

**DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: COMPARATIVE
PERSPECTIVES AFTER TWENTY YEARS OF POLITICAL CHANGE**

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Paper for Conference on *20 Years of Czech Democracy*, organised by The Institute for Comparative Political Research, Masaryk University, Brno, 14 September 2009

(1) INTRODUCTION

What is special about twenty years in national political history? It is of course fashionable in historical circles to divide national development into decades which are a convenient slice of time, although the accompanying tendency to characterise each decade as having a particular character does run the risk of exaggeration in distinguishing one decade from another¹. Not everyone who lived through the famous sixties in Western Europe found it a swinging or liberating experience for reactions divided quite sharply along generational lines and, in any case, the effects of this experience – as well as the reaction to it – marked some political attitudes in the 1970s. For people in Eastern Europe there was no such experience. Indeed, the decade ended for Czechoslovakia with anything but liberation; quite the contrary! Sometimes one needs rather more than a decade to identify an overriding pattern to events; and here we are reminded of current debate about the end of neo-liberal economics after thirty years of its dominance in world affairs (a pattern that was indeed replicated in Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism).

More obviously, two decades might seem remarkable when bounded at each end by a significant historical event. That which occurred in the autumn of 1989 is clearly one such case; while the current situation is seemingly not a turning-point in national development – in any case some turning-points in history are not always perceived as such until awhile afterwards – unless the coming of the worldwide recession presents exactly that, with indeed some calamitous impacts in Central & Eastern Europe (CEE) - although the Czech Republic is not so far one of those countries most affected there. In another particular respect, however, the Czech Republic could celebrate its twenty years as a new democracy since it has already surpassed the duration of the interwar First Republic which came to grief with the Munich Agreement and the subsequent German occupation and the separate installation of the Nazi satellite Slovak State. The present-day Czech Republic faces a very different international environment from then, one which is contrastingly supportive of liberal democracy, having just this year celebrated ten years of NATO membership and five years of membership as an EU member state.

In the end, we are talking about the survival, the durability and the achievement of Czech democracy during these twenty years. That it has survived is a statement of the obvious. The odds were not heavily against it doing so although some scholars of transitology – especially those conditioned by the milder transformation in Southern Europe - were wary of predicting success in regime change in Eastern Europe given the daunting task ahead with double or triple transformation on the agenda after 1989.

The current Czech Republic has also demonstrated durability, that is an ability to withstand crises and challenges through its own political resources including public support. The brief continuation after 1989 with the Czecho-Slovak experiment in democracy soon faced a fundamental crisis and challenge in relations between Prague and Bratislava leading to a separation into two states. This so-called “velvet divorce” may be counted as a success in that it avoided a worse-case scenario comparable to contemporary events occurring further south than in the Western Balkans. Disruption to democratisation that followed this separation was much more evident in Slovakia for a half-decade, with a free rein allowed ethnic nationalism and authoritarian tendencies, than in the Czech Republic. The latter’s political development eventually entered a more difficult period following the transition years with government weakness and later political instability and also economic management problems. Serious corruption scandals from the later 1990s magnified the problem of trust in the new Czech democratic political institutions but they have not encouraged the rise of attractive systemic alternatives.

It is commonly supposed that the country’s ethnic and cultural homogeneity has been advantageous in securing democracy in the post-Communist period. This judgement, while somewhat complacent, contains a truth since reconstructing inter-ethnic relations while simultaneously democratising, especially when nation-building is required (a task not needed in the Czech case), can well complicate the process towards democratic consolidation or at least prolong that. Thus, there is a school of thought which argues that the Czech Republic had it relatively easy when it came to acquiring its durability.

¹ D. Sandbrook, ‘Why we love history in decades’ in *The Observer*, 19 April 2009.

The Czech Republic's achievement certainly includes on the international front membership of the EU and NATO, this – especially in the EU case – reinforcing democratisation through Brussels' firm albeit deficient conditionality policy as well as the transnational elite and other pressures that derive from the integration process during accession and thereafter. Achievement on the domestic front is less easy to identify or interpret – with the obvious exception of Prague's remarkable economic transformation - if one goes beyond the actual establishment of the new political institutions which is essentially a task of democratic transition.

In effect, the celebration a decade ago of the first ten years of regime change after Communism was really about the achievement of democratic transition, for by this time the outcome was indisputably one with a future for liberal democracy. That would make the hypothetical theme of twenty years on – an anniversary that has occasioned less fanfare than a decade ago - the achievement of democratic consolidation. But is this really the case?

International judgements on such matters are too often coloured by impressions, reputations and expectations. The Czech Republic gained a name for a dynamic and successful regime transition; but this owed more to its record in introducing a market economy than to its politics. It certainly helped that the Czech governing elites were rather skilled at promoting their country's international reputation. But its positive reputation was subject to exaggeration, as became evident when the economic miracle turned sour in the later 1990s². International images can be rather one-dimensionally determined and may take time to catch up with later developments which are less favourable to a positive twist. It therefore remains to be seen how much the disasters of the Czech EU presidency serve to change or really harm the country's reputation, one already coloured abroad by the Eurosceptic antics of the state president.

