

Agrarian and Peasant Parties in the Czech Republic: History, Presence and Central European Context

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This paper has been written as part of the Research Plan “Political Parties and Representation of Interests in Contemporary European Democracies” (code MSM0021622407), and has been co-sponsored by the research grant “Political Actors in the Process of Europeanization and Internationalization of the Political Area of the Czech Republic”, elaborated under the auspices of the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic (code 1J 002/04-DP1).

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The research into agrarian and peasant parties in the contemporary Czech Republic is an interesting part of this research in the European context. However, the reason is not the contemporary – very marginal – position of these parties within the Czech party system, but rather decline of the relevance of agrarian and peasant parties in the Czech lands in historical comparison. The Agrarian Party was one of the dominant subjects of the Czech interwar democracy, however, since 1989 there does not exist a strong successor to this party. Some agrarian and peasant parties were or are more important in the East Central European context in some countries in the post-communist era. The “Czech contribution” to the current development of the agrarian party family is also very limited. However, it is also questionable if in the contemporary Europe the agrarian party family still exists.

1. History of agrarian and peasant parties in the Czech lands before 1989

The first agrarian and peasant parties were established on the Czech territory at the end of 19th century. At that time the Czech lands were a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There was not any common parliamentary body for all three historical Czech Lands – Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. The whole monarchy as well as the Czech, Moravian and Silesian territories was multiethnic areas and nationalist tensions were typical of political life in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

It is important to know the above mentioned factors to understand the creation of the agrarian party family in the Czech political milieu. The political parties in the second half of the 19th century were formed primarily on the national base (Czech, German or minor nationalities), and

within the national streams a fragmentation took place on the basis of political and social interests. Czech parties were usually founded in different forms in Bohemia and in Moravia. The agrarian “lager” was one of four within the Czech society (the others were socialist, clerical-catholic and national-liberal) (Hloušek, Kopeček 2004: 75).

This is the case of the agrarian parties which were established from organized interest groups of peasants. The agrarian partisanship was a result of the “delimitation” of Czech peasantry against the urban parties on one hand and rural political catholicism on the other hand (Malíř 2005: 43). In Bohemia the Czech Agrarian Party (*Česká strana agrární*) was founded in 1899, in Moravia the Czech Agrarian Party for Moravia and Silesia (*Česká strana agrární pro Moravu a Slezsko*) was founded in 1904. In 1905 both the parties were united into the Czech-Slavic Agrarian Party (*Československá strana agrární*) (Rokoský 2005: 415). The Czech-Slavic Agrarian Party was the strongest party on the Czech territory in the 1907 election (28 mandates) as well as in the 1911 election (36 mandates). In 1914 the party had 91.194 members in 2.467 local organizations (Rokoský 2005: 420).

The Czech-Slavic Agrarian Party has empowered the Czech autonomous demands as well as the interest of peasants in the Czech kingdom. They rejected the split-up of the Czech national movement. The most important politician of the party was Antonín Švehla. Under his leadership the party formed the conception of united interests of all citizens in rural areas, from rich landowners to smallholders and small artisans. The motto “The countryside – one family” was characteristic of the party (Rokoský 2005: 417).

The German Agrarian Party (*Deutsche Agrarpartei*) was founded in the Czech lands in 1905. The party was aimed at big landowners, only in some regions also at other segments of rural citizens. It had only a free structure. It gained 19 mandates in the Czech lands in the 1907 election and 22 mandates in the 1911 election (Šebek 2005a: 476).

The establishment of the new Czechoslovak state on October 28th 1918 is closely connected with the Czech agrarian politicians, mostly with Antonín Švehla, who was the leading personality of the anti-Austrian uprising in Prague. The era of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) could be labelled as the “golden age” of the Czech agrarian partisanship.

The Czech Agrarian Party was in 1919 renamed to the Republican Party of Czechoslovak Countryside (*Republikánská strana československého venkova*). In 1922 a large part of the Slovak National and Peasant Party (*Slovenská národná a roľnícká strana*) joined the party, which consequently changed its name again and became the Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants (*Republikánská strana zemědělského a maloroľníckého lidu*). However, in usual political life it was called the “Agrarians” (“agrárníci”).

This party was the most successful Czech party in the interwar Czechoslovak history. It gained 9,7% of votes (28 mandates, 603 618 absolutely) in 1920, 13,7% (45 mandates, 970 940 absolutely) in 1925, 15% (46 mandates, 1 105 429 absolutely) in 1930 and 14,3% (45 mandates, 1 176 593 absolutely) in 1935. Agrarians were members of all governmental coalitions in this era. The party politicians held the functions of the prime minister in the years 1922-1938. However, this strong position of the “pragmatic” agrarian party led to permanent tensions with the “humanistic” part the Czech political spectrum headed by president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and his follower Edvard Beneš.

The Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants had strong political figures. In the 1920's Antonín Švehla was the leading personality of the right wing of the Czech political spectrum. A very important personality of the party was Slovak Milan Hodža, who guaranteed the unity of the party in Czecho-Slovak context. After Švehla's death in 1933 Rudolf Beran was elected as a new chairman. Under his leadership the authoritarian streams within the party became stronger.

The agrarian party had a program based on the idea of “agrarism”. The core of this idea was the image of the peasant as the “breadwinner of the nation” (Harna 2005: 556). The party supported the Czech national idea; however, the ideology of agrarism was inspired by similar French and German conceptions. It supported the new allocation of farmland after WWI (from large manors to middle- and smallholders). In other questions it stayed mostly on conservative positions (Harna 2005: 556-557).

The party had a strong organizational structure and many satellite organizations, including the Union of Republican Youth (Jednota republikánského dorostu) and Republican Trade Union Centre (Republikánské odborové ústředí). The party had also a strong influence within various economic agrarian companies. It was active also on international level. In 1927 it was the main actor at the creation of the International Agrarian Bureau (unofficially called the Green International), which existed to the end of the 1930's. All important European agrarian parties were members of this bureau, however, as a consequence of national agrarian protectionism the cooperation was limited (Harna 2005: 586-587).

The parties that split from the Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants were never successful. These are the cases of the Czechoslovak Peasant Unity (Československá rolnická jednota), which was founded in 1919, and the Czechoslovak Agrarian and Conservative Party (Československá strana agrární a konzervativní) which was founded in 1925 (Harna 2005: 579-580).

In the interwar Czechoslovakia there also were active agrarian parties of ethnic minorities. The most important was the German Union of Peasants (Bund der Landwirte). Since the middle of the 1920's the party was a leading actor of the so called “activism”, this is the cooperation of

German parties within the Czechoslovak governmental coalitions. This co-operation was greatly facilitated by good relations the German Union of Peasants had with the Czech agrarians. However, at the end of the 1930's the anti-Czechoslovak forces became stronger and the Union of Peasants entered in 1938 in the Sudetengerman Party (SdP), which was under Nazi influence at that time.

As early as in 1927 the strong nationalist oriented party Sudetengerman Union of Countryside (Sudetendeutscher Landbund) split from the Union of Peasants, however, it was not successful and in 1935 it was dissolved (Šebek 2005b: 881-885). The agrarian parties were active also within the Hungarian minority in Slovakia and within Ruthenians in Carpatho-Ukraine.

After the Munich agreement and German occupation of border territories of Czechoslovakia in 1938 an authoritarian regime was established in the rest of Czechoslovakia (Mareš 2006b: 162). Only two parties were allowed in the Czech lands– the right wing Party of National Unity (Strana národní jednoty) and the left wing National Party of Labour (Národní strana práce). The most important part of the Party of National Unity was the former structure of the Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants. Rudolf Beran became prime minister of Czechoslovakia.

The Nazi Germany occupied the rest of the Czech lands on March 15th 1939. The Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia was established and all former political parties were dissolved. In the quasi-autonomous governmental structure various agrarian politicians played an important role, however, part of them tried to keep the Czech identity against the German influence. Some of them were imprisoned in German concentration camps, including Rudolf Beran in 1941-1943.

Some members of Agrarian Party were active in domestic resistance, mostly within the Political Headquarters (Politické ústředí). However, other resistance groups had a negative attitude towards the agrarians (Pecka 1999: 69). Finally, other agrarians worked in the Czechoslovak exile in Great Britain and in the United States of America.

The Czechoslovak government (with a strong influence of communists) in 1945 decided not to permit re-establishment of the Republican party of Farmers and Peasants in post-war Czechoslovakia. The official reasons were the activities of the party and its politicians in the period since Munich Agreement and during the protectorate; however, the unofficial reason was the effort to eliminate political competition. In fact, many smallholders in 1946 voted for the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ), which was the winner of these elections. In 1947, Rudolf Beran was sentenced to 20 years in prison, where he died in 1954 (Mareš 2006a). The majority of German population was expelled from Czechoslovakia after World War II and no German party (including an agrarian party) was allowed to exist.

