

Marcin Czyżniewski

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Poland)

## The Uncompleted Revolution?

### The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia in the Post-Communist Reality

**Abstract:** The change of the political regime in Czechoslovakia, called the Velvet Revolution, is considered as a success story of transformation after 1989. However, in nowadays Czech Republic, the Communist Party still exists – this is the only such case among democratic countries of Central Europe. It makes us ask the question: is the Velvet Revolution completed? The author treats the activities of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia as a criterion for the assessment of changes in the Czech Republic after 1989 and wonders how strong for the assessment of the transformation influences the relics of the former regime. He stresses that transformation in the Czech Republic can't be assessed on a comparative scale, because pace and effects of changes were different in different countries, as different was the nature of the previous regimes. The author concludes that the existence of the Communist Party is the natural element of contemporary political reality of the Czech Republic, which negates the achievements of transformation in no way.

**Keywords:** *political transformation; the Czech Republic; communist parties; Central Europe; the Velvet Revolution*

## Introduction

“The question of why the Czech Communist Party did not undergo any fundamental reform and did not become a social democratic party dominating the left-wing part of the national party system – which is what happened in a number of countries in this area – is often presented as one of the most important questions in relation with

the development of the political system” – Ladislav Cabada wrote (Cabada, 2015, p. 18). However, it is also vitally important to pose question what it means for the Czech political system? The transition in post-communist Czechoslovakia is considered an example of the successful political transformation. The duration of the Communist Party and its important share in the Legislature, beg the questions about the true dimension of the political transformation in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. This could mean that this process has not been completed and was interrupted in the course. Is the activity of the Communist Party a failure of political transformation in Czechoslovakia or paradoxically, evidence that transformation was successful? This article answers these questions. To solve this problem we must consider how the Communist Party affects the power system and the functioning of the state, who is a typical voter of the party, how he decides to vote: under the influence of communist ideology and other factors, what means the term “communist ideology” in modern Czech Republic and – is perhaps especially important – is it possible to reverse the effects of transformation and return to the old system?

### **Position of the Communist Party in the party system of the Czech Republic**

It is necessary to deal with the communist party in the Czech Republic, not because this party still exists in politics, but because is successful and is one of the most important political parties in this country. In the history of the Czech Republic, established in 1993, six elections to the Chamber of Deputies was conducted. In each election, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*, KSČM) obtained the third result. Big success of the Communists was 2002, when they won 41 seats in the Chamber with 200 members. In the current parliamentary term (2013–2017) the Communists occupied 33 seats. In the elections they received 14.91 percent of the vote.

After the 1989 The Communist Party in the Czechoslovakia has strong support too. In the Czech part of the Federation the Communist Party was the second force after the oppositionist Civic Forum, either of both houses of the Federal Assembly and the Czech national parliament. Electoral support for the communists reached then more than 13 percent. In 1990, six months after the political changes in Czechoslovakia, the first elections took place. The Communists reached the second result. Although they got only half of the votes of Civic Forum, it was a success (Perron, 2010, p. 15). In the regional and municipal self-governments The Communists are invariably strong, as in the Chamber of Deputies. Only in the Senate they cannot achieve success. The peak of their success were the 4 seats, now they have only 1 representative in the

Senate. We must remember that the Senate elections are conducted in accordance with a different electoral law and other rules.

Although the KSČM has the strong support, the party is not involved in the formation of governments. Since 1989, the party, regardless of how many deputies has, always remained in opposition. Throughout all this period other Czech political parties stick to the unwritten rule that there is no cooperation with the Communists, especially in the creation of a coalition government. The Communist Party was the only parliamentary party, which President Václav Havel did not invited for political consultations even once.

However, Czech politicians are aware of how strong are the Communists and how many votes in the parliament they have. There is no official cooperation, but you can see a kind of political flirtation in the Czech Republic. It is high likely that Václav Klaus, who is social conservative and economic liberal, has become the President in 1998 thanks to the support of deputies and senators of the KSČM. Several times, when constructing a majority coalition was a problem, a coalition with the Communists seemed viable and desirable option. In 2002, for the very first time, leader of the Communists received a place in the Bureau of the Chamber of Deputies as its Vice-President. We can find examples of a coalition with the Communists in local governments (Stegmaier & Vlachová, 2009, p. 808).

