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Hloušek, Vít

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Seeking a Type: the Czech Party System after 1989¹

Vít Hloušek

Abstract: *This article studies the issue of a typological categorization for the Czech party system. The author works from Sartori's concepts of moderate and polarized pluralism; the reasons for using this concept are laid out in the theoretical part of the text. An analysis of individual phases of development of the Czech party system shows that until the middle part of the last decade the Czech party system could not be fit into a single type. However, analysis of the current form of the Czech party system at the electoral and parliamentary levels shows that the today's Czech multi-party system displays the characteristics of a moderate pluralism.*

Keywords: *Czech party system, moderate pluralism, polarized pluralism*

The pluralistic Czech party system recently celebrated twenty years of existence. During that time there have been seventeen elections in Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic, to various chambers of various parliaments, four local elections, three regional elections, and two elections to the European Parliament. Twelve cabinets have come and gone, and the country has seen radical changes in its political, economic, and social systems, which have led to the establishment of a relatively stable parliamentary democracy.

Likewise the composition of the Czech party system from the standpoint of the relevant political parties is very stable compared to many of the other countries that have gone through a post-Communist transition. Of the six most important parties present in the Chamber of Deputies just prior to the 2010 election², two have continuity dating back to the 1920s (KDU-ČSL, KSČM), one party was re-founded after 1989 with its continuity having survived at least symbolically in exile (ČSSD), and two were founded at the turn of the 1990s (ODS, SZ). Only TOP 09 appeared as a new political formation during the Chamber of Deputies' last electoral term. It was registered in June 2009; however, a number of its founders come out of the KDU-ČSL or other previously-existing political parties.

Compared to the beginning of the 1990s, when the actual transition took place, there are far fewer political parties that can be labeled as relevant; that is, possessing

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² Not counting the representatives of the DSZ.

sufficient coalition or blackmail potential (Sartori 1976: 121–125). Even so, it is not as simple as it was ten or fifteen years ago to answer the question of what type of party system we have in the Czech Republic. Experts who have studied the Czech domestic transition and consolidation express certain reservations towards the Czech democratic transition and consolidation. They allow that the Czech Republic has succeeded in building a viable institutional framework for democracy relatively quickly and well, but at the same time note that Czech democracy still exhibits clear deficiencies in areas such as citizens' trust in democratic institutions and processes (Pridham 2009) or the ability of political parties to fully anchor themselves in society (Kopecký 2006: 132–135), which is most evident in the very low membership numbers of the Czech parties, or a general unwillingness by citizens to participate in politics through the parties. By way of illustration: an opinion poll from February 2009 revealed that only 7 % of citizens took part in activities by a political party in the community where they live; two years later that number had fallen to 4 % (CVVM 2009a: 5).

In one sense the fault lies with the Czech party system itself. Despite the relatively rapid consolidation in the number of parties, one of the fundamental systemic traits of the Czech system is an inherent instability, evident in the form of weak government coalitions with insufficient backing in parliament. This negative systemic trait has persisted throughout the 1990s and since. A second disputed element is the ideological distance dividing the relevant political parties, which is related to the presence of anti-systemic parties and the overall degree of polarization in the party system. Both of these elements make it more difficult to classify the Czech system.

The aim of this article is not to argue over how much of the blame is due to the institutional setup of the Czech political system, an electoral system that seems to generate results ending in stalemate (see Havlík – Kopeček 2008). Instead the purpose of this article is to consider various typologies for party systems and to show, within a given typology based on Sartori's idea of polarized and moderate pluralisms that the Czech party system has been moving towards a type of moderate pluralism in the context of the upcoming 2010 parliamentary elections.

Finding a typology for the Czech party system

Czech political scientists, and others, very often work with Sartori's classification and typology for party systems, even though there are a number of other party system typologies. A group of authors led by Gabriel Almond (Almond et al. 2001: 113–116) for example combined the "Lijphartian" dimension of conflictual or consensual party competition and a "Sartorian" dimension of the number of parties, which results in a matrix of nine ideal types of party systems. On the axis of polarization the authors defined conflictual, accommodative, and consensual models of

party behavior; while on the axis of numbers of party there are two-party, majority coalitions and multiparty systems. At first glance this combination seems interesting, but an automatic link between political culture, model of political system, and the number of relevant parties as an applicable but theoretically supportable typology, would require a broader explanation. Moreover in the case of a country like the Czech Republic, where the political system underwent a phase of democratic transition and is gradually consolidating, but the political culture itself oscillates between two poles, the application of this principle seems less than promising.

One recent textbook on comparative politics by Italian political scientist Daniele Caramani (2008: 327–332) works with categories of format, such as number of relevant parties, but drawing on Sartori it also defines types of political party: dominant-party systems, two-party systems, multi-party systems with two variants (moderate and polarized). Caramani introduces the term bipolar systems, which combines the characteristics of two-party and multi-party systems, because in a system with many parties two competing coalitions emerge – the poles of a party system. This modification is interesting; however from the perspective of Sartori's original emphasis on party competition it may be somewhat disputable. In any case this is not important for evaluating the Czech party system because except for short-lived exceptions (LSU, Quadcoalition) the main and minor poles of the Czech party system have developed as independent political parties, not as blocs or coalitions of parties.

