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Traditional, Third Way or a Different Path? The Czech Social Democrat Party in 2010¹

Ladislav Cabada

Abstract: *This text is not intended to be an expert analysis but rather a reflection upon the state of ideological debate within the Czech Social Democracy Party, and the position of the Democratic Socialist left within the party and political systems of the Czech Republic and the European Union. This text primarily reflects the writer's opinions on the events and an idea examined, and is in this sense primarily an essay.*

Keywords: *Czech Social Democrat Party, ideology, political system of the Czech Republic*

The Czech Social Democrat Party (ČSSD – *Česká strana sociálně demokratická*) is one of the oldest party-political entities in Central Europe to still be operating. Its history dates back to the formation of the Bohemian-Moravian and wider Austro-Hungarian socialist movements after 1848, and the actual founding of the party is placed at 1878. After the electoral reforms in Austria at the turn of the 20th century, the Social Democrats established themselves as a strong parliamentary party, and were involved on a fundamental level in the process of the deconstruction of the Hapsburg monarchy and the formation of the Czechoslovak state. Social democrat Vlastimil Tusar stood at the head of the party in 1919–1920, and the social democrats were the clear winners of the first parliamentary elections in the independent Czechoslovak Republic in 1920. During this period, however, the party was fundamentally weakened by the internal ideological dispute between supporters of the evolutionary approach and revolutionaries, who after the splitting of the party in 1920 formed the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ – *Komunistická strana Československa*). Despite this weakening, social democracy participated as a strong state-forming party in the creation of a democratic republic in the majority of inter-war governments and after the defeat of Nazism as a part of the post-war National Front (NF – *Národní fronta*, 1945–1948). After the communist takeover in February 1948, social democracy in Czechoslovakia was eliminated by forced incorporation into the communist party, however it managed to go into exile and remain there

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until the 1980s as a dependable partner of socialist and socially-democratic parties and their national structures (Vodička – Cabada 2007: 225).

After the beginning of the democratic transition in Czechoslovakia in November 1989 the then social democrats were not a formation that was – like the majority of other political parties forming within the democratising political system with a view of competing in the 1990 election – beginning its existence anew, neither organisationally, nor, particularly, ideologically. The social-democratic movement could build on both notable intellectual debates, particularly of the first two decades of the 20th century (let us remember in this regard, for example, the group associated with theoretical journal *Akademie* – J. Hudec, A. Meissner, F. Modráček, L. Winter and others – or the evident inclination of the first Czechoslovak president, sociologist and philosopher Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk towards social-democracy and humanistic progressivism /Tomeš ed. 2004/) as well as the uninterrupted debate by renascent post-war socialist and social-democrat parties, who in the majority of Western European countries became one of the two strongest political movements of the developing affluent states founded on social-market approaches, that is a combination and balance of solidarity and individual freedom.

The basic difference between the ČSSD and other social-democrat and socialist parties, which after 1989 established themselves in Central-Eastern Europe, is grounded upon this organisational and ideological continuity that stems from the fact that the party did not emerge from the platform of a former totalitarian party of the communist type, as was/is the case in Poland, Hungary and Romania. The distance from communism was observable in the case of exiled Czech social democrats, who attempted to temper the acceptance by the Socialist International of Eastern European communists during the period of detente, and this became one of the basic ideological foundations for establishment on the Czechoslovak/Czech political scene. In a similar spirit the party then reformed within Czechoslovakia, despite the fact that many members and structures from the Communist Party had integrated themselves into it (Cabada – Šanc 2005: 171–172). The creation and preservation of a *cordon sanitaire* around the insufficiently reformed Communist Party became a fundamental position and was fully respected until 2005. In practical politics this position meant that the ČSSD repeatedly refused the opportunity to form a left-wing government with the co-operation of the communists – after the elections in 1996 and 2002, and during the formation of a government after the fall of Prime Minister Gross in 2005. With the appointment of new party chairman Jiří Paroubek, however, this fundamental stance has begun to be significantly limited. Paroubek, as government chairman in 2005–2006, relied in parliament on a voting coalition between his party and the communists (Černý 2006) and during the course of the election campaign leading up to the parliamentary elections in

2006 repeatedly made it clear that the support of the communists would also be convenient in the coming term (his declaration that in the interests of implementing the ČSSD programme he would be prepared to come to an agreement with Martians became an instant classic). The weakening and perforation of this cordon between the ČSSD and the Communist Party became more pronounced after the regional elections in 2008, when the ČSSD won in all 13 regions (in the 14th of these, Prague, elections were held at a different time, to coincide with municipal elections), and formed a coalition with the communists in three regions and governed with their support in two. Similarly to before the 2006 elections, in 2010 (this text was written a week before the parliamentary election in the Czech Republic) the chairman of the ČSSD, Paroubek, did not hide the fact that the support by the communists of a social-democrat minority government was, for him, an acceptable and welcome solution. This position is of course in sharp contradiction of the distance maintained from the communists which was incorporated into the foundations of the reformed party after November 1989.