What is very interesting, for many years, particularly averse to the Communists was the Czech Social Democratic Party (*Česká strana sociálně demokratická*, ČSSD) (Polášek, Novotný & Perottino, 2012). ČSSD politicians loudly denied the participation of the Communists in power. If one left-wing party so strongly does not want another left-wing party in the government, we can see probably the real reason of Czech anti-communism. It is not a question of ideas or the assessment of the past, actually it is the fear of competition. When the Czech Social Democratic Party was build up its political strength, it was at the same time attacking the Communists very strong. In 1995, the ČSSD adopted a resolution in which the possibility of cooperation with “extremist political parties” was rejected. Miloš Zeman, who changed the social democrats in one of the most important Czech political parties, openly said about the KSČM in this context (Kopeček & Pšejja, 2007, p. 43). At that time Zeman tried to unite left-wing opposition to the Václav Klaus’s government, but without the Communist Party. Despite the initial successes, that plan ended with failure (Kopeček & Pšejja, 2007, p. 42). What is interesting, from the moment when Zeman ceased to lead the party, he also stopped to exclude the cooperation with the Communists, he even criticized the new leader of the ČSSD that he did not decide to create a minority government with the support of KSČM (Kopeček & Pšejja, 2007, p. 50).

Since the regime has changed there are ideas of outlawing the Communist Party. Even in the spring of 1990 the city prosecutor in Prague announced that he would lead to this, and pointed out the provision prohibiting the promotion of fascism (*sic!*). Those announcements were not realized. “The decision to allow the further existence of the KSČ could have, therefore, been motivated by a number of factors: firstly, by the endeavour not to ban a clear rival in the elections (...), secondly, not to ban a political formation, which a great number of the Civic Forum and the new establishment representatives passed through; and finally, by the belief that democracy is characterised by its tolerance toward all political approaches, including the extremist ones” – Cabada wrote (Cabada, 2015, p. 14). In 2011, the government of Petr Nečas made efforts for outlawing KSČM. In the prepared analysis of documents and statements of communist politicians, KSČM were accused of, among others, praising the terrorism and violence (Mareš, 2006). Finally, the party was not eliminated again. David Kunštát (2013, p. 160) says that the political forces in the Czech Republic do not want outlawing KSČM because threatening with communist is always an important element of the political narrative. It seems that in the Czech Republic, anti-Communism is not a true idea, but the element of political competition. Other parties need communists as reasons for their actions and even perhaps as reason of their existence. The Communist Party is the enemy, and without enemy there is no politics. The party which could not show up in opposition to the rival loses its attractiveness.

### **The KSČM against the communist past and communist ideology**

Jerzy Holzer (2006) points out that the course and effects of the political transformation process are strongly determined by the character of the old regime. In this context, he emphasized that the Soviet bloc was diverse, heterogeneous, full of differences in historical experience, political culture and mentality. This means that in each of the countries of Eastern Europe transformation was exceptional, proceeded in a different way and ended up with different effects. In Czechoslovakia communism was a traditional element of the political system. Czechoslovakia was the only country in the Central European region, where the Communist Party acted legally and participated in the political life of almost the entire period of 1920s and 1930s (Hloušek & Kopeček, 2010b, p. 50). Currently KSČM is one of two Czech parliamentary parties with the longest, unbroken tradition. A characteristic feature of Czechoslovak communist regime is its genesis. Unlike in Poland, in Czechoslovakia after 1945 we had an authentic ideological clash between the Communists and other political camps. The Communists won this clash with democratic and non-democratic methods, and the Czechs are aware that the formation of the communist regime was simply