Thus, the questions that drive this paper are: is the Czech Republic now democratically consolidated or not and why (not)?; and, what kind of liberal democracy has the Czech Republic become? The first question is best answered by a considered analysis free from the kind of assumptions that sometimes influence international policy decisions. For this reason, the first section broaches the question of democratic consolidation since this determines the subsequent discussion and precedes any answer to the second question. There then follows a three-dimensional comparative analysis based on different 'tests' for viewing the development of the Czech Republic's democracy in a wider and closer perspective: (a) the historical dimension, which looks back comparatively at previous successful cases of democratic consolidation in Europe in the period since 1945 but also further back in time to the First Republic in Czechoslovakia for any within-country lessons; (b) cross-national comparison, which seeks to relate the Czech Republic's progress to other post-Communist new democracies undergoing political change at the same time whether earlier or in the present time; and (c) the diachronic dimension, which focuses on the evolution of the Czech Republic during its twenty years of existence, highlighting the main developments that are relevant to democratic consolidation.

(2) DEFINING AN APPROACH: DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

Most definitions of democratic consolidation involve the stabilisation, routinisation, institutionalisation and legitimation of patterns of politically relevant behaviour³. Consolidation involves in the first instance the gradual removal of remaining uncertainties surrounding democratic transition (such as those relating to the constitution and loyal elite behaviour). The way is then opened for the institutionalisation of a new democracy, the internalisation of rules and procedures (such as over political competition) and the dissemination of democratic values through a sufficient "remaking" of the political culture. Much may depend in achieving this or in determining the length of the

² R. Fawn, *The Czech Republic: a Nation of Velvet* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 2000), pp. 83-85, 119ff. During this early post-Communist period, public ratings in the Czech Republic were more approving of their "economic situation" than the "political situation" (D. Olson, 'Democratization and political participation: the experience of the Czech Republic' in K. Dawisha and B. Parrott (eds.), *The Consolidation of Democracy in East-Central Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 166).

³ R. Gunther, N. Diamandouros and H-J. Puhle (eds.), *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation: Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), Introduction, p. 7.

consolidation process on the weight of historical legacies but also any controversial effects of the way transition was conducted.

As a rule, consolidation takes rather longer, being a deeper process, than democratic transition which may be largely confined to elite decisions. It is argued here that minimalist definitions of consolidation focussing on formal requirements such as free and fair elections and the separation of powers (to choose from Dahl's indicators of procedural democracy) are of limited use in explaining regime change in CEE where multiple and somewhat interacting transformations have been at work. At best, these requirements provide an institutional environment in which consolidation-promoting decisions may be taken or political events may be managed. Notionally, the achievement of consolidation is likely to occur between two and three decades after the fall of the previous regime but this is subject to cross-national variation. A new democracy is usually regarded as sufficiently consolidated when all politically significant groups regard its political institutions as the only legitimate framework for political contestation and adhere to democratic rules of the game. This state of affairs hence accommodates a behavioural as well as attitudinal outcome to the process⁴. Conditions tending to favour the achievement of democratic consolidation include prior democratic experience that may – especially if recent – be conducive to later democratisation, a preferably consensual and non-violent transition as well as an advanced level of economic development, a favourable external environment and, finally, the effective response of elites and publics to contextual problems whether severe or not⁵.

Given the vagueness of the term “democratic consolidation” and hence some analytical problems in determining its end point, it becomes necessary to disaggregate its scope and meaning. This may be achieved by referring to levels of consolidation such as – in reformulating the above definition – the structural, the attitudinal and the behavioural. Alternatively, and rather more concretely, Schmitter has employed the concept of “partial regimes” in assessing democratic consolidation, such as specifically governing authorities, political parties and interest associations, whereby consolidation is a process that involves the structuration of several partial regimes at possibly different paces⁶. How the different but hardly separate partial regimes interact may be quite crucial to the progress towards democratic consolidation and the dynamics of this process. In similar but broader fashion, Linz and Stepan employ five major arenas of a consolidated democracy: civil society, political society, the rule of law, the state apparatus and economic society⁷. They include stateness questions – neglected in some previous discussions of democratisation – and nationalism in their range of variables; and, on multi-ethnicity advocate non-majoritarian approaches favouring inclusive and equal citizenship and a “common roof” of state-mandated individual rights⁸.

This kind of conceptual handling of democratic consolidation provides a welcome flexibility in applying the term, whereby an outcome so far may amount to partial or incomplete consolidation – as distinct from a defective democracy characterised by a “perverse institutionalisation” or vicious circle in regime change. In other words, one may focus on this or that partial regime but not to the exclusion of the others, while asking whether failings in one arena necessarily suggest a threat to the survival of a new democracy. Thus, it is possible to assess the state of progress towards consolidation (and perhaps also its likely outcome) in a country undergoing democratisation where – such as even after two decades – that process is not yet complete. For example, it may be said that a particular new democracy is essentially consolidated except noticeably in one significant area. The achievement of democratic consolidation is more easily recognised with the wisdom of hindsight than at the time it supposedly comes about. This is because the end point of consolidation is rather abstract and not very palpable in terms of concrete events or developments. The Southern European democracies that embarked on regime change in the mid-1970s have for some while been commonly accepted as consolidated; but looking back it is difficult to link this outcome to any one or more occurrences (and there may well be differences of expert opinion about when the consolidation process ended).