The agrarian element was officially eliminated from the Czechoslovak political life on domestic territory. No peasant party was allowed to exist during the communist era in Czechoslovakia in 1948-1989. Some former members of the agrarian party were active in the anti-communist resistance movement at the end of the 1940's and in the first half of the 1950's when the communists brutally collectivized the countryside. The collectivization and the foundation of the United Agricultural Cooperatives changed the social structure and the identity of the Czech countryside significantly.

Small parts of the agrarians survived in exile in western countries. The Republican Party in Exile (Republikánská strana v exilu) was founded in Paris in 1948, having its strongest base in the USA (Trapl 2005: 1348-1349), where it had close relations to some conservative parts of the American Republican Party. A small group that split from this party and was called the Czechoslovak Republican Party – Agrarian (Československá strana republikánská - agrární) was founded at the beginning of the 1950's (Trapl 2005: 1349). However, despite these efforts the representation of agrarians within the Czechoslovak exile bodies was relatively weak.

2. Development since 1989

Industrial tradition of Czech lands, inherited from the period of Habsburg Empire, was further reinforced in the period of communist rule, so effectively assisting in marginalization of agriculture as major tool of economic advancement. Collectivization of family farms and extensive agricultural properties, which took place in late 1940's and in the 1950's, helped to create agricultural system consisting almost exclusively of common agricultural cooperatives. However, immediately after the regime change in November 1989 we could have witnessed gradual re-emergence of private farming, which was increasingly reflected also in the political arena. In the first months after the fall of the communist regime there was possible to identify high hopes farmers and agricultural interests may become a relevant part of party system, as they had been in the interwar Czechoslovakia. References to the Agrarian Party were not uncommon, usually indicating democratic environment should be favourable to political actions which would represent interests of rural areas of the Czech Republic and of those whose activities are related to agriculture. However, although parties representing these interests initially did achieve a success of a kind, in several years they lost any influence. While searching for corresponding developments and reasons of the failure, we can present four stages of agrarian parties representation's evolution since 1989:

- a) 1990-1991 – in the early months after the regime change there serious chances it may be possible to reintroduce agrarian parties (or agrarian party family for that matter) as relevant segment of the party system; these hopes seemed to be confirmed by electoral results
- b) 1991-1992 – since the first half of 1991 parties representing agrarian interests (primarily the Agrarian Party /Zemědělská strana – ZS/) kept trying to present themselves as part of broader political area, focused on predominantly regional and environmental issues in general, and became major element in a coalition called Liberal-Social Union (Liberálně-sociální unie – LSU)
- c) 1992-1996 – period of gradual decline of relevance of agrarian parties, related to several general developments in the Czech party system and some other factors mentioned above, namely low numbers of voters who have perceived agrarian parties as best mediators of their interests
- d) after 1996 – failure in 1996 election marks an end of any real aspirations to present parties representing agrarian interests as relevant part of the Czech party system; consequently, since this year agrarian parties as relevant actors have disappeared

Following this division into major stages, we can analyze their respective details and see most important reasons of marginal position of all Czech agrarian parties.

In the first months after the regime change in November 1989 it seemed there might be a relevant potential for parties defending interest of those who are related to agriculture – between December 1989 and March 1990 we could have witnessed establishment of seven parties that declared their determinacy to act as representatives of the Czech countryside. From hindsight we can say by far the most important of these parties was the Czechoslovak Agrarian Party (Československá strana zemědělská – ČSSZ), which was founded in January 13, 1990, and which intended to offer broadly conceived representation of all voters that are in any way related to the countryside and agriculture. Despite this self-identification the party was understood as a political expression of interests of co-operative farming (Mareš, Pšeja 2005: 1605-6). However, such a label should have been more appropriate for another party – Political Movement of Agricultural Cooperatives' Members, which was founded in March 1990 to defend interests of a particular segment of agricultural workers. Besides these two parties there were five more parties subscribing to rural issues and countryside in general – Republican Party of Czechoslovakian Countryside (Republikánská strana československého venkova /RSCV/), Agrarian Party of the Civic Forum (from December 1989 till March 1990 called Czechoslovakian Urban and Rural Agrarian Party /Československá strana zemědělská měst a venkova – ČSZMV/), Free Peasants' Party (Svobodná rolnická strana /SRS/), Party of the Czech Countryside (Strana českého venkova /SČV/) and finally Party of Moravian Countryside (Strana moravského venkova

/SMV/)¹ While all these parties did emerge between November 1989 and April 1990, only some of them were able to participate independently in the first free parliamentary election in June 1990.