stage of historical development and was not imposed from the outside reality. “The Communists in Czechoslovakia were able to obtain a monopoly on power primarily through their own strength, with Soviet help playing a secondary role” – Hloušek and Kopeček wrote (2010b, p. 53). We must remember that the revolt against the regime, such as the Prague Spring in 1968, Charta’77 and finally Velvet Revolution does not have the character of anti-communist in the sense of an ideological dispute. In fact, looking at the end of the regime in Czechoslovakia, it is difficult to point out any real ideology. Bureš writes that the communist ideology was replaced with only empty phrases, which in addition to acting of the Secretary-General of the Communist Party, Miloš Jakeš, became something of a caricature (Bureš et al., 2012, p. 23). The Velvet Revolution did not bring any new ideas in this place. Suk writes even about the “ideological emptiness” (Suk, 2010). So the events of November and December 1989, did not close the period of communist ideology, because that one has vanished several years ago. Opposition to communism in the late 80’s was primarily due to the fact of deteriorating economic situation in Czechoslovakia, and even then there were opinions that reforming the system is enough resolution. We must remember about one more characteristic element of changes in Czechoslovakia – Czech emigration practically did not participate in the transformation (unlike very active Slovak immigration). This is important, because – as show the examples of Poland and Lithuania – emigration had a strong inclination to the right-wing with the strong anti-Communist accents. In the Czech Republic, again unlike in Slovakia, there was also no influence of the Church in society – the face of the Church in the XX was strongly shaped by the anti-Communist slogans.

The nature of the Czech communist regime has influenced the way in which it was assessed after 1989. Issue of settling of accounts with the communist past was an abstract idea, a feeling that it is necessary somehow summarize the history and learn from it. When substantive discussions about the details has started, it turned out that there is no ideas. Settling of accounts with the communist past had no form of ideological debate, which would affect the very essence of the system. Czech had not passed ideological cleansing, like e.g. denazification after 1945 in Germany. However in sense of compensation the settlement was limited almost exclusively to officials and agents of the security services. Symbolic were the words of Václav Havel, who in 1989, reminded his citizens that one million seven hundred thousand Communists did not create “a different biological or moral species than the rest of us” (Suk, 2010, p. 26). After 1989, the Czechs and Slovaks had to solve many fundamental problems: it was necessary to carry out economic reform, to discuss Czech-Slovak relations, to create a party system after the collapse of the Civic Forum, to hold elections – and there was a feeling that decommunisation and settlement cannot help in any of

these. Cabada wrote, that in the course of the first few months of the transition to democracy, the Czechoslovak society was inclined toward to consensus and active anti-communism was not a crucial factor. It was no accident that the opposition Civic Forum emphasized the slogan “We are not like them”. The opposition wanted to highlight their human nature being in contrast with the character of communist government and it excludes any radical solutions (Cabada, 2015, p. 13, 15).

Jan Bureš says without any revolutionary romanticism: anti-Communist slogans, which appeared in Czechoslovakia since the Velvet Revolution, resulted often from desire to get rid of the representatives of the former political elite, especially at the local level, and from willingness to take their seats (Bureš et al., 2012, p. 89). This corresponds with the assessment that communism was not bad as a system, but was spoiled by people, as though many Czechs. But it is the fact that, despite the limited range of decommunisation, in Czechoslovakia political elites had been exchanged to a degree significantly greater than in the case of Polish or Hungarian (Waisová, 2011, p. 35). However, it was not the effect of violent settlements, but a very pragmatic decision. In Poland and Hungary in the late 1980s between political elites was a group of modern technocrats, ideologically distant from the orders of the regime and they could involve in the process of democratisation. Meanwhile, in communist Czechoslovakia, the only criterion for inclusion in the elite of power was absolute loyalty to the Party. These people were not able to build a democratic reality. There was a choice between the total replacement of the political elite or remaining under partial influence of hard-line representatives of the former regime. Fortunately first path had been chosen (Waisová, 2011, p. 36).