⁴ Ibid, p. 8.

⁵ S. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), pp. 270-278.

⁶ P. Schmitter (1995), ‘Organised Interests and Democratic Consolidation in Southern Europe’ in Gunther, Diamandouros and Puhle, op. cit., pp. 285-87.

⁷ J. Linz and A. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), chapter 1.

⁸ Ibid, chapter 2.

This differentiated approach to consolidation may be amplified by disaggregating the process chronologically into successive stages and even key turning points (the term “critical junctures” is often used in this respect in the transitology literature). This is in fact easier than estimating the end point of consolidation, for it allows us to attach a significance (i.e. one relevant to consolidation’s prospects) to recognised occurrences during its course. For instance, the first major alternation in power expelling the leaders of the transition with this being accepted without qualification by the losers must be seen as system-reinforcing. A series of alternations in power at appropriate points in time, allowing each side of the political spectrum a reasonable period in office may be said to bring consolidation closer though not to the exclusion of developments concerning other partial regimes. The stabilisation of party systems around a limited number of regime-loyal actors should enhance elite consensus on democratic rules and procedures and possibly promote public support for democratic values. And, the coming of EU membership is certainly one of those critical junctures in the consolidation process even though it does not automatically mark consolidation’s end point as Brussels Eurocrats like to assert, simply because indigenous forces play an important part here.

It is the view of this paper that democratic consolidation was always going to take a relatively long time in CEE – and certainly longer than the previous process in Southern Europe that began a decade and a half earlier – because of the magnitude of the regime change agenda: the dual or triple transformations that have been occurring concurrently though not necessarily in harmony. That would argue for democratic consolidation being achieved nearer to three rather than the minimal two decades after the fall of the previous regime. This is, obviously, subject to cross-national variation and here, for reasons already explained, the Czech Republic is a probable early arrival at consolidation’s end point among the new democracies of CEE. But testing that remains to be seen according to the analysis of consolidation set out above.

(3) THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION

The purpose of this section cannot be ambitious as a comparative exercise - in the way the next section on cross-national comparison may be about the same process occurring concurrently in a range of post-Communist countries. Strict comparison is weakened by the different time contexts in which democratisation took place. However, this historical exercise involving a brief overview of previous cases of regime change after just two decades does provide an additional comparative perspective on CEE countries allowing insights and perhaps lessons. The simple question being asked is: how did these previous cases of democratisation look after a period of twenty years and when was their consolidation achieved? First of all, two sets of successful democratisation are taken. The third example, that of the Czechoslovak First Republic, was of course a failed or aborted democratisation due primarily to external events, where we may still ask how far it was nevertheless a consolidated democracy by 1938.

The two post-Fascist democratisations in West Germany and Italy commenced following traumatic defeat in war, an event not strictly comparable with the autumn of 1989 although that saw a non-violent variant of broadly historically similar importance as ‘life-changing’. The Federal Republic experienced for four years a form of guided democratisation through the Allied occupation, again a difference which some comparative enthusiasts might still want to relate to the intense international input into the new CEE democracies from the beginning. On a matter of historical influence, the members of the Parliamentary Council which drew up the Basic Law (the de facto constitution) were powerfully affected by their own memories of the Weimar Republic less than two decades earlier, for many of them had been politically active – such as legislators – during the previous republic⁹ (a point that can hardly be made about the Czechoslovak First Republic given the much greater lapse of time between pre-1939 and post-1989).

Essentially, the Federal Republic took rather more than two decades to consolidate its new democracy; and here the socio-political upheavals of the later 1960s are a decisive turning-point. Up to that time, West German politics had been characterised by stable governments and the economic miracle of the 1950s and earlier 1960s (which however occasioned judgements about the Federal Republic being a “fair weather democracy” not yet tested by regime change crisis). But politics was constrained within

⁹ ‘Die Mitglieder des Parlamentarischen Rates’ in *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen*, September 1973.

a Cold-War straightjacket which demonised the Left - a useful tool in the hands of Chancellor Adenauer for polarising elections and buttressing his own power. It was not until the extra-parliamentary opposition occasioned by student protest that the patriarchal political order – marked by low political participation outside elections – was seriously challenged. It was significant this domestic change occurred concurrently with the opening to Eastern Europe from Brandt's Ostpolitik. The first alternation in change did not occur until autumn 1969 - a full quarter century after 1945, much in contrast with the regular alternations in power in post-1989 CEE. Even then this alternation was contested as non-legitimate by some circles of the new CDU/CSU Opposition, especially around the figure of Franz-Josef Strauss, which however was not repeated when the next alternation happened in 1982. The seventies were in several respects a politically momentous decade; and it may be supposed that democratic consolidation was achieved sometime then, i.e. a full three decades after 1945. For instance, the economic crisis with rising unemployment from the mid-1970s did not in the end cause any serious political disruption, somewhat differently from that of 1966-67, which had inspired some pessimistic comparisons with the Weimar Republic (increase in the jobless; rise of the neo-Nazi NPD).