Two major agrarian parties, ČSSZ and Political Movement of Agricultural Cooperatives' Members, together with several other minor parties entered into coalition called Alliance of Farmers and Countryside (Spojenectví zemědělců a venkova /SZV/), which can be seen as the most relevant representation of agrarian interest in the first stage of the Czech party system's development. It is important to note although SZV did not manage to get over 5 % threshold guaranteeing parliamentary representation, still it succeeded in collecting quite a substantial number of votes – in the election to both chambers of Czechoslovak federal parliament SZV got 3,77 % of the vote, or 3,99 % respectively, while in the election to the Czech National Council (national parliament of the Czech Republic) it did receive as much as 4,11 % of the vote (which amounts to almost 300.000 votes). The other agrarian parties did not participate directly in the election – either they placed their candidates on lists of other parties², or they withdrew their participation, as they knew their influence was much too small to bring them any success.

However, they tested their ability to attract voters in local elections held in November 1990. Once again, by far the best results were achieved by the Czechoslovak Agrarian Party, which got 1,52 % of the vote (amounting to 1.669 mandates), and by Political Movement of Agricultural Cooperatives' Members receiving 0,93 % of the vote (amounting to 1.410 mandates), while none of other agrarian parties were able to get more than 0,05 % of the vote. Obviously, while these local elections confirmed there is some, although little demand for agrarian parties, primarily they indicated agrarian electorate would only be limited.

Since early fall of 1990 we could have witnessed increasing tendencies to unite fragmented spectrum of Czech agrarian parties, so that they could possess a chance to successfully compete with other parties. There were two major attempts – while the first one, aspiring to create a new party composed of the Czechoslovak Agrarian Party, Political Movement of Agricultural Cooperatives' Members, and Republican Party of Czechoslovakian Countryside, failed in January 1991 after prolonged negotiations, the next enterprise succeeded. However, this time the goal was a bit different: parties participating in the project did not seek unification, rather they intended to constitute a broad coalition representing also other political options. Liberal-Social

¹ For a brief survey of details on party programmes and other differences see Mareš, Pšeja 2005: 1605-7.

² The Free Peasants' Party was on the list of the Christian and Democratic Union (Křesťanská a demokatická unie). This coalition of Czechoslovak People's Party, Christian Democratic Party and several small subjects won 8,42% to Czech National Council, 8,75% to the Chamber of Nations of the Federal Assembly and 8,69% to the Chamber of People of the Federal Assembly.

Union (Liberálně sociální unie /LSU/), which emerged in May 1991, thus once again brought together Czechoslovak Agrarian Party (in the meantime, the party was renamed to Agrarian Party in late January) and Political Movement of Agricultural Cooperatives' Members; besides these subjects, Czechoslovak Socialist Party (Československá strana socialistická /ČSS/) and a Czech branch of the Green Party (Strana zelených /SZ/)³ took part in this enterprise. From the very emergence of LSU, the socialist and agrarian parties were its major elements which supplied huge majority of key programmatic priorities (Fiala, Mareš 1997).

Establishment of this broad coalition proved to be a real success – in 1992 parliamentary election LSU got 5,84 % of the vote, or 6,06 % respectively (both chambers of the Czechoslovak federal parliament), while in the election to the Czech National Council it achieved its best result of 6,52 % of the vote (which amounts to app. 422.000 votes).⁴ However, this success should last for a short time only. Even when just after the election LSU entered into closer touch with the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party (Československá sociální demokracie /ČSSD/) and nursed some ambition to establish itself as relevant part of the opposition, disputes within its constituent segments quickly eliminated any hope in longer-term successful operation.

In June 1993 Czechoslovak Socialist Party, hoping to establish better relationship towards governing coalition, left LSU; five months later the Green Party followed its example and quit LSU as well. Agrarian Party, which to a serious extent considered LSU its own project, kept trying to keep it alive, but did not manage to prevent it from marginalization. During 1994 LSU was constituted as a separate party, while Agrarian Party rejected to merge and also continued in independent operation. This development was accompanied by decrease in electoral preferences, which at the turn of 1993/94 fell to 1 % and never recovered. Local elections in November 1994 only reconfirmed agrarian parties lost their chance to achieve relevance and are on the way towards hopelessly minor position – Agrarian Party got only 0,2 % of the vote (340 mandates), while the Farmers' Movement (Hnutí zemědělců /HZ/, formerly known as Political Movement of Agricultural Cooperatives' Members) achieved 0,3 % of the vote (680 mandates).