With regard to the above-mentioned continuity of Czech social democracy in exile from 1948 to 1989, the foundation of ideological debate inside the party should be viewed in the context of the influence of several socialist and social-democratic parties and figures from Western Europe upon the first programme documents of the ČSSD. In this regard we see the most striking influences coming from Germany and Austria – e.g. the general secretary of the exiled party Jiří Loewy (Germany) or the eminent representative of the Austrian exile organisation, Přemysl Janýr. These were figures that became identified with the concept of democratic, evolutionary minded social democracy, promoting the concept of a social-market economy and a balance between solidarity and responsibility. These were exponents of the “classical” socialist concepts as they took shape after the Second World War.

This clearly expressed itself in the programmes of the party – the programme for the elections in 1992 clearly borrows from programme documents of the main socialist formations of Western Europe, when it emphasises the solidarity particularly with young people, seniors and families, propagates good education as the foundation of successful professional fulfilment and supports the idea of safeguarding health and social security without individual contributions. In these the ČSSD programme commits to the support of free education (including university), free health care and a pension system without the responsibility of individual pension contributions (the programme does, however, call for the separation of pension funds from the state budget, which even during the governments managed by ČSSD did not occur). The arrival of a series of (left-wing) figures from the ranks of the disintegrated Civic Forum in the 1990s – e.g. Miloš Zeman and Pavel Dostál – strengthened the more liberal side of the party; after the departure of M. Zeman from the leadership,

the ČSSD nevertheless returned to the above-mentioned foundations all the more intensively and in election campaigns and in the rhetoric of its representatives made key programme points of them. It then associated several fiscal and wider economic assumptions with their implementation, specifically a tax system founded on the progressive taxation of individual wages in several income brackets. According to the ČSSD the state should also regulate the prices of significant commodities, particularly energy, and also ensure the construction of flats with regulated rent (starting flats for young families, flats for seniors etc). Other repeatedly referred to positions, e.g. the support of the plurality of property ownership and the support of rural areas, form more or less proclamatory slogans.

In relation to the European Union, the ČSSD has from the very beginning positioned itself very positively, seeing it as, among other things, an instrument for the establishment and protection of the concept of the social-market economy – in general terms the EU is for the party a project arising from the model of social-market economics, which is an example of economic (neo)liberalism – and the party inclines strongly towards the federalist visions of the further development of the EU. The party however does not play any fundamental powerful or ideological role within the European Socialist Party (PES); in the recent period it has profiled itself as the strongest supporter of the Slovak social democrats (*Smer*) after their membership of PES was revoked (*Smer* had created a government coalition with radical nationalists in Slovakia).

The ČSSD is very liberal on issues with an ethical subtext – it supports, for example, same-sex marriage and the right of a mother to choose a termination. Conversely, on the issue of immigration it promotes more restrictive politics and repeatedly discusses the necessity of maintaining jobs for Czech citizens and their preference above foreigners in the labour market. The ČSSD, in rhetoric, places great emphasis on the politics of unemployment, and has for a long time been promoting its system of incentives (e.g. tax breaks etc.) for foreign investors. In reality, however, it supports the growth of budget spending destined for economically inactive citizens, including the unemployed, rather than the creation of new jobs.

In the area of foreign affairs, the ČSSD is conflicted. Its programme documents unambiguously incline towards the promotion of conflict resolution using peaceful methods; however before chairman Paroubek the party nevertheless accepted that some situations require the use of appropriate force (humanitarian interventions and the like). In the recent period the party has defined itself particularly in terms of saying no to the possibility of the American radar base in the Czech Republic (which is understandable), and also voted for the end of engagement of Czech soldiers in Afghanistan. A basic theme of internal party discussion is the position towards non-democratic states, particularly with regard to economic diplomacy. While

Czech diplomacy has for a long time supported coercive measures – e.g. sanctions – against countries such as Cuba and Belarus, ČSSD chairman Paroubek in February 2008 was in Syria negotiating co-operation with the representatives of the totalitarian Ba’ath party (compare this step, for example, with the open support of the democratic Israel, as often proclaimed by Miloš Zeman, party chairman from 1993–2001). In this sense Paroubek – similar to the Czech President, Klaus – declares a much more marked pragmatism and willingness to concessions and the so-called “balanced approach”, particularly with regard to China and Russia.

The ČSSD has in the long term been declaring its support for the principle of ecological responsibility; programme documents contain a series of the party’s numerical goals in terms of recycling, reducing energy use and so on. In the 1990s the party was even the incubator of the Greens. Nevertheless in the last five years we can observe a deviation from consistent ecological politics in terms of concessions, particularly to the energy lobby (breaching the limit for the mining of coal, the support of traditional energy sources and so on). The ČSSD also significantly contributed to the splitting of the Green Party and the emergence of the “left-wing” Democratic Green Party, which worsened its relationship with the postmodern liberal Green Party leadership even more (not so with the relatively left-wing radical part of the Greens member base).