Postwar Italy is a more difficult case of democratisation because the impact of the Cold War was so powerful dividing the Left (represented by the strongly rooted PCI) from the Right, which held continuous power for decades through the Christian Democrats' monopoly of governmental office. No alternation in power occurred, only extensions of the governmental camp to new allies willing to support the hegemony of the DC – such as the “opening to the Left” involving the entry of the Socialists into centre-Left governments from the earlier 1960s. It was not until the major crisis in the early 1990s with the collapse of public confidence in the Italian political system, arising from the Clean Hands scandal of massive corruption, that eventually the Left (the former PCI now well social-democratised under a different name) finally entered government. During the last decade, Italy has experienced alternation between Right and Left several times in a way familiar to other European democracies. It cannot therefore be said that Italy achieved democratic consolidation before the late seventies at the very earliest, here attributing great significance to Berlinguer's persistent efforts at pushing forward his Historic Compromise strategy, that was soon aborted and replaced by a different version of the centre-Left for the decade of the 1980s. On other counts, Italy had developed well both economically but also at the level of civil society although in the latter respect the vast networks of associations were for long dominated by the Left/Right divide.

In comparison with the post-1989 Czech Republic, these two cases highlight the very different international environment of democratisation. Cold War politics may have had some reinforcing effects on this process, such as in stimulating rival party development along bipolar lines; but it also had a detrimental impact on political debate and participation (finally challenged in West Germany by the social movements of the later 1960s). Altogether, the international environment after 1989 was much more directly supportive of democratisation with a range of democracy promotion mechanisms on offer from different international organisations and their member countries that were just not present after 1945. The Czech Republic, as did other CEE new democracies, enjoyed a more relaxed and tolerant environment in which to evolve, just as well as their transformations occasioned enough difficulties without any international hostility. That has only really appeared with recent Russian antagonism towards the “coloured revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine.

The three Southern European democratisations commenced at slightly different intervals during the year and a half from spring 1974 to autumn 1975. In contrast with the postwar cases, they evolved in a rather different international environment marked by East/West détente though not to the extent that the West fully trusted Soviet intentions as was shown in the transition upheavals in Portugal during 1974-75. Alternations in power first occurred in Greece in 1981 and in Spain in 1982, in each case bringing the Left into power. In both countries, memories of these two countries' civil wars with victories of the Right meant that these alternations were given an historical significance, but the initial nervousness attached to them was soon dispelled. Greece has seen further alternations in power between Left and Right in 1990, 1993 and 2004, with Spain experiencing the same in 1996 and 2004. One important difference from CEE was that these three countries' economic transformations (better called modernisations with the EU a driving force) occurred after their democratisations were largely completed and not simultaneously¹⁰. That did of course make for a phased overall transformation process and one with less disruptive effect on democratisation than in post-Communist Europe.

¹⁰ D. Ethier, *Economic Adjustment in New Democracies: Lessons from Southern Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).

Moreover, Southern Europe did not really face the kind of state- and nation-building tasks that have marked transformation in some CEE countries. The only possible exception was post-Franco Spain which embarked on radical decentralisation (much contested by the traditional Right, including the military), while in the Basque Country centre-periphery relations became very loaded by the ETA terrorist problem. By and large, one may conclude that democratic consolidation commenced already in the 1980s and came to an end in the 1990s once economic modernisation had reinforcing effects on this process. In Spain's case, an important theme of consolidation was the political defanging of the military which had been a strong power factor in the Franco regime. Here, the events of 1981 and 1982 provided a decisive turning-point. The attempted military coup of February 1981 provoked a system-supportive response in favour of the new democracy, which quickly dispelled an uneasy political malaise that had surfaced in the late 1970s; and, its defeat provided a relevant prelude to the change of power to the Left in autumn 1982.

By comparison with Southern Europe, therefore, the post-1989 Czech Republic confronted a more wide-ranging and much more immediate transformation although of the dual rather than triple kind (for the latter was speedily resolved on the Czech side with the split from Slovakia in 1992-93). Inevitably, therefore, interactions between political and economic system change were intense at times. But how did this experience compare with that of the First Republic in Czechoslovakia? Both sets of democratisation explained above emphasise the salience of historical legacy factors so there is also a general comparative virtue in looking back.

It is common to note that the memory of the interwar First Republic was strong in the Czech Republic and remained 'a source of inspiration' for post-1989 democratisation efforts¹¹. It is true that the First Republic resisted the trend in Eastern Europe – and also parts of Western Europe – in the 1930s for authoritarian if not quasi-Fascist models to replace parliamentary democracy and that external events in 1938-39 proved decisive in ending its life. However, domestic developments cannot be omitted from the equation. There is usually an element of national myth-making in such cases of previous regime experience; and here national pride plays some part. In postwar West Germany, the reputation of the fourteen-year Weimar Republic had become the ultimate negative reference point for failed democratisation (not least because of the horrors of the Third Reich which followed it) and, accordingly, various key provisions were included in the Basic Law that reflected constitutional lessons from Weimar, such as relating to presidential power (controversial in the hands of Hindenburg) and the soundness of the new federal system. With the Czech Republic, the constitutional settlement drew positively on the Czechoslovak interwar model but also the Communist federal constitution as well as the brief constitutional arrangements of 1989-92, thus benefiting from much national experience¹². As if to reinforce the picture of continuity with the past, several 'historical' parties played a part in the transition at this time.