However, at that time another attempt to build a relevant partnership was already under way, as since late 1993 the Agrarian Party initiated a series of negotiations intended to create a grouping of centrist parties, which would be able to present an option alternative to more successful rightist and leftist parties. These negotiations, having lasted approximately for one year, culminated in December 1994 by establishment of an electoral coalition called Czech-Moravian

³ In the early 1990's the Green Party was divided into two administrative branches – Moravian and Czech. See Kopeček 2005: 1582, 1587.

⁴ While it is impossible to make absolutely exact judgement, we can say – on the basis of pre-electoral public opinion polls – that three parties constituting LSU (Political Movement of Agricultural Cooperatives' Members left LSU before the 1992 election) supplied voters in approximately equal ratio.

Centrist Alliance (Českomoravská unie středu /ČMUS/), which in the end consisted of six subjects. Of these, the most important ones were – besides the Agrarian Party – Liberal Social Union (now independent party) and Czech-Moravian Centrist Party (Českomoravská strana středu /ČMSS/), formerly known as Movement for Autonomous Democracy in Moravia and Silesia (Hnutí za samosprávnou demokracii Moravy a Slezska /HSDMS/).

In following months parties grouped in ČMUS further reinforced their co-operation, and finally – in February 1996 – the Czech-Moravian Centrist Alliance was officially transformed from coalition into a single party. Such a development obviously meant that parties formerly constituting ČMUS, including Agrarian Party, ceased to exist and merged into the broadly oriented centrist party. However, even this merger did not produce required result, i.e. establishment of a strong centrist party. In 1996 parliamentary election ČMUS got as little as 0,45 % of the vote – this was a failure from which the party has never recovered.

In the party system of the Czech Republic since 1996 there has been no party representing agrarian interests which would achieve at least a partial relevance⁵: while there still are several agrarian parties, none of these is able to mobilize any support. The most successful of these minor parties (Rural Party – United Civic Forces; Strana venkova – Spojené občanské síly /SV-SOS/) has never managed to get more than 1 % of the vote in any national, regional, or local election. In the 2006 parliamentary election the Agrarian Party took part in the nationalist right wing project “Law and Justice” (Právo a spravedlnost)⁶; however, it won only 0,23% of the vote. Consequently, agrarian interests in the Czech Republic are represented through other parties and institutions.

3. Agrarian and peasant parties in East Central Europe

The development of the agrarian and peasant partisanship in East Central Europe reflects various ways of development that can be observed in various countries after 1989. All countries in this area have their historical agrarian traditions. The agrarian parties were identified in the process of the transition to democracy, however, with very different influence on the party system in various historical periods.

In Hungary, Poland and partially in Slovakia this type of party family was represented in a relevant position in the 1990's (in Hungary as well as in Poland by parties with historical

⁵ The Farmers' Movement, historically the second most successful agrarian party after 1989, was dissolved in February 1998.

⁶ The main stream of the Czech party „Law and Justice“ possess different ideological profile than successful conservative party Law and Justice in Poland. From the ideological point of view the Czech Law and Justice party is closer to another Polish party – the dogmatic catholic League of Polish Families.

tradition) (Batory, Sitter 2004: 528). On the other hand, in the German Democratic Republic (and in the Eastern Germany after the German unification) agrarian political parties do not play an important role. Only in contemporary Polish politics a subject with agrarian roots plays a significant role, however, the new party Self-Defense (*Samoobrona*) is labelled by various experts as an extreme right-wing party.

Political scientist Lubomír Kopeček explained the Polish exception as a result of the non-realized collectivization in this country during the era of communism. The collectivization of peasantry during the era of communism caused the strong peasantry as an autonomous and self-confident part of society was dissolved in other East Central European countries. According to Kopeček, the other factors of the decline of agrarian parties were similar to those in Western Europe – the decreasing number of people working in agriculture and the depopulation of the countryside generally (Kopeček 2007: 97).

The Polish Peasant Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe - PSL*) was founded in 1945; however, it was connected with the peasant party from the pre-war period. In 1949 it joined the United Peasants Party (ZSL), which became part of the communist-dominated National Unity Front (Szajkowski 2005b: 482). At the end of the 1980's the party supported anticommunist activities. In 1990 the transformation of the ZSL into PSL was finished.

The PSL won 9,7% of votes and 48 mandates in parliamentary election in 1991. The party achieved its best result in 1993 – 15,4% of the votes and 132 mandates, which made it a second largest party at that time. PSL formed a coalition with the Democratic Left Alliance and chairman of the party – Waldemar Pawlak – became prime minister. However, due to intra-coalition tensions he left the position, while the PSL remained a part of the coalition up to 1997. In 1997 election it received 7,3% of the vote and 27 mandates. In the next election in 2001 the party got 8,8% and 42 mandates, in 2005 it was 6,96% and 25 mandates. The PSL is a member of the European Peoples Party (Fiala, Mareš, Sokol 2007: 45).

The Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland (*Samoobrona Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*) keeps an important position in the Polish party system. The current leader of this party Andrzej Lepper organized in 1991 anti-governmental protests of Polish farmers. In 1992 Trade Union of Farmers “Self Defense” (*Związek Zawodowy Rolnictwa „Samoobrona“*) was registered and a short time later the party called Agreement “Self Defense” of Poland (*Przymierze „Samoobrona“ Polski*) was created. It won medial attention due to radical actions of farmers; however, its electoral results were weak in the 1990's. In 1999 it was renamed to Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland.

The leader of the party Andrzej Lepper became popular due to his radical activities and criticism of the established politics. In 2001 the party won 10,2% of the votes (53 mandates) and got

parliamentary representation for the first time. In 2005 it received of 11,4% votes and 56 mandates. It joined the governmental coalition with the conservative party Law and Justice (PiS) and conservative catholic League of Polish Families (LPR).

The Self-Defense has farmers and peasant roots, however, currently it has a broader profile than the traditional agrarian party, assuming label of a populist party. The party is ranked as a part of the extreme right party family by many political scientists (Grün, Stankiewicz 2006: 181-183, Thieme 2006: 337). The Self-Defense is a member of the Eurosceptic organization EUDemocrats on European level.

In Hungary the Independent Party of Smallholders, Agrarian Workers and Citizens (*Független Kisgazda, Földmunkás és Polgári Párt -FKgP*) became relevant in the 1990' s, however, currently it lost its position. FKgP was renewed in 1989 and it is connected with the traditional party, which was the winner of the election in Hungary in 1945, but in 1948 was dissolved by communist regime.

In the new democratic regime the FKgP won 44 mandates and 11,7% of the votes in the 1990 election and joined a centre-right coalition government headed by the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) (Szajkowski 2005: 285). However, the internal disputes later weakened the party's position.

In 1994 the FKgP received 8,6% of the votes and 26 mandates. At this time it had a strong nationalist orientation. The election 1998 were success for the party, because it won 13,2% of votes and 48 mandates and joined the governmental coalition headed by the Federation of Young Democrats–Hungarian Civic Party (FIDESz-MPP) (Szajkowski 2005a: 284).

However, internal clashes were typical of the party as well as of the coalition. In elections 2002 the FKgP won only 0,75% and lost its parliamentary representation. The decline of the party was confirmed in the 2006 election. The FKgP was an associated member of the European People's Party; however, it left this organization (Fiala, Mareš, Sokol 2007: 48).

The FKgP was not the only agrarian party in post-communist Hungary. In December 1989, the Agrarian Union (*Agrárszövetsége – Asz*) was founded. It was leftist oriented and it opposed privatization policies of the FgKP. The Agrarian Union won one seat in Parliament in 1994 (Szajkowski 2005a: 285).

In 2002 The Hungarian Provincial Party (Magyar Vidék és Polgari Párt – MVVP) was created. It defines itself as an „independent middle party dedicated to safeguarding the provincial interests based on European values and Hungarian national interests“ (MVVP 2006). The position of the party in the Hungarian party system is marginal. The party is a member of right-wing Alliance for the Europe of the Nations on the European level (Fiala, Mareš, Sokol 2007: 69).

In Slovakia the agrarian partisanship has a mostly similar tradition as in the Czech Republic. As mentioned above, the Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants in the interwar period acted as a common Czecho-Slovak party. Also after the fall of communism the coalition Alliance of Peasants and Countryside (*Spojenectvo poľnohospodárov a vidieka – SPV*) had a federal basis in the first free election in 1990, however, in Slovakia it received fewer votes than in the Czech Republic – only 2,5%.

In the first half of the 1990's peasant parties managed to achieve relatively high electoral results, however, it is important to understand it more as a result of successful electoral coalition tactics of the peasant representation than the electoral support of this type of parties. The Peasant Party of Slovakia (*Rolnícká strana Slovenska - RSS*) and the Movement of Peasants of Slovakia (*Hnutie poľnohospodárov Slovenska - HPS*), which represented mostly the interests of agricultural cooperatives (Hynčica 2006), established in 1992 an electoral coalition with the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia (SDSS). This coalition received 4% of votes in the Slovak National Council, 4,9% in the Chamber of People of the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly and 6,1% in the Chamber of Nations of the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly.

