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Social Cleavages and Political Conflicts in the Contemporary Czech Society

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* From 1958-1970, Pavel Machonin, Dr. Sc., was a researcher, deputy director and director of the Institute of Social and Political Sciences of Charles University (Prague). After the Soviet invasion in 1968 he was excluded from all official scientific activities. He worked four years in an enterprise of a sports organization, then 14 years at a computer station. After 1989, he resumed his research activities at Charles University and the Sociological Institute of the Academy of Sciences. He co-initiated and/or led eight national or international research projects on social transformation and modernization. In 1991, he was elected Honorary President of the Research Committee for Social Stratification and Mobility of the International Sociological Association.

Abstract

There are a number of significant social cleavages and political conflicts within the population of the European postsocialist societies. The first one concerns the cleavage between the decreasing number of people who benefited from the “Ancien régime” and those who took advantage of the new developments over the past 12 years. The second one concerns cleavages based on ethnic differences, which are more important in South Eastern than in Central Europe. The third cleavage is the rapid polarization between the rich and the poor, which developed in the relatively egalitarian Czech social structure as a consequence of the rapid privatization and the sudden liberalization of both the economy and other spheres of life. These cleavages as well as some other conflicts influence the contemporary existing political relationships which – under Czech circumstances – are characterized by a relative balance of four main political currents. The optimal solution for the hybrid coexistence of these cleavages and conflicts would consist in strengthening the role of forces which are important for the development analogously to the more advanced postindustrial European models of social and political arrangements.

This paper was given as a lecture at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB), July 2001.

Social cleavages and political conflicts in the contemporary Czech society

I have been working more than 30 years in the field of social structure and change in state socialist as well as postsocialist societies in the Czech Lands, Slovakia, and other Central European countries, with increasing attention devoted to the processes of modernization, counter-modernization and, eventually, stagnation of modernity.

One issue of interest in this field which I have been asked to speak about here in Berlin are social cleavages and political conflicts developing in the course of postsocialist changes in medium-developed Central European countries, with stress on the data and problems of the Czech Republic. I prefer to explain my considerations in a rather medium-level theory language, turning your attention from time to time to those points, in which the Czech experience differs from that of other countries in our region. I am not going to compare it with the experience of East Germany, as - in spite of some similarities - this is based on a specific way of transformation, expressed by Professor Zapf's team as 'transformation through unification'. Analogies as well as differences in this case may become the subject of our discussion later on.

I have formulated in advance some main theses explaining the core of my considerations concerning the issue of my lecture. Here I am going to reproduce them and add some further explanations, argumentation and references to facts.

There are various types of factors originating in and forming various types of social cleavages and correlated political conflicts within the postsocialist societies.

Partly, these factors persist from the former state socialist system, and partly, to an increasing extent, from the newly developing social reality. They gradually emerge in the course of transformation and modernization in accordance with the creation of new conditions. That is also the order in which I am going to explain and comment them assuming that, in principle, their weight in the present societal structure so far roughly depends on the time distance from their emergence in this historical process - the significance of the older factors is rather decreasing, while that of newly emerging ones is increasing. I am sure that a historical causal nexus exists which explains the order and mutual relationships among those individual types, yet, I prefer to wait for some more

empirical proofs that would manifest these kinds of regularities before I am trying to generalize. However, I am convinced that the result will be highly important for the transformation theory.

The historically earliest of these factors, nowadays gradually losing its weight, is the influence of the state socialist past with its combination of totalitarianism and egalitarianism hampering the development towards a pluralist democracy, freedom and self-realization of the individual and the liberalization of the national economy on the basis of market principles.

This points out to our findings from the 1960s consisting in the statement of a symbiosis of totalitarianism and egalitarianism as the leading principle of state socialist structures, very distinctly appearing in the Czech and Slovak conditions. The regime tried to compensate for the lack of democracy by granting certain privileges to the lower social strata at the detriment of the better educated and qualified workers and citizens, while those less qualified and socially corrupted supported the equally not very qualified people at the top, in spite of the lack of democracy and even in spite of the communist elite's collaboration with the Soviet regime. This became evident during the so-called 'normalization period' between August 1968 and November 1989. This was practised by the lower strata only as long as their relative privileges lasted, that is until the economic means for this were not exhausted, which happened towards the end of the 1980s. With the exception of Poland, the main cleavages and conflicts in state socialist countries were those between the elite in power plus the state-controlled managers and the skilled part of society.