If we look at the ČSSD through the prism of the issue described in the title of this article, then in the programme documents of the party we clearly see a preference for traditional approaches founded on high taxation and statism, that is a preference of solidarity and direct equalisation, resulting in the creation of a classic affluent state, like those established in Western Europe after the Second World War. This position was disrupted most notably at the turn of the century in association with the debate about the so-called third way, the approach of Tony Blair, Lionel Jospin and Gerhard Schroeder, then heads of governments of the three dominant countries of the EU. Blair’s project of the dismantling of the nanny state, similar to Schroeder’s rhetoric concentrating on innovation and high added value (the Lisbon Strategy), found its supporters in the ČSSD (the media referred especially to adviser Otto Novotný) including chairman Zeman. He however was a markedly unorthodox figure, labelled a liberal by many (his government, for example, privatised banks and certain other sectors and enterprises under the condition of the state retaining a share), who pragmatically positioned himself at the head of the ČSSD because with a liberal programme he would not have had a chance of success (in 2010 Zeman is attempting a return with a new formation called the Party for Civic Rights, whose programme can be labelled as liberal-centrist, founded on the rhetoric of individual responsibility, restraint in state spending and investing in the future). The appointment of Vladimír Špidla as head of the ČSSD (2001) and the government (2002)

nevertheless led the debate in the ČSSD again in the direction of classic approaches (Špidla is an admirer of the Swedish social model). The result of the transposition of these changes to practical politics was a marked increase in mandatory state spending resulting in a state budget deficit.

Even Paroubek's appointment as leader of the social democrats did not signify a revitalisation of the concept of the third path, which had in the meantime had led to fundamental problems and defeats for its above-mentioned propagators in Western Europe. Paroubek decided on a combination of three approaches: 1) supporting a strong and socially classed state founded on statism and levelling, with rhetoric based on the promise of maintaining "free" education, health and social services, valorisation of pensions and so on; 2) considering the co-operation of left wing entities – ČSSD and the communists – as beneficial and possible, by which he deviates from the anti-communist position of the party; 3) turning to political marketing, by which he is very similar particularly to Gerhard Schroeder and even more to Slovak Prime Minister Fico. The programme of social democracy, which is in reality elaborated and extensive material, was hence transformed into merely a collection of advertising slogans during the election campaign, which in addition misrepresents the real contents of the programme documents (the party, for example, talks about a "13th pension"; in reality this relates to a special contribution for seniors to the amount of approximately a quarter of the average pension).

A basic phenomenon, which can also be observed in some other socialist parties in Europe, is the personalisation of politics – the identification of a party with its leader. As early on as during the leadership of Miloš Zeman it appeared that the party often spoke with the same voice, however in hindsight we see many other – often non conformist – figures alongside Zeman (e.g. the willingness of Petra Buzková to resign from her post of vice-chairman of the party in protest against the project of electoral reform supported by party chairman Zeman, or the minister of culture Pavel Dostál). The ČSSD under Paroubek is a party of "external uniformity" and absolute party discipline, a rich factionality has been significantly muted to the outside and an ideological debate has practically not taken place. Alongside the prime minister, his wife became a key figure in the election campaign, rather than other prominent politicians from the ranks of the ČSSD (where they appeared on billboards, they repeated the slogans connected to the chairman of the party).

In the middle of 2010 the ČSSD seemed, in terms of its programme, to be quite a traditional socialist formation that was not fundamentally influenced by postmodernity or the concept of the third way. Its electoral campaign for the parliamentary elections in 2010 was founded on trivial slogans advocating selected parts of the programme (free education and healthcare, regulation of the price of energy) and had a strong negative element (attacks on all other parties). In the recent period it

has turned away from its programme and towards political marketing. With this strategy it is relatively successful, appealing to approximately one third of the Czech population.

If an ideological debate is taking place within the party then it is well hidden even from the academic public. Since 2001 – after the appointment of Vladimír Špidla – the party has gambled on the revitalisation of the idea of a socially generous state, and altogether stepped away from the promotion of at least some of the ideas of the concept of the so-called third way. The ČSSD is thus pursuing a strategy founded particularly on the “relative impoverishment of the educated middle class” and it is thus similar to the ODS from the first half of the 1990s (Rupnik 1998: 13). While the ODS then gambled on bank capitalism managed often by old cadres, the ČSSD is now betting on comfortable statism, in which Czechs were used to living before 1989, or – as expressed by Jacques Rupnik (1998: 12) – on the combination of old positions and new opportunities.

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