One study of Czech(oslovak) history has argued that 'the First Republic in some respects actually had a more promising starting point than the democratisers would have after the Velvet Revolution in 1989', for 'the post-Communist institution-builders had less to build on in many other respects [aside from bringing together the separate units of the Czech lands and Slovakia for the first time]: no recent experience of electoral competition on which to base the new party organisations; no politicians seasoned in parliamentary politics; and a long interlude in which the rule of law had been subordinate to the policy direction of the Communist Party'¹³. The First Republic did benefit from the viable governance system of the Habsburg Empire such as in its state administration while adapting its more democratic features; and it remained a reasonably functioning parliamentary democracy with free competitive elections at roughly five-year intervals¹⁴. At the same time, the First Republic developed as an economically strong country for it inherited much of the industrial capacity of the Habsburg Empire in Bohemia with its agriculture in a fairly viable condition¹⁵.

¹¹ Olson, 'Democratisation and political participation' p. 151; C.S. Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics: Nation versus State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), p. 30.

¹² P. Kopecky, 'The Czech Republic: from the burden of the old federal constitution to the constitutional horse-trading among political parties' in J. Zielonka (ed.), *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe: Volume 1, Institutional Engineering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 319.

¹³ C.S. Leff, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 29.

¹⁵ Fawn, *The Czech Republic*, p. 3.

However, to draw an analogy with the triple transformation from post-Communist Europe, the worldwide depression of the 1930s affected Czechoslovakia particularly badly since protectionism crippled its exports and there was a sharp downturn in industrial production¹⁶. This change had a negative effect on inter-ethnic relations for the industrial depression particularly affected the German minority in the Sudetenland¹⁷. Efforts had been made to integrate politically the minorities both through the party system and even in government; but the relations between Prague and Slovakia over the unitary state of two nations remained an unresolved issue throughout the interwar period. Eventually, the Sudeten German minority became more aggressively vocal, once Henlein's party came to monopolise its vote from 1935, with both propagandistic and covert support from Berlin. It is against this more difficult background of the 1930s compared with the 1920s that the international crisis of 1938-39 put to death the First Republic. In short, this first experiment in Czechoslovak democracy had started with favourable prospects for its consolidation; but increasingly international developments undermined these.

Altogether, these different historical cases of democratisation provide some relevant lessons for regime change in the Czech Republic after 1989. The most powerful one is the importance of the international environment which in all these different cases had a major impact on the chances for democratic consolidation if not democratic survival. By comparison, the Czech Republic was very fortunate in the international environment it found itself in following the collapse of Soviet power with greater scope for American influence in Europe and the presence of some important democracy-promotive international organisations, notably the EU as well as the Council of Europe, the OSCE and NATO. This factor provided a significant balance against the stresses of the dual transformation in the Czech Republic, while the latter differed from the First Republic in not facing serious ethnic minority tensions apart from the special problem of the Roma. As to the time taken to consolidate democratically, cross-national variation might allow less time in the Czech case in the event of that country continuing to be a "leader" in this process as it was back in the earlier 1990s. Thus, historical comparisons provide a broad context in which the Czech democratisation may be measured over time. They do not however account for the actual course and dynamics of regime change; and it is to this that we turn in the next two sections.

(4) CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON

Discussion starts with formal or quantitative assessments and then moves to a qualitative evaluation of Czech democratisation. Post-Communist regime change was monitored internationally to an unprecedented degree, far more than any of the previous democratisations explained above; and brief reference will be made to some of this evidence. The general pattern that emerges is one of widening cross-national variation in post-Communist regime change after the first decade of change, particularly if comparison is extended southwards to the Balkans and eastwards to former Soviet republics some of which like Ukraine have experienced rather difficult democratisations while others like Belarus and Central Asian republics have in the first instance undergone democratic inversion (regime change U-turning to an authoritarian path though not necessarily the Communist path) or in the second adopted variations of hybrid regimes. Cross-national comparisons will, however, be confined to other countries set on EU and NATO membership because of the importance, as just stated, of the favourable international environment and as the EU/NATO framework provides a tighter basis for such comparisons.

Firstly, Freedom House annual surveys provide only a very general basis for cross-national comparison. The Czech Republic has during the past decade been considered a "free" country. However, the highest rating of 1 for political rights and 1 for civil liberties has been recorded only from the 2004 survey (along with Estonia, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland among the CEE countries), before which Prague received a 2 rating for civil liberties for the 1998 to 2003 inclusive surveys. The ratings of 1 and 1 for the 2004 to 2008 inclusive surveys hence brought the Czech Republic into line with established democracies in Western Europe. By comparison, the more difficult democratisation case of Latvia, a former Soviet republic with a large Russian minority and unresolved inter-ethnic issues, similarly received a rating of 1 for political rights and 2 for civil liberties in the 1998 to 2004 inclusive surveys and the rating of 1 for both criteria in those of 2005 and 2006. However, Latvia dropped back

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 6; Leff, pp. 35-36.