Luciano Bardi and Peter Mair (2008: 148) point out that

„despite numerous studies focused mainly on party system change, theoretical interest in party systems has proved limited, with almost no substantial innovation since the publication of Sartori's classic work of 1976“.

The reason Sartori's typology of party systems has kept its place in so many textbooks on comparative politics (among them Axford 2002: 367–373) is not only Sartori's effort to find congruence between format and type of party system, it is also the perspective that Sartori offers. While keeping in mind the institutional and social context of a party system's evolution, Sartori sees the key parameters for the functioning of a party system as its actual structure, relationships between the political party, and form of party competition. At the same time he creates a relatively clear if not always easily applicable set of basic types, covering the entire range of empirical cases, which even 40 years later continues to display its heuristic potential. And so we, too, are unable to resist applying Sartori's classification and typology to the Czech party system.

However, in order to apply Sartori's typology and classification, we must examine one important prerequisite, and that is the structure of party competition. Sartori assumes what we might call a one-dimensional simplification. Although there may exist many various cleavages or points of tension between parties, there is one dimension of party competition that we can regard as most important for the voter as well as for the political parties themselves, which are able to define their positions in the framework of this dimension. In the West European countries this dimension is socio-economic cleavage, which defines the political right and left. In many Central and East European countries, however, it has not been possible to "fit" party competition into a single dimension, and thus Sartori's model has not been applicable. However this is not the case for the Czech Republic, with its political legacy of Communism and its previous path dependency (see Kitschelt 2001: 311–317) that limited the significance of other cleavages. Thus the dominant socio-economic cleavage (Hloušek – Kopeček 2008: 531–533; Kopecký 2006: 128–129; Mansfeldová 2004: 237–239) allows for this reduction of party competition to its most significant dimension.

The later history of party systems from the 1980s onward show up some of the problematic spots in Sartori's typology. These concern not only some characteristics of certain selected model types of party system, which we will discuss below (the concept of an anti-systemic party or the term "polarization"), but also some of the unspoken assumptions behind Sartori's approach. Sartori implicitly worked with a concept under which a single political system contained a single party system. The decentralization of (not only) European polities which has taken place in the meantime, has led some political scientists to reevaluate the dimension within which current party systems must be examined. Luciano Bardi and Peter Mair (2008: 154 and subsequent) in their article recommend working with three dimensions within polities: vertical, horizontal, and functional. The vertical dimension does not concern the Czech party system much, for it applies to a segmented society in which the reduction of party competition to left-right competition might not be applied; but this is not the Czech case. Bardi and Mair apply the horizontal division to countries in which there has been a federalization or major decentralization, and thus present an example of multi-level governance and therefore of multi-level party competition. The Czech Republic is not a strongly decentralized polity in which regional elections are an independent electoral contest of a major kind; instead the party system is structured primarily on the nation-wide level.

From the standpoint of research on the Czech party system, the greatest attention must be focused on a third potential division of the party system or party systems within a single polity – the functional division. This is because there is more than one separate arena of party competition. Basically, political parties must always work on

at least two different levels of competition – the electoral level, and in parliament. Bardi and Mair point out that while in some polities the influence of this division is negligible, elsewhere different rules of the game may apply for different arenas:

“These differences may be defined as those between the electoral party system, on the one hand, and the legislative or parliamentary party system, on the other... In the former, issue salience and party strategies will be determined by electoral goals, that is, by the pursuit of available votes... In the latter, considerations of coalition formation and maintenance will prevail. In the one, enmities may be at a premium; in the other, it may be friendship.” (Bardi – Mair 2008: 158)

Bardi and Mair add that in some political systems, government politics can be seen as a separate arena as well. Later we will take a look at current Czech politics in this regard. These observations add an interesting element to Sartori’s basic typology. In my opinion they do not necessarily undermine his typology as a whole, but point to aspects that for various reasons Sartori did not focus on. The biggest challenge, I think, is the vertical division of the party systems, the existence of which casts doubt on Sartori’s basic one-dimensional simplification of party competition. Fortunately in the Czech case neither the vertical or horizontal divisions apply, while any differences we find under the functional division of the Czech party system can basically be interpreted within Sartori’s concept.

It is clear from the outset, however, that we need not work with all of the elements of Sartori’s typology. From the beginning the Czech system developed as a multi-party system, but with a limited number of represented parties. That takes away the two-party system as well as atomized pluralism. At the same time, no political party has gained the dominant position. This leaves the categories of moderate and polarized pluralism between which the Czech system can be said to move. Let us briefly go over the basic characteristics of these two types of party system. Moderate pluralism is related to the term limited pluralism, and in a segmented political system to extreme pluralism as well. The rough dividing line separating limited and extreme pluralism according to Sartori is the number of six relevant political parties (Sartori 1976: 131). The basic characteristics of moderate pluralism are defined by Sartori (1976: 178–179) as follows: In this system there are more or less durable coalition governments, while none of the parties has the power to form a single-color majority government. In the government it is not single parties that alternate but coalitions of parties; however (1) the structure of party competition is basically bipolar. On the left and the right there are relevant political parties, all of which have coalition potential and are able to attract centrist voters; thus we can consider the structure of party competition to be (2) centripetal and (3) with a low degree of

polarization. This means that the relevant political parties are not so ideologically distant as to present permanent and growing barriers to cooperation, as is the case with polarized pluralism.

