the Swedish Democrats (SD), the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the German Alternative for Germany (AfD), etc. As for the Polish and Hungarian conservative shift by the mainstream right, social democratic parties seem to be in even deeper crisis in these countries, and over a longer period. A fairly special case is that of Italy, where both right wing populists can be found (Northern League, LN) and the more recent and less easily classifiable (but anyway Eurosceptic) group called Five Star Movement (M5S).

51 Its main representative, Michal Hašek, suffered an electoral defeat in the 2016 regional election (as did the whole party) but this does not mean more internal party unity – rather, the contrary. There are actually several prominent internal party critics of Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka.

tempt against the party leadership immediately after the election – allegedly in coordination with President Zeman – this all was heavily publicised after the election. The divisions in the party persist, at times in a more latent form (in peaceful periods between various electoral campaigns), at times coming to the forefront – as at present, due to the 2016 electoral failure.

The fundamental question is how a party like the ČSSD may face these challenges and respond to them. A key to this question seems to be the preservation and regeneration of the left-right socio-economic axis. This is probably the only way of protecting the public discourse from various xenophobic passions and Euroscepticism. It seems to be in the interest of social democrats to reveal the competing “old – new” polarity as essentially false, misleading and obscuring the issue. This may partly be facilitated by the fact that the current bearers of “newness” will naturally “grow older” and politically worn out after some time. Beyond any doubt, however, there will be successors to take their place, or the current “new ones” will try to preserve themselves through various innovations. Agendas such as the refugee crisis or Brexit might help them to do so, making it possible to re-frame and re-direct their populist appeal in a very “natural” manner.

The downside of this general strategy - i.e., the regeneration of the left-right socio-economic axis – is, however, that it perhaps cannot be pursued successfully in a *direct* way. In other words, saving the concepts of left and right, together with their desirable meaning, will almost certainly not be possible through talking about them more frequently or strongly. Moreover, merely to raise, consistently and systematically, all the “good” and classical left-right socio-economic *issues* will probably be very far from sufficient (even if to do so seems to be right and desirable for the ČSSD in any case). To make things even trickier, it will probably not be enough even to enforce them politically and implement them successfully, - in other words, even their prospective benefits, possibly quite objective and measurable, for the country’s economy and life will probably not be enough. Such things are easy only in a world of positivism. In the real world, someone else may easily harvest the credit for those issues and benefits, if they are able to establish their “issue ownership”. An additional problem of its own kind is how difficult it is to raise and pursue such issues in a grand coalition together with two right-centre partners, one of them constantly the frontrunner in the polls for the next House of Deputies election.

In spite of all these complications, a powerful actor like the ČSSD can probably hardly accept the idea that there is no solution to this tricky situation. Nevertheless, the solution will have to be a “two-level” one. This means that, on one level, the systematic and consistent raising of classical left-right socio-economic issues (which obviously *cannot fail to be* a part of the solution) ought to be accompanied, on another level, with a persistent and innovative effort to construct and reshape the political language defining and framing these issues. Social democrats have been neglecting the second, linguistic and symbolic level of politics. Especially in their current governing coalition it is becoming more than evident that the mere fact of pushing for and enforcing something good (for the political party) does not bring the party credit unless the linkage between the enforcing party and enforced policies becomes an elementarily known fact among the public at large. Unless the “good thing” is really ascribed to the party that pushed for and introduced it, or at least credibly tried to, it does not help the party.

The political language constructed ought to be sufficiently vigorous (percussive) as to ensure it gets into the relevant media and matches natural Czech “talents” such as Zeman and Babiš – even in a situation when most of the media tends to be biased against the social democrats⁵² and some of them are even owned by the party’s main political rival. Form is as important in political messages as substance (as is, of course, the very fact that a message is being delivered, i.e., that a “suitable” issue is being raised). By vigorous language that is percussive in nature we do not necessarily mean the “strength” of the expression (even though some

⁵² Stories of both Polish and Hungarian conservatives have shown that success is possible in an environment shaped by mostly unfriendly media. Also, and most recently, Trump has proved that being at the centre of media attention may be more helpful than being a media darling.

verbal radicalisation may be desirable in order to intensify the left-right polarity) or even its frequency (a never-ending series of boring press conferences presenting the party's successes in government might be an example of how not to go about it). It is not about "making more noise" or about making it all the time. The language skill that the ČSSD should pay particular attention to for its own improvement is metaphor. The party ought to work with what we call an efficient shortcut message – a simple and a deliberately simplified message that captures the core of what the ČSSD wants. Repetitiveness is an absolutely crucial attribute of an efficient shortcut message. If the ČSSD succeeds in finding one, it has to be relentlessly and persistently repeated (preferably in slightly varied expressional forms). It must also be used sufficiently systematically as a fundamental framework for, ideally, *everything* that *every* relevant party voice says at *every* moment.