The second issue of the thesis is based on the assumption that the democratization actually represents the main direction of development in the first, transitory period of postsocialist transformation, that has already become known from the observation of historical reality. At its beginning the historical process of postsocialist transformation, according to A. Rychard (1993), included the same important components of transitory character.

The consequence of the first factor's influence is the existence of the social cleavage between a decreasing number of people having profited from the "Ancient régime" and those having found more advantages in the development over the last 12 years. In the political sphere, this is clearly reflected by the conflict between the still existing

majority of elderly communist voters and, eventually, of people boycotting (it does not matter if intentionally, or not) the present political system from populist positions, on the one hand, and of democratically thinking and acting people, on the other hand.

This first type of factors originates in tensions being impersonalized by the existing different attitudes and behaviour of people with various engagements in the “ancient” and the new system. However, as everyone of us knows, the concrete face of these conflicts is not so simple. Our statement is probably fully valid for the relationship of the poles of this differentiation: the elderly part of the past elites and their younger counterpart succeeding in the new system, for instance, as entrepreneurs, managers, politicians, or workers of successful (privileged) professions. As far as middle-aged people and/or middle-strata members are concerned, we can meet highly complicated patterns of attitudes and behavior. Part of the former managers in the second row and politically engaged people on the middle, or even lower level now make their successful careers and eagerly fight on the right-wing of the political scene, whereas many people from the middle strata who suffer from the surviving egalitarianism, like teachers or other unprivileged, mainly lower professionals (e. g. nurses), who had supported the “Velvet Revolution”, are disappointed now. And, of course, manual workers (especially the semi-skilled and unskilled ones) as well as rank and file (routine) non-manual workers sometimes, though with decreasing intensity, feel a certain nostalgia for the old times, based partly on bad experience with the collective downward development of the present. However, the victory of democracy and freedom, of pluralism and self-realization is still popular and highly evaluated by the majority of people, though far not all adherents of these ideas understand democracy in the same way and are ready to participate actively in these processes.

In some of the postsocialist societies the heritage of the state socialist system remained relatively strong. Specific reasons derived from their cultural and civic background as well as their historically developed national and ethnic structures facilitated the metamorphosis of the remnants of state socialist system structures into the second type of cleavages based on ethnical differences and conflicts. This seems to occur more frequently in South Eastern Europe.

I am not going to comment this thesis - it seems to me to be obvious and today beyond our topic.

In Central European countries, with some exceptions, this type of cleavages and conflicts is of minor significance. (Compare, e. g., the sudden disappearance of the Czech radical nationalists and populists - the Republicans - from the political scene.) It does not mean that this type of relationships is no more valid for the Czech lands. There are empirical observations which prove that nationalist tendencies still work. Nevertheless, I am not going to comment them in detail. Here are only some concrete examples: the hasty and, by the way, not too democratic way of the dissociation of federal Czechoslovakia at the beginning of 1993 as well as the cross-boundary clashes between the extreme positions of the Czech and German or Austrian nationalist movements, the increasing weight of the clashes between the pro-European expectations (sometimes rather idealistic) and the euro-scepticism, as well as the prevailing mood of the population against the possibility of an ethnical mass emancipation of the Roma population. This all corroborates the still not negligible weight of the specific relationships in our conditions, though so far it does not represent one of the key problems of transformation.

During the years 1990-1997, the third type of cleavages and conflicts developed, which were connected with processes of a rapid privatization and sudden liberalization of both economy and other spheres of societal life. They followed, in principle, the recommendations of the international economic institutions, however, in Czech conditions they were carried out by specific and not too successful methods like e. g. the voucher privatization. The economic effect was a substantial and sudden fall of the standard of living by 25 - 30 percent. And all this was carried out without any significant economic assistance from abroad. Simultaneously with certain improvements in the first half of the 1990s, the gradually developing economic recession following these institutional changes aggravated the situation approximately at the beginning of 1997. Within the relatively equalized Czech social structure a rapid polarization of incomes, wealth, political influence and power as well as prestige took place.