Polarized pluralism is usually associated with the format of extreme pluralism. Sartori (1976: 132–140) defines its basic traits as well: First, such a party system must contain relevant anti-systemic parties. It is clear that the definition of an anti-systemic party may present a problem, and Sartori himself admits that there are broader and narrower definitions of anti-systemic. Generally however he defines it as “*being anti-system whenever it undermines the legitimacy of the regime it opposes*” (emphasis by Sartori), as an “*opposition on principle*” (Sartori 1976: 133).³ Even this narrower concept of an anti-system opposition has shown itself to be problematic, though (Kubát 2010: chapter 4.2). Czech political scientist Michal Kubát, building on the ideas of Giovanni Sartori and also Italian Giovanni Capocchia, has tried to clarify the concept of anti-systemic. Kubát takes up Capocchia’s ideological definition of an anti-system party, and derives a definition of an anti-systemic party in terms of either its isolation or its distance from other political parties, which may not always mean the same thing. He recommends using the term anti-systemic party only for parties that truly work to de-legitimize the democratic political system, and at the same time are isolated within the framework of the political system. A party that is isolated but does not ideologically reject democracy should, according to Kubát, be categorized as an extreme party. A formation that ideologically calls for regime change, but is not isolated from the other parties, he labels as a masked anti-systemic party (Kubát 2010: chapter 4.5).

I fully agree with Michal Kubát that the term anti-system party without modification should be used only for those that fulfill the criteria of isolation within the political system, along with ideological subversion of the democratic system. It is a question, however, how to classify the masked anti-systemic party that promotes an anti-systemic ideology, but does not behave according to that ideology, and thus gradually improves its coalition potential. This question is more than just academic, as we will see, because just such a case is presented by the position of the KSČM within the Czech party system. If we maintain Sartori’s emphasis on party competition and internal systemic characteristics, by this logic ideology is actually a secondary parameter, while isolation of the party or ideological distance from other parties is more important. Therefore, we cannot automatically take the existence of an anti-systemic party as an indicator of polarized pluralism.

³ Theoretically an anti-system party could be the bearer of *any* ideology that undermines the existing regime. Theoretically such a party can be an illegal or semi-legal opposition in a non-democratic regime. Given our topic, Sartori’s ideas about polarized pluralism, and the clear “democracy-centered” nature of comparative politics, we explicitly assume for purposes of this text that by the regime we mean liberal democracy.

But back to Sartori's definition of polarized pluralism. In a polarized pluralism there is a bilateral opposition; the pro-system parties are attacked by anti-systemic parties from both the right and the left ends of the political spectrum. This leads us to a third characteristic, the filling of the space at the political center (in a functional, not ideological sense) by one or more political parties, which creates a multi-polar structure of party competition in which centrist parties must compete with the anti-systemic opposition on both the right and the left, while at the same time the anti-systemic parties are competing among themselves. This competition between the political center and the anti-system parties leads to polarization of the entire party system, the shape of party competition, and the competition for voters, as it tends to increase the ideological distance between the parties. This polarization in turn leads to a fifth characteristic trait, which is the predominance of centrifugal tendencies over the centripetal, shown especially in the weakening of electoral support for the parties of the center, and the strengthening of the extreme formations.⁴ A sixth characteristic is that polarized pluralisms function in an atmosphere of the growing ideologization of politics, of the role of ideology as a means of mobilizing voters by political parties grows, and a growing conception of politics as ideology by the public along with it. A seventh characteristic is irresponsible behavior by the opposition, the result of which is to limit the possibilities for alternation in government. Parties at the center of the system are "condemned" to govern, while an acceptable alternative to them is lacking. Both pro-system and anti-system opposition formations behave as though they will not be the ones bearing responsibility for actually governing in the future. And this strategy, determined by the systemic character of polarized pluralism leads to political competition becoming a kind of competition between exaggerated promises and outright political bribery.

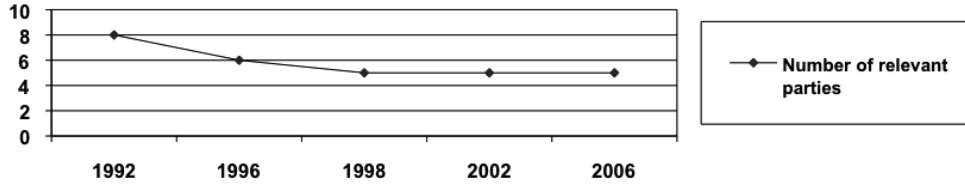
The format of the Czech party system: a trend towards reduction in the number of relevant parties