An efficient shortcut message is not merely the central motto of the electoral campaign. It is not just a single specific formulation (or the sum of several). It is the whole framing, used not only during electoral campaigns, but throughout the entire parliamentary and government term and beyond⁵³. In our understanding, an efficient shortcut message is something like a micro-narrative: a condensed and simplified story that social democrats tell about themselves.

⁵³ Moreover, there are always several second-order election campaigns throughout parliamentary terms. Modern competitive politics is actually a permanent election campaign, which does not falsify our assertion but, on the contrary, supports it.

4 The ČSSD in Europe and in the world: cooperation between social democratic parties

The ČSSD is a member of the Socialist International (SI), an organisation of social democratic, socialist, progressive and labour parties from most countries of the world. At the European level, the party is a member of the Party of European Socialists (PES) and in the European Parliament (EP) all four deputies currently elected for the ČSSD work in the Socialists and Democrats group (S&D), which is the second largest faction in the EP. Bilaterally, the ČSSD maintains close partner relationships primarily with social democratic parties in neighbouring countries, in particular the German SPD and Slovak Smer-SD.

The international and European dimension of social democratic politics seems increasingly prominent in the context of contemporary challenges. Why? A swift summary of the previous chapter's main conclusions helps us approach this question. First, the main post-2010 challenge for the ČSSD is the emergence of new, anti-establishment actors who attack the entire system and use populist strategies and style. Second, since 2015 there has been a growing tendency in Czech politics to supplement this attack with xenophobic and eurosceptic motifs. Third, these are not trends specific to Czech politics only – on the contrary, they have been manifest long-term across the Western democracies. Fourth, the strategy of regenerating the left-right socio-economic axis seems to be the way to face these challenges, i.e., reconstructing the polarity that worked as a fairly reliable compass of Czech politics from the early 1990s to approximately 2010. Fifth, such regeneration can probably only succeed through a “two-level solution”. Talking more and talking more radically about what is “left-wing” will not help, even in combination with consistent efforts to push socio-economic left-wing issues. Sixth, social democrats ought to maximise their efforts to develop an efficient shortcut message – a sufficiently vigorous (percussive) and simplifying framework for all the party's public actions. That is, a framework serving as a condensed social democratic narrative.

The challenges and problems faced by social democrats in Europe (Australia, Canada...) are analogous. It could therefore be very useful for the ČSSD to make use of the experience of foreign social democratic parties that have a longer record of systematic, elaborate and considered work with political language, as well as experience of getting it into the public space.

A sophisticated system of experience and good practice exchange could help capture various important details of rhetoric and expression that should not end up “lost in translation”. Quite specifically, this touches on Europe's immense linguistic richness and the possibility of mutual terminological inspiration and enrichment.⁵⁴ The success of the efficient shortcut message literally stands and falls with success in finding appropriate language formulations that are sufficiently concise, simple and interesting (percussive) to penetrate even a possibly inimical media, and in this way to reach the widest possible public⁵⁵.

54 E.g., the Czech language uses the expression “rovná daň” (literally: “equal tax”) for the term “flat tax”. The connotation of the adjective “rovný/ equal” is unequivocally positive (as opposed to the English “flat”, which in Czech translation is “plochý”). The term suggests that the tax is equal for everybody, in other words simply just. It would have helped the Czech left wing enormously in its struggle against tax regression if it used an expression which in its very name alone delegitimised the concept of “flat tax”. Czech also lacks apt, terse and linguistically natural expressions for precarious work: equivalents to the German “Kurzarbeit” or the Polish “umowy śmieciowe”.

55 Another important fact that we are deliberately leaving aside in this analysis is that of the new social media and networks. It would require further analysis to assess what impact they have. Provisionally, it may be stated that they provide the possibility of reaching the wide public without the mediating function of the traditional media.

