



**Jirí Pehe**

## A toothless dog

The Czech government is facing a crisis after the collapse of the coalition between the Civic Democrats, Christian Democrats, and Greens formed following the parliamentary elections of June 26. New coalition talks are underway between the Civic Democrats and Social Democrats, the runners up in the election. But the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM), which came in third place with 13 per cent, has been sidelined from all coalition talks. Politologist Jiri Pehe asks why the KSCM attracts votes despite subscribing to an ideology that is clearly unfeasible.

One of the most frequent questions asked by foreign journalists is this: How is it possible that an unreformed communist party has such strong support in the Czech Republic? The question is a valid one, particularly when one considers that the country is a relatively stable and economically prosperous democracy. In such an environment, one would expect very little support for the ideology offered by the Czech Communist Party. In reality, very few Czechs are actually asking what this party truly represents.

### **The scrap-heap of history**

The main difficulty in understanding the strong influence of the KSCM stems from the false perception that the party is an extreme leftwing party. Its pre-WWII communist era (1948–1989) predecessor, which seized power after the Second World War, could undoubtedly be described as being geared towards the ideology of classical Marxist utopianism. In those days, the Czechoslovak Communist Party was characterized not only by its stated aims of economic egalitarianism, a classless society, and the replacement of existing democratic and economic models, but also with the notion of a pan-global struggle designed to spread communism to all parts of the globe.

After the communist parties came to power, they quickly proved that their utopian classless societies could not be realized and that the elimination of multi-party democracy through absolute state power invariably leads to authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Despite this, communist parties continued to cling to the notion of internationalism. Their verbal attacks against the West were framed as class warfare waged against "imperialists" and "capitalists". In this regard, communist ideology could easily be described as far-Left rather than nationalistic.

The present-day KSCM has kept several of these ideological tenets, but it has also had to abandon many. Tactically, the present day KSCM can no longer afford to speak of a dictatorship of the proletariat or of worldwide revolution. Rather, it presents itself as a party that respects the rules of a democratic

system, whilst advocating what many would view as a far-Left economic position. But even in the economic sphere, the present-day KSCM is far from advocating wide-scale re-nationalization and the annulment of private ownership. The party's rhetoric has instead shifted towards a defence of social justice within the framework of the current economic system.

Meanwhile, the battle against capitalism has adopted a new form. Today, the KSCM views globalization as the greatest embodiment of the evils of capitalism. And because communism is based on the Marxist notion that the foundation is the key to the structure, the party views new forms of global administration, such as the EU, as the embodiment of the domination of global capital. The nation state, which under the old communist perception of the global "internacional" was meant to wither away, has now been transformed into a fort which must be defended against the onslaught of global capitalism. Thus, in the last fifteen years, communist parties have become considerably nationalistic.

In this sense, today's communist ideology shares much common ground not only with the far-Right, but with much of the mainstream Right as well. In recent times, the Right has also undergone an ideological shift. Traditionally, it was geared towards the undiluted free flow of capital; today, it too argues against reducing the role of the nation state in the global political process. It frequently calls for a strong national state, able to stand up to both global economic pressures and pan-global institutions.

Thus, paradoxically, the main proponents of globalization have arguably become the social democratic parties, which, like the Communists, emerged from a viewpoint which was critical of capitalism. If we accept the communist definition of globalization, then it could be argued that social democratic parties are the greatest proponents of global capital and other facets of globalization, for example, pan-global institutions.

## Clean hands

In the case of the KSCM, the shift towards nationalism was brought about not only by a necessary post-Cold War ideological shift, but also by tactical considerations. At some point during the mid-1990s, the KSCM realized that there was a portion of the Czech populace that had rejected the current democratic system but was also not naturally adherent to far-Left politics. After the failure of the short-lived nationalist Czech Republican Party in the 1998 Czech parliamentary elections, the KSCM shifted its rhetoric notably into an arena hitherto occupied by the Right.