During the Czech democracy's consolidation phase, which for working purposes we can say began with the parliamentary elections in 1996 (see Ágh 1998: 160–162), the number of relevant parties in the Czech party system practically never moved beyond the format of limited pluralism. Not counting the period 1990–1992

⁴ Sartori understood polarization mainly as a property flowing from the structure of the party system as such. Meanwhile, however, especially in his six characteristics of a polarized pluralism, he acknowledged at least implicitly that there are other factors contributing to polarization having to do with the ideologization of politics. Riccardo Pelizzo and Salvatore Barbones (2007) in their text analysis of Sartori's examples of polarized pluralism (inter-war Spain, the Weimar Republic, France's 4th Republic, and Italy's 1st Republic) show that polarization also has a macro-economic context. This factor is important for analysis of pluralism in the post-Communist countries, especially during the democratic transition, for the worsening social situation suffered by many citizens as an inevitable part of economic transformation has been one of the factors in the polarization of politics there.

when there was much breaking up and reassembling of party clubs in both houses of the Federal Assembly and in the Czech National Council, this has remained the case for almost the entire era of the Czech party system since the “Velvet Revolution”, as illustrated by the following graph:

Figure 1: Number of parties represented in parliament during 1992–2009 (immediately after elections)



Source: www.volby.cz

During the period 1992–1996 the number of relevant parties corresponded to the format of extreme pluralism, though we must keep in mind that between eight electoral actors there existed three coalitions (always with a single stronger party – ČSS along with the LSU, ODS with the KDS, which merged with the ODS in 1995, and the KSČM in coalition with LB). After 1996 the Czech party system consistently maintained the characteristics of a limited pluralism. Theoretically this would have corresponded to a type of polarized pluralism until the mid-1990s and afterward a type of moderate pluralism. So how was it in reality?

Polarized pluralism: the trend of the 1990s?

The establishment and evolution of the Czech party system during the 1990s has already been sufficiently described (esp. by Pšeja 2005), so at this point we can focus on trying to classify the type of the Czech party system that was prevalent during the period from the transition itself to the phase of consolidation. We can leave aside the system’s formative period (December 1989 to June 1990): the character of the first phase of democratic transition and the fact that party competition was just beginning to form, and could only really be evaluated in the context of the elections in the summer of 1990, make it impossible to speak of a party system in any strict sense of the word (that is, not just a bunch of individual units, but a system for which some analyzable model of interaction exists). Instead we might term it a “set of parties” (Bardi – Mair 2008: 152–154), indicating an unevolved and very weakly structured arena of party pluralism in the new democracies. For further argumentation over the type of party system that evolved in the Czech Republic, what is important is that already during this initial period, two “sets of parties” – Czech and Slovak – had

begun to develop somewhat separately. Both sets moved towards forming a system in the strict sense of the word, but the system was not a Czechoslovak system. For the less than three years remaining of Czechoslovakia's existence, separate Czech (and separate Slovak) party systems formed which provided direct continuity despite the breakup of the federation (see Mansfeldová 2004: 228–231).

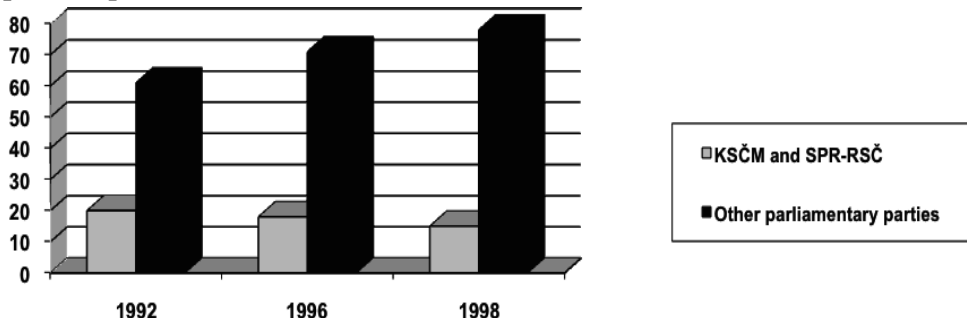
The period 1990–1992 was characterized by the fragmentation of some relevant actors (particularly the Civic Forum) and the crystallization of the model of party competition. Czech political scientist Miroslav Novák is undoubtedly correct when he rejects using for this period the criteria for determining the type of party system, such as polarization or fragmentation (Novák 1999: 133). The transformation process of the Czech party system was still in its intensive phase and happening too fast for a set of parties to become a party system.