5 Conclusion

Conclusions of analysis

- The ČSSD is the only historically-rooted social democratic party in Central and Eastern Europe to have become the main political force on the left after 1989. The main sign of continuity today is the maintenance of the formal organisational structure of a mass political party together with its collateral organisations. This arrangement has been changing – especially due to changes in context – but it nevertheless has a significant inertia force and is strongly symbolically charged.
- Some long-term cleavages typical of political parties in general and the mass party type in particular are present in the ČSSD. The centre – periphery cleavage (the party headquarters vs. the regions), which currently resembles a model of stratarchy, is the most prominent one. In the mid-term perspective, no fundamental change is likely to happen. Some minor changes may result from negotiation, rather than the centre making one-sided decisions, but their character will be incremental.
- The party depends financially on state budget funding, the amount of which is based on election performance. No change can be expected here in the mid-term perspective. The party must adapt to its financial limits, especially as far as the instruments and size of election campaigns are concerned.
- The ČSSD's membership plays the majority of roles attributed to a mass party membership in a very limited way at best, or possibly not at all. A return to a mass membership is not likely even in the long term.
- A number of organisations and interest groups are linked to the ČSSD in various ways. Some of them were meant to function as the party's anchor in society, expanding its influence and building up a social and cultural milieu which would integrate the party's members and voters. For various reasons, these functions are performed in a very limited way by these organisations. As for party-independent interest groups, the most significant is the long-term link to the trade unions. Relationships with relevant social movements are not very vibrant.
- The ČSSD has a left-wing programme. On the socio-economic axis, it stands closer to the West European social democratic parties than to the other Visegrád countries' social democratic parties. This means, it is more left-wing than the other Visegrád countries' social democratic parties. On the progressive – conservative axis, it currently also stands closer to the West European social democratic parties. Over the long term, though, it has been fairly conservative, similarly to the other Visegrád countries' social democratic parties. This conservative profile reflects not only the party's electorate, but also – and even more significantly – the party's membership, posing an at least mid-term limit to any possible change in this respect.
- The ČSSD established itself as a relevant political force when the Czech party system was still crystallising. In the late 1990s the party's electoral support multiplied, partly as a consequence of the strongly protest-oriented and populist political language used by Miloš Zeman.
- In 1996-2010 the ČSSD was the hegemon on the left side of the Czech party spectrum, profiled chiefly along the socio-economic axis. The ČSSD was one of the two main poles of a relatively stable party system. It had a pivotal position in the system, with a strong impact on shifting alliance patterns.
- Since 2010 the ČSSD's support has been weakening and the whole party system has undergone change. The left-right polarity has been undermined in efforts to replace it with a division between old parties and new movements. The system has also become increasingly fragmented. The salience of issues like corruption and direct democracy has been rising.

- Since 2013 the intensity of populist and anti-establishment appeals has risen further. On top of that, since 2015 some xenophobic and Eurosceptic appeals have become more prominent, although they have not undergone a successful first order electoral test.

Recommendations

- The ČSSD should address the question of what its primary goal ought to be, both in the mid-term and the long-term perspective. Should it seek to dominate the whole left side of the political spectrum, trying to maximise electoral support, should it focus on a specific electoral segment and cultivate primarily the support of that group, or should it put its main emphasis on a certain ideological “mission“ related to a grand social vision or specific policy/policies? These three goals do not completely exclude each other. The vision of the Good Society, for example, may have its place in all of them. There is a latent tension between these goals, and in everyday decision making it will always be necessary to choose instruments making one of these goals more prominent than the others. In the long term, the ČSSD will probably be highly reluctant to abandon any of these goals. Still, in the mid-term perspective it will have to prioritise among them (in order to conduct election campaigns, for example).
- The new challenges resulting from party system change may be faced primarily through the regeneration of the left-right axis and restoration of its socio-economic meaning. This is not inconsistent with the fact that the ČSSD should be culturally progressive. The construction of political language (discourse) should play the key role in this strategy, as well as the ability to develop efficient shortcut messages – micro-narratives condensing the social democratic story and translating programmatic goals and policies delivered into rhetoric and into a set of images or metaphors. A political party does not merely mirror the will of its supporters. It also shapes its voters via its action – without much exaggeration, it “makes” its own voters.
- The challenges the ČSSD is facing – as a political party in general and as a social democratic party in particular – are of a European and global character. Intensified cooperation with foreign partners could, therefore, help in the search for efficient shortcut messages, as well as in improved work with political language.
- As far as the ČSSD’s organisation is concerned, the current arrangement within the party does not require and does not allow any radical structural changes. Neither, however, is it necessarily to be mentally fixated on the mass party organisational model. In general, the role of political parties in the system of representative democracy should also be subject to reflection.
- Interest groups and organizations – both “allied by affection” and “allied by choice” – should be perceived in the future as a source of information and experience, rather than expected to function as the party’s anchor in society or even its transmission belt.
- The financial limitations the ČSSD is facing should lead the party to a deep reflection of its methods of political communication, including in the periods between election campaigns. Some interest groups and organisations may provide inspiration in this respect, especially those “allied by affection”, or those that could be gained for cooperation that focuses on partial issues.
- If the ČSSD wants its membership to play more roles, in addition to legitimising myth reproduction and that of a source of income, it has make a marked attempt to activate the membership and strengthen its social democratic identity. Just as a party “makes” its “own” voters through its activity and language, as an organisation it socialises some voters, as well as members, as its “own”. The party’s possibilities in this respect are much more limited than they used to be in the 20th century. All the more emphasis should

therefore be put on those that remain, as well as on building new institutional capacity (e.g., for the training of the personnel that are also needed for policy making; stressing certain issues and mobilising supporters – not solely members – around them).

- The ČSSD's programme profile may vary in respect to specific ideas and goals. However, the change cannot come as the result of a decision by the centre; it may more conceivably happen as a process of socialisation or ideological "mission". Whatever the change, though, it should not lose sight of the ČSSD's position in the party system, as well as its expectations regarding the party's role in the system.
- None of the above-mentioned recommendations is a matter of a single measure that would have immediate effect. All of them require long-term thinking, with a horizon extending beyond a single parliamentary electoral term or a single ČSSD chairman's term. It is not a matter of having a plan, centrally constructed and implemented, as much as a framework vision.

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