On the basis of various kinds of data, mainly from our survey "A Decade of Transformation" towards the end of 1999, we came to the following conclusion, which was already presented at the mentioned Prague symposium in May. We have reasons to assume that by now in our population approximately 5 - 8 percent belong to the quite rich and another 12 - 15 percent to the well-off people. As a whole, they represent the so-called "winners" of transformation, as some sociologists prefer to call them. On the other pole, we have fixed 20 - 25 percent of people endangered by poverty, and

approximately 5 percent of really poor people, both groups making up the "losers". There exists a broad zone of groupings with a medium level of wages and wealth between these two poles. Only part of them, however, can be characterized as the so-called (traditional) middle class, or (new) middle stratum. The reason for this is the fact that for most of them a distinct social status inconsistency is typical - in most cases their incomes and shares in management do not correspond with their education, complexity of work and lifestyle.

Social polarization and problems connected with the status inconsistency of the middle groupings became, step by step, the crucial axis of social inequality and the resulting political conflicts between left-wing / center / right-wing attitudes and behaviour scale. This was the reason for the swing to the left and for the installation of a social democratic government in the Czech Republic in 1998 (this government is still in office). In Poland and Hungary this happened somewhat earlier with subsequent new political shifts.

However, after several years of a social democratic minority government in power, with limited support of the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (after the 1998 elections), in a period when the consequences of the failures of economic policies from the first half of the 1990s continued to exist and a mass unemployment appeared in 1998 together with a new, temporary decline of real wages, in the Czech Lands the fourth, an until then rather latent type of social and political cleavages emanated and determined the attitudes and political behavior of the people. It was the polarization between the tendency of strict application of the principles of "civic society", sometimes even in a direct anarchist-liberal sense, and the tendency of an extreme authoritarian and bureaucratic application of the principles of the majority rule of the political parties and the "state of law". Though not in such a pronounced form as in the Czech Republic, this type of political cleavages and conflicts seems to exist in all Central European postsocialist societies. We have proofs for it, for example, from Slovakia and Poland.

The concrete causes of this phenomenon were, on the one hand, the tendency of limited mutual support of the government and the opposition CDP (Zeman and Klaus) and the use their majority at the detriment of other political forces (electoral law, pressure on the mass media) and, on the other hand, the clearly exaggerated counteractions of the political parties of the right-of-center bloc and the group around the President, including influential mass media and the Constitutional Court, aimed at the

denial of the principle of the ruling of a democratically elected majority and the valid law. We have compared this situation with a “divided ship”, not able to flow. The differentiation in this clash of ideas and behavior went clearly parallel to the differentiation along the left / center / right-wing cleavages. On one pole, social and civic democrats were allied to some extent, while the communists and the Coalition of Four, including the right-wing Union of Liberty and the right-of-center Christian Democratic Union, the People’s party, were concentrated on the other pole. Nowadays, this type of cleavages, the impact of which had its peak at the dawn of 2001, seems to weaken. This is mainly due to the government’s evident achievements in the economy and the accession process to the EU, the ongoing generational change in government, the political parties, as well as the decreasing influence of the Coalition of Four that has demonstrated to the public that they do not differ too much from the other political parties.

Unfortunately, only towards the end of the last century, after eight - ten years of postsocialist transformation it happened, what some scientists had predicted several years ago - compare (Gorzela et al. 1994) - in cooperation with teams from Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. The more general, and in the long run decisive fifth factor of social and political differentiation took effect and influenced societal change and political decision making. It is the postsocialist society’s relative civic and cultural backwardness, compared with the advanced European countries among the members of the European Union, which hampers its postindustrial development on the road towards a knowledge-based information society. The cleavage caused by this factor can be defined as a division between a minority of people and social groupings who are inclined to support moves towards a level corresponding with the approaching accession to the EU and those people who support a continued stagnation on the level of a half-modern, extensively industrialized society. (On the other hand, one must concede that the intensification of a restructured industrial production process represents a highly important internal resource for the coming postindustrial changes.) This differentiation is correlated with the level of education and qualification of the people and the axis of achievement or non-achievement. The cleavage dividing pro- and counter-modernization attitudes and behaviour finds its expression in political conflicts arising from the differentiation of political parties and movements along the right / center / left axis as well as from the differences between the adherents of “civic society” and “state of law”. In the case of the left-right scale, there is some minor

concurrence caused by education. On the other hand, there are supporters of modernization at the left wing of the political scene both among social democrats and communists and their sympathizers.