Even so, some trends began to appear that showed the way to the next period. First there was the breakup of the Civic Forum. Among the parties that emerged, those declaring a right-wing orientation (the ODA and particularly the ODS) dominated in terms of voter preference (though not in the number of mandates). A process of crystallization also took place on the Czech left. Although the KSČM's abortive transformation process towards social democracy lasted until late 1992/early 1993, by the end of that electoral term it was obvious that the KSČM would remain a formation that was clearly on the left side of the Czech party spectrum, but because of its lack of ideological transformation and its already clearly anti-systemic character, its status was that of an anti-systemic formation the other parties would be unwilling to work with. The weak political position and poor electoral returns of the regional, agrarian, and to an extent also the Christian democratic parties KDS and KDU-ČSL, showed that a model of party competition was emerging oriented towards the right-left scale, with other cleavages being of lesser importance (see Novák 1999: 136–137). The KSČM's anti-systemic position and its isolation on the left created space for the establishment of a second strong pro-systemic formation on the left. During the interim period 1990–1992 this space was left unoccupied, though there were possible pretenders (particularly the ČSSD and ČSS). Finally the political space was successfully occupied by the ČSSD after Miloš Zeman became head of the party in 1993. Some other features emerged during 1990–1992 which would continue to characterize the Czech system in later years. There was a high degree of ideological polarization, related to crystallization of the terms “left” and “right”, not only in the area of content definition, which gradually approached that of the West European mainstream understanding (though the concept of the “right” was set by the ODS even earlier). This right-left polarization complicated the position of formations presenting themselves as centrist (OH). At the same time in parliament and in the Czech electorate, two parties established themselves that were clearly anti-systemic in both

Sartori's and Kubát's conception – the KSČM on the left and the SPR-RSČ on the right. The Czech party system was now well on the way to a polarized pluralism.

But was the period after the 1992 elections really a true polarized pluralism? Some characteristic features were fulfilled. A relevant anti-systemic opposition in the form of the KSČM and SPR-RSČ, which attacked the political regime as such, had a truly bilateral character. But centrifugal tendencies did not fully emerge. When we compare the aggregate electoral results of the two anti-systemic parties in 1992 and 1996, we find that they failed to “steal” the electorate away from the pro-systemic parties.

Figure 2: Combined electoral results for the KSČM and SPR-RSČ and other political parties in 1992–1998⁵



Source: www.volby.cz

On the contrary, the pro-system formations gained, the KSČM lost votes and the SPR-RSČ gained slightly. The crystallization of two strong alternatives – the ODS and ČSSD – occurred also because the pro-system part of the spectrum was unsuccessful in filling the space in the center. These two parties battled over centrist voters, and the left-right aspect of party competition was more significant than their competition against the two extreme parties. On the other hand the level of antagonism between ODS and ČSSD in the 1996 election campaign, and especially the sharp-elbowed tactics of the ČSSD, kept the ideological flames in Czech politics well-fanned (see Kunc 2000: 216–219). The ideological distance between the parties continued to be great, but not radically greater than prior to 1992. In favor of a diagnosis of polarized pluralism might be that there was no alternation in power before 1996, and the government of Václav Klaus, a coalition of right-wing parties, remained in office. However, immediately after the elections the ČSSD

⁵ For 1992 the results of elections to the Czech National Council are counted, in 1996 and 1998 elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. The SPR-RSČ is still counted in 1998, but afterward loses its relevance as it did not meet the electoral threshold.

did not behave like the typical irresponsible opposition that never thought it would find itself governing. Instead, their decision to abstain from the parliamentary vote allowed the seating of Klaus's minority cabinet. This would indicate that there was no insurmountable polarity between the two strongest parties. Thus we must conclude that developments in 1992–1996 do not allow for a clear categorization of the Czech party system according to Sartori, though if we disregard the existence of an anti-systemic opposition on both sides, most of the structural elements seem to indicate gradual movement towards a moderate pluralism.

It did not happen all at once. On the contrary, on first glance it might seem that the functioning of the Czech party system moved more towards a polarized pluralism.

The position of Klaus's minority governing coalition may seem similar to that of parties located in the center under the polarized pluralism model. To the right there was only the SPR-RSČ, and on the left the KSČM and ČSSD, the latter of which allowed the government to win a vote of confidence, but without giving it explicit support. During that period the degree of polarization and ideological distance between Czech political parties increased. As Maxmilián Strmiska pointed out, the ČSSD was able to get votes from pro-system and from protest voters, which prevented a potential rise in support for the anti-system KSČM. Neither the KSČM nor the SPR-RSČ were strong enough to establish themselves as a long-term and stable dual opposition with blackmail potential (Strmiska 1999: 164). At the same time the ČSSD remained the main competitor of the ODS over the status of strongest party. At least potentially there was now the nucleus of an alternative coalition between the ČSSD and ODS.

The crisis in the ODS in 1997 and 1998, together with the emergence of the US as Klaus's cabinet broke up, the seating of Tošovský's caretaker government, and early elections in 1998 opened up new possibilities for transforming the Czech party system. The 1998 elections eliminated the SPR-RSČ from parliament, and the KSČM remained as the only anti-systemic formation, ostracized by agreement of the other parties. It gained enough seats in parliament to complicate the formation of government coalitions. The main axis of party competition, between the ČSSD and ODS, was pushed against by two smaller parties, the US and KDU-ČSL, which tried to compete against the ODS for right-wing voters (US) or occupy the political center (KDU-ČSL). The surprise outcome of complicated negotiations to form a new government was an agreement between the ODS and ČSSD, the so-called opposition agreement, under which the ODS agreed to tolerate a minority government by the ČSSD.⁶ This alliance, which bore no formal

⁶ The official name was the "Contract for Creating a Stable Political Environment in the Czech Republic". In January 2000 the so-called "tolerance patent" was added to the contract; this was

or real resemblance to a coalition, and represented an attempt by the two main poles of the Czech party system to overcome a stalemated political situation by strengthening the majority or majority-forming elements in the electoral system. To oppose it the Quad-coalition was formed, of which the KDU-ČSL, US, and ODA were the main members (Roberts 2003). Interpreting the nature of party competition during the 1998 to 2002 period is difficult. Obviously it cannot be said to have had a bi-polar structure. Rather it was more of a multi-polar party competition, but the main issue was not to supplant the main pole of competition with competition against the anti-systemic parties. Despite the opposition agreement, competition between the ČSSD and ODS continued, with the Quadcoalition attempting to break in on both the parties.