Two years later the Peasant Party of Slovakia was a marginal electoral partner of the winner of this election – the centrist populist Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) headed by the charismatic and authoritarian leader Vladimír Mečiar, which received 37,3% of votes. The RSS won 3 mandates and it was a part of governmental coalition agreement. The RSS and the HPS merged later into the New Agrarian Party (*Nová agrárna strana – NAS*). The NAS joined the HZDS before the 1998 election (Kopeček 2002: 372). Therefore, the agrarian party family is not represented in contemporary Slovak party system (Kopeček 2007: 482)

The Democratic Farmers Party of Germany (*Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands – DBD*) existed during the communist regime in the German Democratic Republic, where it was one of the so called “Blockparteien”. These were parties which were officially admissible by the regime in the Democratic Bloc. The DBD was founded in 1948 with the aim to get the farmers for the idea of building of socialism ((Oberreuter, Kranenpohl, Olzog, Liese 2000: 241).

After the fall of Berlin wall the party left the Democratic Bloc in December 1989 and attempted to act as an independent party in the democratic political system. However, the DBD did not have any partner in western Germany, which was very important for East German parties in 1990. The turn to the ecological issues was also not successful because this part of political spectrum was occupied by Greens. In the free election in March 1990 the DBD received only 2,2% of votes. In September 1990 the party with 90.000 members merged with the Christian Democratic Union (Oberreuter, Kranenpohl, Olzog, Liese 2000: 241), which is one of the two

major catch-all parties in the party system in unified Germany. Currently, there is no relevant agrarian party in German party system or in the party landscape in the Eastern Germany.

4. Concluding Remarks

Contrary to its own historical tradition and to a significant extent also to developments in Poland (and in somewhat limited way in Hungary and Slovakia), where parties related to rural interests have managed to mobilize quite a substantial support after 1989, in the Czech Republic agrarian parties have never achieved a real success. The only exception can be seen in parliamentary representation of the Agrarian Party, achieved through participation in LSU. When we search for an explanation of this failure, we can primarily point out to two major elements – first, low numbers of active rural population in the Czech Republic, and second, ability of some more successful parties and other institutions to offer more relevant representation of rural interests.

Especially the former element seems to be of obvious importance. While in 1948, the year in which communist regime in Czechoslovakia was established, in the Czech part of the country there were more than 1.3 million of people actively working in the agriculture, in 1989 it was only 531.000 people. Another steep decrease followed, with only app. 250.000 people actively involved in agriculture in 1993. Taking into account obviously not all of them could have been expected to vote for a party highlighting rural interests, and that the 5 % threshold to enter Chamber of Deputies (lower house of the Czech parliament, equipped with major powers) applies, which amounts to app. 380.000 votes necessary to get over the threshold⁷, it is clear the agricultural population grew only too small to produce a strong party (Pospíšil 1994: 20).

Still, there might have been some space for a rural party to achieve parliamentary representation, as it was evidenced by 1992 electoral results. However, such a scenario was only possible provided a rural party would be a member of a stable coalition. As we could have already seen, the major attempt to build such a coalition failed, especially because none of participating parties was able to constitute a stable core of its electorate. In more general perspective we can say the Czech party system in 1991-1996 experienced a series of attempts to create a relevant centrist party, able to compete with Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana /ODS/) and with the Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická /ČSSD/). Even when there were six or seven parties aspiring to such a position, and their developments were

⁷ While these numbers relate to hypothesized electoral participation of 100 %, it is clear we have to adjust the numbers to real levels of participation. As in last parliamentary elections the participation oscillates about 60 %, we can deduce the threshold would stand for app. 230.000 votes, which still allows for the same interpretation. See www.volby.cz for details on electoral results in the Czech Republic.

interlinked to the degree that allowed for a kind of unification, in the end they all failed and disappeared after 1996 parliamentary election, leaving no chance to establish viable centrist coalition (Pšeja 2005: 83, 86-7).

While absence of numerous electoral bases definitely played a crucial role in marginalization of Czech agrarian parties, we should not underestimate influence of other parties. As early as in 1990 parliamentary election there were other parties – besides Alliance of Farmers and Countryside – paying more or less extensive attention to rural and agriculture issues: for example Civic Forum (Občanské fórum /OF/), Czechoslovak People's Party (Československá strana lidová /ČSL/) or Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa /KSČ/) (Řehák, Řeháková 1991). What is more, each of these parties was related to rural and agriculture issues in different way: while agricultural policy of Civic Forum reflected necessity of a thorough transformation of agriculture and included also emphasis on remedying injustices of former regime (e.g. nationalization of agriculture property, which now should be returned to original owners), two other parties were much more traditionally focused. While KSČ defended interests of members of common agriculture co-operatives and tried to highlight importance of co-operative farming, policies of ČSL reflected its regional and ideational roots – ČSL has had its strongest base in rural and religious areas of Southern Moravia and Eastern Bohemia, which obviously makes rural and agricultural issues important part of its agenda, with a special emphasis on private ownership.