¹⁷ Fawn, *The Czech Republic*, p. 6.

to 2 for political rights in the 2007 survey which was attributed to a series of corruption scandals that implicated high-ranking officials¹⁸. It barely needs saying that acquiring the top rating for both criteria should not be read as attributing any form of perfection to the democracies in question. Rather, it suggested there were not any offensive or blatant deficiencies in their systems according to the criteria set by Freedom House.

Secondly, a decade ago a report was published on progress with both formal and substantive democracy in ten CEE countries all of which subsequently joined the EU¹⁹. This allows us to draw some conclusions about the Czech Republic in comparative perspective at a point in time after transition and when notionally consolidation had commenced. The Czech Republic received an A rating for all of the formal democracy criteria such as the separation of powers and free and fair elections except for the rule of law and inclusive citizenship (because of the situation of the Roma) where a B rating was given. This overall picture compared fairly well with the other CEE countries although Slovenia scored rather better and Hungary slightly better, while Slovakia was distinctly worse – because of the Meciar Government’s violations of European standards - with two C ratings for the rule of law and the separation of powers as well as a B for civilian control of the armed forces and security services.

For the criteria of substantive democracy, which have a direct bearing on democratic consolidation, the Czech Republic presented then a mixed picture. There was constitutional stability but a lack of will on the part of the government to implement all provisions such as over regional devolution. There were independent media but a certain level of politicisation and the persistence of party allegiance in the national administration while there was a low membership among NGOs with the government taking an unhelpful attitude towards their activity. The qualitative judgements placed Hungary (no constitutional problems, better minority rights situation and a more developed NGO world) ahead of the Czech Republic and Slovenia much more ahead (with a more professional administration and a more vibrant NGO world). By contrast, Slovakia as well as Romania and Bulgaria had more problem areas such as over constitutional matters in Slovakia and Romania and a strongly politicised civil service in all three countries²⁰.

In other words, according to this report published in 1999 the Czech Republic was not in fact among the “leaders” of democratic consolidation. It was placed in a second or middling group. The report commented that the Czech Republic, ‘widely held to be a model of successful transition’, had a rather weak human rights policy and only recently had rescinded an exclusive citizenship provision denying this to the Roma²¹. The country study in the report concluded that the crucial deficiencies of Czech democracy were the weakness of “politics from below”, an underdeveloped legal and political culture, the vacuum between self-interest and public power as well as the lack of interest in a proper public dialogue and difficulties of public communication. However, it remarked that the substantive democracy problems that remained were not unexpected at this still relatively early phase in the transformation process²².

Thirdly, the regular annual reports issued by the European Commission provided further evidence on the same kind of democratic standards for the accession years of 1998 to 2002 inclusive, that is for the half-decade following the Kaldor/Vejvoda report. Even taking into account the Commission’s rather punctilious approach in recording progress while invariably urging further efforts, the Czech Republic comes across as hardly a model candidate country. One study of the Commission reports for 1999, 2000 and 2001 recorded the Czech Republic as together with Romania and Bulgaria registering the least impressive performance over compliance with the EU’s political conditions for the entire period, with Lithuania and Latvia followed by Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia as showing the greatest

¹⁸ The Freedom House surveys were published in the January (from 2007 the April) issues in the years after of the *Journal of Democracy*. It is evident that the serious differences between the Czech and Latvian cases hardly appear in these ratings.

¹⁹ See M. Kaldor and I. Vojvoda (eds.), *Democratization in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Pinter, 1999), chapter 1.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 20-21.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 19.

²² Z. Kavan and M. Palous, ‘Democracy in the Czech Republic’ in *ibid*, pp. 91-92.

compliance for the same period²³. The question here was whether this deficiency was due more to bureaucratic inefficiency or the lack of political will or even complacency due to a self-confident belief that the Czechs could hardly be refused EU membership when the final decision came²⁴.

If the problem was the last or even the second factor, the 1999 report served to shake confidence in Prague that accession business was proceeding well. The Commission's 1998 report had already warned the Czech Republic about the need for more attention to judicial reform (on which there was little progress), fighting corruption and the NGO sector seen as being less developed compared with neighbouring candidate countries as well as upbraiding Prague for the lack of commitment to concrete actions for administration reform and also neglecting the situation of the Roma²⁵. In 1999, the Commission began to lose its patience and declared that the Czech Republic had no effective policy against corruption, that there was no change over judicial reform, that the situation of the Roma had not evolved since the previous year and that the steps towards administrative reform were limited²⁶. With this onslaught, magnified domestically by press and parliamentary opposition criticism of the government, the government finally responded out of urgent necessity and steps were quickly taken to try and remedy the position over judicial reform in particular.

In 2000, the Commission nevertheless urged greater efforts over administrative reform while Prague's fight against corruption, which was widespread, was seen as 'far from satisfactory'²⁷. The 2001 report acknowledged action on judicial reform and that in this area the Czech Republic had 'gained momentum' and generally praised the country's 'considerable progress' while noting the need for further action over administrative reform and the situation of the Roma²⁸. Finally, the 2002 report recognised further progress with judicial reform but warned that corruption was a 'serious cause for concern' and the capacity to combat this 'inadequate'²⁹ (a warning repeated the following year in a special report on the Czech Republic's preparations for membership).