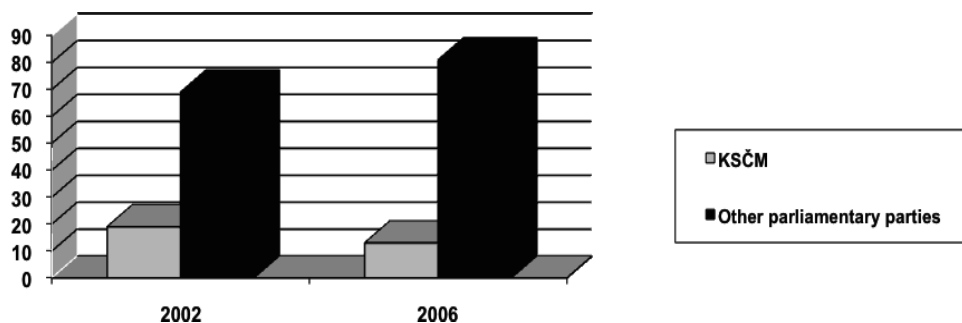
These developments, so characteristic of the second half of the 1990s, indicate how difficult it has been to classify the Czech system as a type. James Toole (2000: 445–446) labeled the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland as moderate pluralisms because support for extremist parties was not higher than in Western Europe and the ideological distance between the parties was small; but we must disagree with this as too simplified. As indicated above, certain tendencies towards moderate pluralism were present here, but elements also appeared such as the high degree of polarization in the party system and the existence of relevant anti-system parties, though by the end of the decade there was only one; this would tend to indicate a polarized pluralism. Perhaps more accurate is the opinion of Maxmilián Strmiska, who speaks of “*an incomplete and somewhat ‘defective’ pluralism*” (Strmiska 2000: 1) characterized by the fluctuating alternative models for assembling coalition governments, and a certain systemic instability, which makes it impossible for us to place Czech pluralism in the 1990s in either of Sartori’s above-described types.

The Czech party system’s second decade: towards a moderate pluralism?

The 2002 elections produced a number of interesting trends. The attempt by the Quadcoalition to break into the dominant axis of party competition between the ODS and ČSSD ended in failure (Hanley 2005: 45–46). The government coalition led by Vladimír Špidla included the ČSSD and both smaller pro-system formations, the US and KDU-ČSL. A very interesting result in terms of the debate over typology of the Czech party system were the gains by KSČM, which were something of an exception to the long-term declining trend of this party (see Pšejja 2009: 144–153).

a set of agreements on specific topics that the ODS and ČSSD were supposed to work together on (the Czech Republic’s entrance into the EU, reform of the Czech electoral system, etc.).

Figure 3: Electoral results for the KSČM and other parliamentary parties in 2002 and 2006



Source: www.volby.cz

The strengthening of the KSČM might tend to support the argument for a polarized pluralism in the Czech party system, but as I try to show below, it was during the 2002–2006 electoral term that there was a shift in the status of the KSČM within the Czech party system, or at least in the parliamentary arena. During this term there was also a personnel crisis in the ČSSD leadership, but with the accession of Jiří Paroubek to the head of the party in 2005 this crisis was resolved well in advance of parliamentary elections. The US was marginalized as a party, and its role as a secondary pole in the Czech party system was taken over by the SZ in 2006.

The 2006 election campaign signaled the bipolarization of Czech politics, linked to a strengthening trend towards bipolarization of Czech party competition. The campaign amounted to a duel between the two strongest parties, the ČSSD on the left and the ODS on the right, and the results reflected this. In terms of the right-left division of the Czech party system, the elections ended once more in stalemate, and a long period after the elections until a coalition government led by Mirek Topolánek was finally formed under somewhat dramatic circumstances between the ODS, KDU-ČSL, and SZ (see Hloušek – Kaniok 2009: 2–3). The circumstances of its fall were likewise dramatic; Topolánek's government lost a no-confidence vote in March 2009 halfway through the Czech presidency of the EU (Hloušek – Kaniok 2009: 5–6). Early parliamentary elections were rejected in a somewhat idiosyncratic decision by the Czech Constitutional Court, so another caretaker government was formed, this time under Jan Fischer, and was given support in parliament by the ODS, ČSSD, and SZ.