Under the conditions of the new modernization challenges, however, the problems of the national economy's sector and branch structure, the role of science, research and technological development as well as of education, communication and information, knowledge-based policy and management, rationalization of state administration, socially just meritocratic principles of differentiation of awards, modern ecological and health-care policies, a balanced approach to globalization and Europeanization, etc., nowadays represent the core of the most important set of issues which are to be settled in all Central European postsocialist countries (very likely including the East German lands). In the Czech Republic, they take a specific shape influenced by the traditional role of the Czech Lands in the European modernization process before they were included into the Soviet bloc, and the ideas of the reform movement of the 1960s as well as the still lasting relative modernity of the country in comparison with most of the other European postsocialist countries. For a detailed insight into this issue see a recent study of the author on modernization theory and the Czech experience. (Machonin 2000)

Besides the above-mentioned types of differentiating factors, in all the postsocialist countries there exist self-evident, so to speak "natural" sources of cleavages and potential political conflicts which, as a rule, interpenetrate the enumerated historical factors and co-determine their intensity and extensity as well as their qualitative relevant forms. The most important among them obviously are the generation gaps dividing the young, lower and the older middle-aged and elderly population, which are now accentuated by the changes in demographic behaviour and developments. A potential and highly important source of the emergence of societal problems are gender relations as well as regional differentiation.

Here, I would like to stress the problem of the generation gap, often actualizing itself in the case of profound societal changes of a long-lasting character. The young generation at the age of 16 to 30 years was very active in the "Velvet Revolution". Part of them managed to join the victorious march of the reviving entrepreneurship, of middle and higher managerial groups in prospering branches and of the new faces in democratic politics. Another part, mainly the youngest one, in many cases believe that they will get similar chances in the nearest future. According to the usual pattern of any

system change and simultaneous change of generations, young people are far more in favor of transformation and modernization than older people and have distinctly supported these changes in practice. On the other hand, the democratic representation of society is still in debt to the young generation in many respects: broader access to higher education, improvements in the system of vocational training for skilled workers shaped according to the actual needs of the labor market, sufficient offers of affordable housing for young families, social protection of children, support for studies and work abroad, etc. Only a relatively rapid succession of the younger generation in the political as well as managerial sphere can give incentives to mitigate this type of tensions and support social cohesion.

Conclusions

The interpenetration of the enumerated factors and their consequences for social and political tensions and conflicts are creating a typology of the main historically relevant social relationships in present-day postsocialist countries of Central Europe:

1. The surviving egalitarian relationships and the correlated status inconsistencies.
2. The emerging equality of opportunities and relationships based on meritocratic principles.
3. The emerging class-like polarization of the wealthy and the poor or of those who are endangered by poverty, of the people in power and the powerless, of the "famous" and the nameless.

All these types of relationships influence the existing political relationships, in which - in the Czech conditions - a relative balance of four main political streams is prevailing.

Thus, we have a hybrid coexistence of these types of cleavages and conflicts: no more socialism, however, a still relatively strong impact of its principles, not yet capitalism, which, incidentally, is many times emerging in the forms inspired by the

period of original accumulation, and a, by no means developed meritocratic structure stimulating further modernization. That means that the further development opens the chance for various alternatives and variants, and that the future is relatively open and waiting for a democratic choice of, let us hope, optimal solutions. In my opinion, an optimal solution consists in the strengthening of the role of differentiation, which is important for a development in the direction towards the more advanced postindustrial European models of social and political arrangements and a gradual mitigation of those dysfunctional cleavages and conflicts coming from the European as well as our own national past. On this basis, the increase of consensus unifying the democratic political, economic and cultural elite and of social cohesion of the society as a whole will be possible and probable in the coming years, though, unfortunately, not with definite certainty. In order to let the optimistic forecast become true, not only internal, but also positive external conditions (including some deliberate assistance from abroad, mainly in the direction of a successful and as early as possible accession to the EU), not only goodwill, but also much rationality as well as political skill will be needed.

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