This ideological shift towards ultra-nationalism is arguably one of the keys in the continued influence of the KSCM. Today, the party fills the role that is occupied by Jörg Haider's Austrian Freedom Party in Austria and Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front in France. Naturally, the failure of the mainstream Czech political parties has also played a significant role. They failed to give the communist party an ultimatum — either apologize for the past and undergo reforms similar to those undertaken by their compatriots in other countries or face being outlawed. Since the Velvet Revolution, there have been several attempts to have the KSCM outlawed, all unsuccessful.

Instead, the democratic parties chose to make toothless declarations and pass weak laws designed to "bring to justice" those responsible for the crimes of the former regime. Even though the KSCM has continued to resist all attempts at

wide-scale reform, it continues to exist within the framework of the Czech democratic multi-party system. Initial opinions, which suggested that, due to the demographic makeup of the party, it was only a matter of time before it ebbed away into insignificance, soon proved to be wrong. Suddenly, the Czech political spectrum had to contend with the fact that the KSCM wasn't going to go away.

On the one hand, the KSCM has continued to have a high level of visibility, primarily because it has a notable share of seats in the Czech parliament. On the other hand, with zero coalition potential, it has successfully avoided having to bear any responsibility for the post-revolution governance of this country. In this sense, it can sit back and play the white sheep amongst the wolves of the political establishment.

The mainstream political parties have always claimed (often for the sake of scoring political points) that they categorically rule out any kind of cooperation with the KSCM, despite much cooperation in local politics. Thus, the KSCM has found itself in a very unique and advantageous position in that it is able to use its high profile to criticize the policies and actions of its opponents whilst taking no responsibility whatsoever for the running of the country. Over time, the party has also shaped itself into a party of protest, attracting many voters who are sick of the mainstream political establishment.

### **The social democratic factor**

One other very "Czech" factor has also contributed to the relative popularity of the KSCM. The Czech Republic is the only eastern European post-communist country in which a strong social democratic party has emerged and grown independently rather than emerging from a reformed or defeated communist party. Whether this is a positive or negative fact is best left to historians. In Hungary or Poland, the "problem" was solved by the communist parties transforming themselves and becoming part of the political mainstream. These parties then undertook the same open-market reforms that the Czech Social Democrats undertook. This resulted in a far less polarized society and avoided the problem of a political party with no coalition potential holding on to a block of 20 per cent of parliamentary seats.

However, a counter-argument can be made that a strong barrier between the Social Democrats and the Communists has proven to be far healthier for the Czech political system. It is true that there are several former Communists within the ranks of the Social Democrats, and this arguably gives the party a different kind of political legitimacy than the post-communist parties (Editor's note: the Centre-Right Civic Democrats also have several high-profile members who were once members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party). But Communists serving within an overtly communist party are arguably far more visible than if they were hidden within a party camouflaged as a modern democratic Centre-Left grouping.

### **From wall to wall**

This specific division of the Czech Left into the Social Democrats and the Communists has existed in the Czech consciousness since the defeat of the Prague Spring in 1968. During the post-1968 normalization era, the KSCM cleansed itself of all reformist voices and essentially became a neo-Stalinist party, in contrast to Poland or Hungary, where reformists were gaining ground. This meant that in 1989, as Czech streets were full of protesters, the party

lacked the necessary voices to transform it to democratic, modern Centre–Left politics.

Today, non–communist voters find themselves in a dilemma about how to deal with this party. Reactions range from moral condemnation — particularly in light of the KSCM's failure to apologize for past crimes — right through to unperturbed pragmatism. Whilst the moralists openly call either for the outlawing, boycotting, or renaming of the party, pragmatists maintain that we should accept and come to terms with the existence of this party in Czech politics. What one cannot deny is that around one in six Czechs continue to vote for this party.

A key problem presented by the KSCM is the simple truth that Czech society as a whole has not yet come to terms with its communist past. The militant anti–communism of many of today's democrats only masks the fact that a significant part of Czech society was entangled in a web of collaboration and support of the old regime. As former dissident Václav Havel wrote in his book *The Power of the Powerless* (1990), the communist system entangled in its web all of those who were not openly opposed to it. Ceremonies at which attendance was compulsory, and a whole series of other mechanisms, meant that in truth you were either with the party or against it.