The situation before the 2010 elections shows the following trends. The position of the ČSSD and ODS as the two strongest poles in the Czech party system seems to be stable, even though the ODS has lost much ground since the 2006 elections. Besides these parties, the KSČM also has seats in parliament, as does the new conservative formation TOP09, which in effect split away from the KDU-ČSL and has tried to

take a position to the right of the ODS. In addition there are up to four small parties that have a chance: the VV, KDU-ČSL, SZ, and SPO. The likelihood that all will succeed is small. With the exception of the left-oriented SPO, all of these small groups aim at the political center. In any case, all of them have experience in parliament (the SZ and KDU-ČSL and actually TOP09 as well) and the possible new parties (VV and SPO) possess coalition potential, though not strong in relation to the main poles.

Halfway through the last decade doubts still prevailed about whether the party system would fit within any of Sartori's types (for example Čaloud et al. 2006: 7–10). Maxmilián Strmiska came up with an original conceptual framework, recommending the term “semi-polarized pluralism” for the Czech party system (Strmiska 2007). In relation to Sartori's terminology, Strmiska cites the impossibility of classifying the Czech party system as either moderate or polarized pluralism. We can agree with Strmiska that this new concept has significant heuristic potential for analysis of the Czech party system at the end of the 1990s and first half of the last decade, and reflects the fact that (1) a relevant KSČM was still present and (2) the problem of limited coalition alternatives continued. Nevertheless I will try to show that at present there is an interesting shift under way and that Strmiska's semi-polarized pluralism has been replaced by a classic Sartorian type of moderate pluralism.

What has changed since the beginning of the last decade? What leads us to say that the characteristics of polarized pluralism are steadily declining? As has been said, Czech party competition is not fully multi-polar as Sartori talks about when he describes a polarized pluralism. The main pole of competition is the competition between right and left over the political center. Specifically this means competition between the two main poles of the Czech party system, the ODS and ČSSD. It does not rule out the existence of minor poles of competition, but the dynamics of party competition and electoral competition are basically driven in this direction. As subsidiary poles of party competition we can see competition between the KSČM and ČSSD over left-wing voters, and now between ODS and TOP09 on the right, and of course the efforts of the smaller parties to “bite off” a bit of the political center. But the fundamental bipolar and centripetal character of Czech party competition remains the same. It has also been shown that parties which are trying to aim for the political center (ideologically or functionally) have no chance to gain the status of a large party or main pole of the party system. One problem in fully classifying it as a moderate pluralism remains the relatively high degree of polarization, along with a growing shrillness in electoral campaigns, and elements of political bribery. This element, closer to the polarized pluralism model, is most detectable in the electoral arena; it is a question to what degree it appears after the elections in the arena of parliamentary politics. Moreover, this polarization cannot be labeled as ideological in the strictest sense. It is more a product of the personalization of Czech politics along with the professional management of

election campaigns that resorts to populist rhetoric, and makes elections about the personalities of party leaders. The Paroubek-Topolánek duel in 2006 and the issue of Mirek Topolánek before the 2010 election is typical of this personalization.

A look at the quality of the parliamentary system in this country brings us to another very important statement. All indications are that the constant of the Czech party system, the taboo on coalition-building with the KSČM, is on its way to falling. Especially after Jiří Paroubek became head of the ČSSD in 2005, the KSČM has played a more important role than previously as a voting partner of the Social Democrats in parliament. This is not to say that there have been in effect two ruling coalitions, one official (ČSSD, KDU-ČSL and US for example) and one de facto in parliament (ČSSD+KSČM), but the isolation of the KSČM has been broken, and the two parties have grown closer ideologically on topics such as social policy, health care, etc. (see Kopeček – Pšejja 2008: 332–334).⁷ This trend continued after the 2006 elections, when both the left-wing was in opposition. Again the right-left delineation of the Czech political spectrum can be seen.⁸

In debating about the current and potential role of the KSČM, two distinctions must be taken into account. First, the distinction between Kubát's full-blooded anti-systemic party and a masked anti-systemic party. A second distinction is between Bardi's and Mair's party system in the electoral arena, and the party system in the parliamentary arena. In the case of the second distinction we note that in the electoral arena the KSČM remains an ostracized entity attacked by the right (although compared to the 1990s the intensity of attacks has declined as the issue of de-communization fades). Not even the ČSSD has revoked the Bohumín resolution adopted in 1995 when it vowed not to work with the KSČM. However, in the parliamentary arena the KSČM has been much more successful in breaking the isolation. It is entirely possible that after the 2010 election the KSČM will support the formation of a minority ČSSD government, with which it would cooperate in parliament. ČSSD leaders reject the formation of an open coalition, but tolerance of a minority government would be good for both sides given a left-wing majority. The KSČM would not risk so much of its reputation as a party of protest as it would if it were part of a ČSSD government, and the ČSSD could continue to keep the Communists at arm's length. Thus in parliament we are witnessing the growing coalition potential of the KSČM in relation to the ČSSD. In that case the KSČM would shift from being classified as an anti-system party towards being a masked anti-system party.

⁷ A detailed analysis of elections during this period is given by Černý (2006).