However, there was another intriguing development that definitely deserves some attention. The part of former pre-war members of the Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants and its youth organization entered the newly founded Assembly for the Republic–Republican Party of Czechoslovakia (Sdružení pro republiku–Republikánská strana Československa /SPR-RSČ/). This party, headed by a populist politician Miroslav Sládek, declared itself a successor to the Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants; however, in fact it was the extreme right party. The pre-war agrarians mostly left the party as early as in 1990 due to disputes with Sládek – for example, Sládek rejected the cooperation with the Free Peasants' Party and Christian and Democratic Union, which was supported by agrarians in the SPR-RSČ (Mareš 2003: 190-192). Despite the fact that SPR-RSČ later elaborated agrarian programme, it was not an agrarian party. The SPR-RSČ represented the extreme right party family in the Czech Parliament in 1992-1998, but since the end of the 1990's it has grown marginal.

In the post-1989 Czech politics the “republicanism” as a political “mark” was mostly connected with extreme right wing populism or with conservatism inspired by American Republican Party, not dominantly with agrarianism of the pre-war period. The limited ideological relations to the

pre-war republicanism, however, could be found in the politics of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS).⁸ Nevertheless, these activities do not mean ODS tried to assume political agrarianism; rather, they can be explained as an attempt to find roots of contemporary Czech non-confessional conservative liberal right (the other roots could be found in the Czech national socialism, which is obvious in the celebration of Edvard Beneš in some political circles close to the ODS).

In the 1990's, all major Czech parties⁹ developed elaborate agricultural policies and are thus able to offer satisfactory alternatives to voters related to agricultural activities. However, should we search for a party whose rural and agricultural policies constitute relatively most important part of its agenda, obviously it should be KDU-ČSL – agricultural issues constitute one of major areas of its interests and its former chairman Josef Lux repeatedly, in the years 1992-1998, headed Ministry of Agriculture (Fiala, Suchý 2005), thus significantly influencing transformation of agriculture. Besides political parties there are other institutions offering mediation of rural and agricultural interests, namely Agrarian Chamber of the Czech Republic, Association of Private Farming, Alliance of Agricultural Co-operatives and Companies etc. (Mareš, Pšeja 2005: 1613). These institutions possess numerous links both to political parties, and to governmental agencies, thus making it possible to achieve broader representation of agricultural interests than through a single party.

In sum it is possible to say while in the first half of 1990's it might seem an agrarian party may be at least a bit relevant element of the Czech party system, since 1996 it is clear development of rural areas does not constitute an issue that would attract substantial number of voters, and moreover interests of countryside are much more effectively represented through interest groups and professional associations. Even when we cannot exclude minor successes of agrarian parties e.g. in local elections, it is certain agrarian parties cannot be expected to achieve relevant position at a national level.

The Czech contribution to the establishment and development of the agrarian party family is significant mostly in the first half of the 20th century. If one of the criteria of emergence of a party family is to be seen in the existence of transnational political structures, the role Czech agrarians played by the creation of the International Agrarian Bureau in the 1920's is very

⁸ It is interesting in 2001 the chairman of the ODS (now president of the Czech Republic) Václav Klaus wrote an introduction in a book about Alois Švehla (Klaus 2001). The parallel between “idealists” Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Václav Havel on the one hand and “pragmatics” Antonín Švehla and Václav Klaus on the other hand is vague, however partially (!) acceptable (Holzer 2006: 276).

⁹ Currently there are five major parties – Civic Democratic Party, Czech Social Democratic Party, Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy /KSČM/, successor to the former KSČ), Christian and Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party (Křesťanská a demokratická unie-Československá strana lidová /KUD-ČSL/, successor to ČSL), and the Green Party.

important. After the 1989 the Czech agrarian party politics reflected the post-communist cleavage between the interests of agricultural cooperatives and those of private farmers. The contemporary dissolution of the agrarian party family in the other party families (Christian democratic, extreme right, ethno-regional etc.) in the contemporary Europe is obvious also in the Czech politics after 1989, and any perspective of the rebirth of a strong agrarian element in the Czech party system is very unlikely.

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