### **A harmless evil?**

The trauma of the communist experience and the continuing inability to confront the issues posed by today's KSCM have another notable effect: one has trouble placing the former regime and its practitioners into an applicable historical context. Communism was able to survive as long as the ruling elites were able to manage the flow of information and the movement of people. The absolute unification of political, economic, and ideological might, held by a small coterie of party apparatchiks, required a great deal of centralization. Such authoritarian might is impossible today, as people have access to wide ranging sources of information.

There is also the fact that today's KSCM may well have undemocratic tendencies, but that it lacks the means to facilitate them. The communist world has fallen apart and today the Czech Republic is a member of NATO. Furthermore, the country continues to have strong memories of the communist experience and therefore remains far more sceptical than it did in 1948 when the defeat of fascism made communism an attractive inevitability to many. Many Czechs in the political and cultural establishment continue to warn of the dangers posed by the ascent of the KSCM, but are often unable to point out how this party could actually threaten our freedoms.

### **A moral problem**

Simply put, the KSCM is no longer a danger in the sense that it will attempt to create a totalitarian dictatorship. The foundations of Czech and European society make this all but impossible. Further, many Communists themselves would surely not wish for a return to the old days, since many of them have found success and prosperity within the new system. They know full well that any attempts to create a communist regime today would lead to consequences entirely different than those that existed when they came to power in 1948.

Naturally, the existence of the KSCM in its current form remains foremost a moral problem. However, this problem is far larger than the KSCM. It

continues to be particularly difficult to express moral indignation solely at a political party, when wider society remains entrenched in the post-normalization era mentality. In this sense, the KSCM exists as a mirror of a society, which needs to come to terms with and reform itself.

The continued electoral success of the KSCM and the failure of efforts to do away with or reform the party have had the effect of weakening the resolve of the other political parties to continue to boycott it. Because of this, there has been an inevitable slide by the Social Democrats towards further co-operation with the Communists. Prior to the recent parliamentary elections, the ruling three-party coalition of the Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, and Freedom Union essentially collapsed, existing only on paper. The Social Democrats increasingly began to rely on the votes of Communist MPs in passing legislation. It is perhaps difficult to condemn this in light of the Right's intransigence and inability to work more closely with the Social Democrats, which would make isolating the Communists far easier.

### **The biggest problem**

If we ignore for a moment the negative moral and emotional effects of a potential government coalition with the KSCM, the true threat posed by such a coalition would actually be minimal, particularly if the KSCM had a minority voice. A coalition between the Social Democrats and Communists could mean significant concessions by the Social Democrats in the economic field, but even so, the limits within a global and EU framework remain clear. Whilst it could be easy for the Social Democrats to defend their reliance on the silent support of the communist party to their own constituents, the KSCM would have a far harder task. They would have to explain to their constituents that they had become a minority partner in a coalition government that would almost certainly betray most of the fundamental principles of communism.

Ultimately, all protest parties have problems working within the framework of the democratic establishment. Working in the very system that the party's principles berate often seems to be the ultimate act of selling out one's ideals. This then results in a certain degree of fragmentation as happened to both the Communists in France and the far-Right Freedom Party in Austria.

### **A reality check**

The June elections have indicated that the Communist Party's success in the elections in 2002 (the party then won 18 per cent of the popular vote) was possibly an aberration. Many voters, it seems, reacted at that time to a highly unpopular opposition agreement — a hidden grand coalition between CSSD and ODS between 1998 and 2002. The fact that the Communist Party won only 13 per cent of the votes in this June's elections was undoubtedly also caused by a higher voter turnout than in 2002. In general, however, it seems that the Communist Party has a greater problem: post-election surveys show that very few young people voted for the party. Clearly, the real strength of the Communists (and supposed dangers associated with it) had been grossly overestimated before the elections.

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