⁸ After the 2010 elections it will be very important which of the smaller centrist parties get into parliament, and what strategy they adopt in parliament or in government. Not even the prospect of a grand coalition between the ČSSD and ODS would tend to cause a deepening of the left-right division. From a long-term perspective it is clear, however, that the space in the political center is not a place where a new big political party can take shape; the left-right dynamic is fundamental.

This statement requires some commentary however. Here I return to Capoccia's and Kubát's distinction between ideological and relational anti-systemic parties. From an ideological anti-system standpoint the description stands of the KSČM as having two faces. It presents itself outwardly as a party fully accepting the democratic rules of the game, but internally it speaks differently of the period of Communism, and its official goal remains socialism, though wrapped in rhetorical phrases about democratic society (Balík 2005; Hanley 2002: 150–154; Kubát 2010, chapter 6.1.1). Likewise from the standpoint of public opinion it is still not accepted as a fully-qualified actor in the Czech party system. A CVVM survey shows that like a decade ago, Czech society remains divided almost equally on the question of whether they would be against participation by the KSČM in a government coalition. Significant for the growing relative coalition potential of the KSČM in relation to the ČSSD is the fact that among ČSSD supporters 60 % would not mind participation by the KSČM in a government, while 32 % would be against it (CVVM 2009b: 4). Ideologically the KSČM remains estranged from the democratic political system, and this is reflected in the electoral arena among others. However, its coalition potential is growing (though on the parliamentary, not the governmental level for now), and its isolation as an ostracized party is crumbling.⁹

Conclusion

We can conclude with the statement that the Czech party system at present can be said to fit the model of a moderate pluralism. This is especially true on the parliamentary level, and after the 2010 elections the number of political parties will probably correspond to the format of a limited pluralism. Each of these parties in this arena possesses coalition potential, though of differing proportions. Of course the KSČM will not be a partner in the governing coalition, but in the Czech parliament the KSČM can no longer be considered to be ostracized.

The party system on the electoral level now corresponds more to the type characteristics of moderate pluralism. The fundamental structure of party competition is bipolar, and basically centripetal. Even if some of today's parliamentary parties were to drop from relevance (KDU-ČSL, SZ) and/or new relevant formations become established (VV, SPO, TOP09), they will not change the main right-left dividing line, and it is likely that the structure of the two main poles will remain and be supplemented by the configuration of minor poles of which all will have coalition potential. The nucleuses of alternating coalitions are established – the ČSSD on the

⁹ In the long term the isolation of the KSČM outside of government could be weakened as well. ČSSD leaders reject an open coalition with the Communists for *these* elections, but after that it's an open question. I must say that although I approach these developments analytically, normatively in view of the persistent dogmatism of the KSČM I do not regard this as unproblematic for the quality of Czech democracy.

left and the ODS on the right. Strmiska's observation about the absence of coalition models is not completely passé, but it applies mostly to the tactics and strategies of the small parties. Although the ideological profile of the KSČM is unfortunate, its possible post-election cooperation with the ČSSD might more or less solve the problem of classification. A left-coalition model (ČSSD and KSČM) would then establish itself, alongside a right coalition model (ODS and TOP09), while the role of small parties after 2010 and how many would remain in parliament would be an open question. If they were to enjoy a limited success, the Czech Republic would actually become less of a pure moderate pluralism because of the increased polarity of the party system, which would manifest itself more on the electoral than parliamentary level. In the event of a grand coalition or relevance being achieved by more centrist parties, the role of these parties in parliament and in government while forming a coalition will be key to whether the trend towards moderate pluralism continues, and the degree of willingness on the part of the ČSSD and ODS to cooperate with one another. But not even these developments need hinder the gradual shift of the Czech party system towards moderate pluralism.

Future confirmation of the trends analyzed above may have a stabilizing effect on the Czech party system. Along with format, the mechanics of the party system might also consolidate; in particular some innovative forms of coalition cooperation might begin to function, which would make more likely the future alternation of government coalitions enjoying stronger parliamentary support. However there is no reason to think that this type of moderate pluralism will solve all the problems of the Czech party system. The issue remains of the modification of the electoral system to the Chamber of Deputies remains an issue, along with the question of whether and how political parties will be able to better integrate themselves into Czech society. The case of Czech Republic and others show that in an age of cartel parties a minimum degree of social rooting is very important for the vitality of political parties.

List of abbreviations

ČSS – Czechoslovak Socialist Party

ČSSD – Czechoslovak Social Democracy/Czech Social Democratic Party

CVVM – Public Opinion Research Centre

DSZ – Democratic Party of Greens

KDS – Christian Democratic Party

KDU-ČSL – Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party

KSČM – Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia

LSU – Liberal Social Union

ODA – Civic Democratic Alliance

ODS – Civic Democratic Party
 OH – Civic Movement
 SPO – Party of Citizens' Rights
 SPR-RSČ – Association for the Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia
 SZ – Green Party
 TOP 09 – Tradition, Responsibility, Prosperity
 VV – Public Issues

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Vít Hloušek is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Joštova 10, 602 00, Brno, Czech Republic.
E-mail: hlousek@fss.muni.cz