The KSČM has never really distanced itself from the past, however it has admitted “some mistakes” in the history of communism (Mareš, 2008, p. 307). In the new political reality, the Communist Party got rid of Soviet symbols officially, and even apologized the citizens of Czechoslovakia for the mistakes of the regime, including the repression and violations of rights and freedoms (Kunštát, 2013, p. 124). Thirty communists officials accused of the greatest responsibility for abuses and errors, was expelled from the party. Program of the party approved in 1991 rejected the Marxism as a closed system and the notion of a “proletarian dictatorship” as an ideological relic of the last century and inapplicable to an advanced civic society (Strmiska, 2002, p. 225). On the wave of change and according to the experiences of other Central European countries, the idea of transforming KSČM into a social democratic party was launched. At the end of 1991 was conducted internal referendum on renaming the party and tipped the word “communist”. The vast majority of party members, 76 percent, voted against this idea (Cabada & Šance, 2005, p. 166; Hloušek & Kopeček, 2010b, p. 54). The Communist Party not only decided to refuse the social democratic

revisions, but even became more dogmatic. Proponents of liberalisation left the KSČM ultimately and tried to establish new left-wing parties – the Democratic Left Party (*Strana demokratické levice*), which, however, did not achieve any success and was liquidated in 1997. (Kubát, 2010, p. 120–121). Inside the Communist party not only liberal factions had appeared but also extremely dogmatic. In 1993 was founded inner group “For socialism!” (*Za socialismus!*) in KSČM. Its leader, Miroslav Štěpán, was removed from the party soon and formed his own Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická Československa strana*), which criticized the KSČM from dogmatic positions. This party has not achieved any success in the elections (Bastl et al. 2011, p. 37–38).

In the mid-1990s the KSČM left everyone who was dissatisfied with the party line, both liberals and hardliners. At that time, support for the Communists began to grow and the ideological line of the party was considered as optimal and most appropriate to the expectations of voters (Bureš et al. 2012, p. 295). However, internal discussions are ongoing, although no longer as strong. It is possible to find three internal currents in the KSČM: reformers who accept communist past, but criticize Stalinism and some errors of later eras, they positively assess the changes of the Prague Spring in 1968, they are opposed to membership of the Czech Republic in the EU, but in favour of the use of the opportunities it brings. Dogmatists who fully accept communism, including the Stalinist era, they criticize the Prague Spring, and they take the Velvet Revolution for counter-revolution. The third group, neo-communist pragmatists, occupy a position between the two extremes (Bastl et al., 2011, p. 27–28; Mareš, 2008, p. 307).

It is difficult to determine the true ideological nature of the Czech Communists, because of differing messages there are addressed to the outside and inside the party. The researchers note a clear difference between the image of the party created on the basis of the official program documents, and coming from the statements at meetings, demonstrations, informal meetings or internal documents. In the former case, the image is much milder and moderate (Hloušek & Kopeček, 2010a, p. 71; Kunštát, 2013, p. 160). Regardless of some obstacles, we can conclude that the KSČM does not refer to the classic slogans of revolutionary communism. Strmiska stressed that „the KSČM cannot be classified as a purely ultra-orthodox communist or genuine neo-communist party, even though some neo-communist traits are clearly also present” (Strmiska, 2002, p. 236). The party focuses on social issues, rejects capitalism, which is considered as the cause of deepening problems of the contemporary world, and considers state property as the dominant form of economic relations (although it accepts private property too). The Communists want to build a “modern socialist society” without exploitation and with wide social rights. They reject privatisation and

are in favour of examining and revising the process of ownership changes. In foreign policy they are anti-American and anti-German (especially in the context demands the return of property of the former German minority) and against the presence of the Czech Republic in NATO (Kunštát, 2013, p. 192–195). During the negotiations for EU membership the Communists presented a rather “soft no”. During the referendum campaign the KSČM appealed to their voters to vote against the accession, although there was communists politicians who supported the Czech membership in the EU. It is estimated that among the 3.4 million Czechs, who voted against the EU in the referendum was only 200 thousand voters of KSČM; in the elections to the European Parliament the Communists received 473.000 votes (Bastl et al., 2011, p. 23). Czech Communists have strong representation in the European Parliament, considered to be active and substantively prepared.

### **KSČM as an alternative to the system**

Hloušek and Kopeček (2010b, p. 55) stressed, that “KSČM was successful after 1989 in creating a strong, nostalgic subculture, ostracized by the outside world; with its own norms, values, and associate organizations”. However, the Communists did not achieve success if they had only their core voters encouraged by nostalgia for the old times. The study of political preferences shows that 26% of KSČM voters (between voters who are not the party members, only 16%) said that he fully supports the program of KSČM. The next group of 17% voters recognizes that this program is close to them, but in most cases these people have a different view (Kunštát, 2013, p. 225). This leads to the assumption that the Communists are building their support, not because they have an attractive program and not because they are a party identified with the past. Interesting in this context are studies assessing the situation in the country. In 2010 72% of KSČM voters assessed that the situation in the Czech Republic is bad, and only 7% that is good (Kunštát, 2013, p. 129).