It has to be said for the sake of cross-national accuracy that certain political conditions of the EU proved difficult to implement in the short space of time allowed by accession and in some cases were resistant to change. Fighting corruption did not advance much in practice in other CEE countries too, partly because there was a lack of political will due to governing party interests coming under challenge but also as corruption was so rooted and widespread in post-Communist societies. Judicial reform proved difficult partly for the same reason (loosening party control) but also due to conservative judicial cultures deriving from the Communist period. And the situation of the Roma ran up against societal prejudice but also political elite indifference, so that the issue was essentially driven externally by the EU and other international bodies.

It was on this issue in particular that the Czech Republic (whose largest ethnic minority was the Roma) encountered severe international criticism which tarnished the country's image at times during the accession period. Well-publicised episodes of anti-Roma sentiment, their indifferent if not hostile treatment by the police and, more disturbingly, the reluctance of major political figures to speak out all contributed to this drubbing by international opinion³⁰. An element of ethnic politics had entered the Czech political scene but it did not in the end harm the country's chances of EU membership, maybe

²³ D. Ethier, 'Is democracy promotion effective?: comparing conditionality and incentives' in *Democratization*, spring 2003, p. 106.

²⁴ Prime Minister Klaus was exceptional among post-Communist leaders in often saying that he felt no great need to argue his country's case for EU and NATO membership since his country's case for entry was obvious (J. Nagle, 'Ethnos, demos and democratisation: a comparison of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland' in *Democratization*, summer 1997, p. 33).

²⁵ European Commission, *Regular Report from the Commission on the Czech Republic's Progress towards Accession* (Brussels, 1998), pp. 10, 11, 12, 18 and 42.

²⁶ European Commission, *1999 Regular Report from the Commission on the Czech Republic's Progress towards Accession* (Brussels, 1999), pp. 13, 14, 16 and 77.

²⁷ European Commission, *2000 Regular Report from the Commission on the Czech Republic's Progress towards Accession* (Brussels, 2000), pp. 18-19 and 21.

²⁸ European Commission, *2001 Regular Report on the Czech Republic's Progress towards Accession* (Brussels, 2001), pp. 18-19, 24-26 and 26.

²⁹ European Commission, *2002 Regular Report on the Czech Republic's Progress towards Accession* (Brussels, 2002), pp. 22, 24 and 26.

³⁰ Nagle, 'Ethnos, demos and democratization', pp. 34-41.

because of a comparison with neighbouring Slovakia where for a time infractions of different European standards were more blatant. Once a new government in Slovakia responded to the Roma issue from 2000 the Czech Republic had begun to get its act together, as shown in the summary of the Commission reports above.

It may well be asked what relevance these EU political conditions had for democratic consolidation. The Commission claimed they were promoting democratic consolidation in driving these conditions, although frankly they were also geared to preparing CEE countries for EU membership over decision-making and especially policy implementation. The EU had a mounting fraud problem so fighting corruption was very pertinent; but it also furthered respect for the rule of law. Judicial reform was rather relevant to the EU's working methods including transparent decisions that conflicted however with the conservative ethos of the post-Communist judiciaries. And, the improvement of the Roma situation was part of the general human and minority rights approach of the EU. But, it has to be said nonetheless that EU political conditionality did not cover the whole range of consolidation requirements still facing the new democracies in CEE. Even after EU entry in 2004 (and in 2007 for Romania and Bulgaria), the state of implementing the conditions remained rather unsatisfactory. There had been progress during accession, driven by the desire for membership; but this was more at the formal level of creating new mechanisms for furthering various conditions than in terms of on-the-ground change. Moreover, these countries were no longer being pushed by the Commission; and there were some cases of political will lapsing (such as over fighting corruption) although over some other conditions further advances were made³¹.

Since the EU enlargement to eight post-Communist countries in 2004, a concerned debate has emerged in Europe about the quality of democracy in the still relatively new political systems there. In that year, a Polish expert wrote pessimistically about:

‘a generalised sense of frustration regarding the state of democracy in the new member states. Public administration is seen as weak, under-resourced, inefficient and prone to corruption, and above all politicised: civil servants display arrogant attitudes towards the ordinary citizens and undue deference towards party politicians; governmental structures have been captured by political parties, while parliaments are peopled by demagogues and hide behind the shield of parliamentary immunity...internal security services are frequently happy to participate in political games and manipulation conducted by their political superiors; and the excessive proliferation of political parties built upon criteria that have little to do with genuine differences in political programmes render the ideal of electoral choice chimerical. Citizens of CEE do not trust and do not particularly like their own states: fourteen years after the advent of democracy, the belief in their own democratic institutions is very low’³².

This statement tended towards the pessimistic and ignored some improvements since the fall of Communism as well as significant cross-national differences concerning the state of public administration, the situation of control over the media and the prevalence of populism. However, the role and credibility of political parties was a common and a serious problem facing all these new democracies. It reflected a legacy of mistrust towards politics, one reinforced by the activity of parties since Communism especially their engagement with corruption.