We can raise the question of whether the KSČM does not play just the role of the party of protest in Czech conditions. Perhaps it attracts voters not by its program, but it is a choice for those who do not like the situation in the Czech Republic for political, economic or social reasons? The Communists, as we know, never participated in the government, what helps them to take the electorate dissatisfied with the effects of transformation and relations in the country. Even a decade ago, D. Kunštát wrote that the KSČM began to attract former voters of different parties, both left-wings and extreme right-wings, that lost their chances of electoral success (Kunštát, 2004). The Czech Communist achieved the greatest success in the elections of 2002, when they presented themselves as a protest alternative never connected with the executive

or with the repercussions of the economic transformation primarily convincingly (Kopeček, Pšejka, 2008, p. 331). When in 2006 a broad diagnosis of the voters of the Communist Party was performed, it turned out how big is the untrusted to the state institutions. The assessment showed that 84% of them do not trust the Senate, 66% do not trust the Chamber of Deputies, and 61% do not trust the President of the Republic. However, more than half of KSČM voters (58%) trusted the government, but it was a social democratic government then (Stegmaier & Vlachová, 2009, p. 808). The image of the Communists as an alternative to the political reality is extremely strong. In 2010 KSČM was the only anti-system party, which exceeded the election threshold. Three years later the Chamber of Deputies entered three anti-system parties, and yet support for KSČM clearly increased. For three years, the number of voters KSČM increased by 150,000 votes despite the emergence of strong competition. This shows that the KSČM as a party of protest is extremely reliable.

In the literature we can find discussions on the anti-system nature of KSČM. Kunštát presents this discussion widely (2013, p. 258–265). It is difficult question, first because of the unclear definition of anti-system party. In the literal sense an anti-system party is seen as a threat to the regime, and even to democracy. However, the literature also allows us to look at anti-system parties from the perspective of ideological difference between one party and the other parties of the system, in respect to issues of crucial importance for the regime in which these parties operate. This approach do not require an opposition to values that are fundamental in all democracies (Capoccia, 2002, p. 10).

Strmiska (2002, p. 227) suggests even a link between anti-system program of Communists and low possibilities of its implementation in this way that they can propose radical solutions, knowing that they have not a chance to implement its policy proposition. Kubát (2006, p. 553), following Giovanni Sartori, who is considered the most important theoretician of anti-systemness, emphasizes that the probability of achieving the goals is not a criterion of anti-system party. The fact that anti-system party cannot, for various reasons, to change the system of government, does not mean that is no longer the anti-system party. But from the point of view of the problem posed in this article, this probability is important. KSČM cannot and does not want to restore the former system of government. Regardless of whether it is still the party of anti-system or not, this fact undermines the thesis that political transformation in Czech Republic is not completed.

Bureš wrote about “non-acceptance” of the basis of the contemporary political and market economy system” by the Communist Party (Cabada, 2015, p. 20). However “non-acceptance” does not mean “striving for a complete change” automatically. “The changes were to be realized through non-violent and democratic means, and

in their program documents the Communists avoided any mention of revolution. Officially at least, there was to be respect for parliamentary democracy” – Hloušek and Kopeček wrote (2010b, p. 55). Hanley argues, that despite playing the role of an anti-system party, KSČM has in practice scrupulously conformed to democratic norms since 1990. “Thus, despite their conservatism and orthodoxy in comparative terms, its politics do nevertheless represent a significant move away from those of its totalitarian predecessor party” (Hanley, 2002, p. 164).

The Communist Party attributes special importance to the “ordinary and under-privileged people”, to the right to work, the principle of fair remuneration of work, demand for full employment, a radical increase in pensions and the development of health and social insurance scheme. The communist electorate is the oldest, the least educated and the least earning one, living mainly outside large cities, in areas with the greatest social problems, the weakest growth and the highest level of unemployment. For those voters ideological issues are of secondary importance. For those people the Communist Party seems to be a best chance to solve their problems and not an ideological appealing project.

## **Conclusions**

How to evaluate the Czech transformation in the context of the activities and successes of the Communist Party? First, we must accept the assertion that political transformation does not necessarily mean a total negation of the previous regime. There was no example of transformation, where we cannot find relics of the old order in the new public institutions, law, personal relationships, political, economic and social relations or even in human mentality and habits. The Czech Communist Party is a relic of a significant scale, but that does not mean that exceeds the limit beyond which we can no longer speak of a complete transformation.

The Communist Party is build its support among on longing for the past, it's true. However, it does not promises the return to the past, the negation of all the achievements of contemporary times and restore the previous system. Criticism of the current situation is an element of political competition present in the programs and activities of many parties of the democratic world. Recalling the past as the ideal world is not a goal but it's a way. The Communists, although they are continuators of the Communist Party that ruled Czechoslovakia for 40 years in a straight line, are not simply the party of the past. They are interesting in a current situation and have ideas how to solve today's problems, even if that are utopian ideas with the mark of the past. Importantly, many people voting at the KSČM are indifferent or even critical of the past. He treats this party as an alternative, even symbolic, for the

ruling parties. It expresses its dissatisfaction with the present, regardless of how they evaluate the past.

For many people in the Czech Republic, the existence of the Communist Party is not a relic of the past, but rather a natural part of political rivalry. This mind applies not only to the present, distant for the transition period. According to a survey of spring 1990 72% of Czechoslovaks saw the Communist Party in the democratic party system (Kunštát, 2013, p. 156–157). Recognition of the communists as a natural part of the democratic party system is partly due to the fact that they earned such position before World War II and the seizure of power by the Communist Party in 1948 is treated as a natural result of political and international developments. Strmiska explicitly said: belief, that KSČM embodies an unreformed, “fossilised” communist party operating under an unchanged name, an anti-system or even “extremist” political force is “oversimplified and misleading definition fails to reflect the KSČM’s specific inner dynamism and context of development of the party” (Strmiska, 2002, p. 220)

Many voters supported the Communists not because they have a chance to restore the future, but because they cannot do it. It is a safe expressing of dissatisfaction with the government, without the risk of changes for the worse. There is no chance for returned to the communist regime in the previous shape in the Czech Republic. Today’s reality cannot be treated as a temporary departure from the previous system. That regime is definitively ended. Even if the KSČM will win the elections once, or create a coalition government, it does not mean the return of the old regime. KSČM is certainly a different party than the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, although it continues its history, with personal and organisational relationships, and quotes some issues from the old program. Importantly, there is no evidence that the Communists kept unofficially impact on political, economic and social changes in the Czech Republic throughout the period after the Velvet Revolution and unofficially decided on its development.

The presence and success of the Czech Communist Party does not has a precedent in other Central European countries. They could arouse surprise and justified doubts whether the political transformation after the Velvet Revolution was a success. However, the presence of the Communist Party and its impact on the situation in the country does not mean that the transformation stopped halfway or was uncompleted. Position of KSČM due to the characteristic of the situation in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic after 1989. The course, pace and effects of changes were different in different countries, as different was the nature of the previous regimes. The transformation in the Czech Republic can’t be assessed on a comparative scale. The transformation rating must be carried out for each country separately. For the Czechs, the existence of the Communist Party, despite the bad experiences from the years 1948–1989,

is the natural element of reality, which negates the achievements of transformation in no way. The Czech Republic is not a country built from scratch. In public, legal, social and economic life we can find relics of various historical periods, often in the same form. The transformation of the political system in the Czech Republic ended in a way that was natural and appropriate to the conditions of the country and, despite the problems with finding in a new reality, acceptable to the society.

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## Author

Professor Dr Hab. Marcin Czyżniewski

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Department of Eastern Europe. Contact details: ul. S. Batorego 39L, 87–100 Toruń, Poland; e-mail: [mcz@umk.pl](mailto:mcz@umk.pl).