Such concern about democracies in CEE has intensified since the 2004 enlargement. From late 2006, the press in various Western European countries has published gloomy stories about CEE such as in *European Voice*, the Brussels-based EU weekly, which commented: ‘Politicians are out of touch and voters do not care; outside pressures can be safely ignored; reform stalls or goes backwards’³³. Headlines like ‘Shadows at Europe’s heart: the ex-Communist countries have been an economic success – but risk becoming political failures’³⁴ highlighted this trend of commentary; while the

³¹ See G. Pridham, ‘The European Union’s Political Conditionality and Post-Accession Tendencies: Comparisons from Slovakia and Latvia’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, March 2008.

³² W. Sadurski, ‘Accession’s democracy dividend: the impact of of the EU enlargement upon democracy in the new member states of Central and Eastern Europe’, *European Law Journal*, July 2004, p. 373.

³³ *European Voice*, 22-28 November 2007, ‘Citizens demand more from East European politics’.

³⁴ *The Economist*, 14 October 2006.

Financial Times agonised that the rise of populism was hampering economic reform³⁵ and *Le Monde* dwelt on the moral and socio-political consequences of the Communist past as having become accentuated over time³⁶. The EU portal *Euractiv* alerted its readers in summer 2007 to the 'Wrong turn for Eastern Europe' because of the lack of direction since EU entry and warned about the stagnation or worsening of democratic standards there: 'The euphoria of finally "reaching Europe" has faded for many CEE countries in the three years since jubilant celebrations marked their accession to the Union', quoting a report from *Transitions Online*³⁷. There is an obvious trend of commentary emanating especially from older member states of the EU some of whose governments had been initially wary about a possible threat to the functioning of the EU from such a mega-enlargement. The further Eastern enlargement in January 2007 to Romania and Bulgaria further increased disquiet over the state of post-Communist democracies because they represented weaker cases than those that had joined in 2004.

Since there is clearly a problem of protracted democratisation in CEE, media criticisms of CEE democracies should be placed in a longer-term context for they represent so far short-term trends (as of the last couple of years) with some admittedly correct observations. Many of these issues of democratic quality owed much to heavy legacies from the Communist period, if not earlier times, that inhibited democratic development, relating to the functioning of the state – including public mistrust towards it – as well as patterns of political control, judicial incompetence and also corruption. At least, therefore, they were likely to take some time to eradicate fully. Furthermore, EU membership has made any major setback in these member states' democratisation more improbable on the back of their own democratic development since the early 1990s. New authoritarian systems like in Belarus and Russia or hybrid regimes as in some other former Soviet republics, such as in the Caucasus, have become unthinkable in the new member states from CEE just as the same happened somewhat earlier in Southern Europe especially once the modernising effects of integration set in. Finally, there was a positive aspect about these recent criticisms of CEE democracies because of growing public concern in the countries themselves over government performance – alongside strong notional support for democracy as a type of system.

(5) THE DIACHRONIC DIMENSION

It is with respect to these concerns about democratisation in CEE that we take a closer look at Czech democracy itself, abandoning now the comparative perspectives and concentrating on its evolution – on which formal evidence has given some picture in the previous section – and applying the theme of "partial regimes" from the literature on democratic consolidation. Already, it is clear that the reputation of the Czech Republic for being a great success back in the transition period – a reputation unchallenged at the time and boosting it as a FDI paradise – has increasingly been questioned by political and economic developments over the past decade and more. What has this said about the country's course towards democratic consolidation and how far is it short of achieving that state?

An early judgement on the Czech Republic's consolidation's chances came in a study published in 1997. This claimed the country was 'well on its way toward a consolidated democratic political system', for 'building on its democratic past in the interwar period, its post-Communist political and economic system closely follows a Western democratic model'. The democratisation developments quoted in evidence were the rapid growth of a multi-party system, the slower growth of an interest group system and the abrupt increase in parliamentary activity as well as rapid privatisation and the public's 'accepting, if reserved, attitude toward these post-Communist changes'³⁸. Significantly, this optimistic (though slightly qualified) judgement only just preceded the more difficult course of political and economic developments that marked the Czech Republic henceforth – which was evidently one of those turning points in democratisation. The economic situation deteriorated, problems became visible with privatisation over corruption and government management became more difficult leading to a pattern of non-majority or shorter-lived governments. This turnaround in the Czech case reminds us that democratisation is not necessarily a straightforward or comfortable linear process. It may be subject to setbacks or challenges which can result in regression or, alternatively – depending on the

³⁵ *Financial Times*, 30 September/1 October 2006.

³⁶ *Le Monde*, 16 May 2007.

³⁷ www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement, 9 July 2007.

³⁸ D. Olson, 'Democratization and political participation', p. 150.

reaction to the situation and of course competent leadership - a re-stimulation of democratisation's course.

A further study published a few years later in 2000 concluded that the Czech political system readily met the minimum or procedural requirements for democratic consolidation but fell rather short of more substantive definitions. While the country had a developed and respected system of horizontal and vertical accountability between its institutions with the constitution enjoying widespread acceptance among elite and public alike, there was a contrasting story when looking at the two arenas of civil society and economic society (according to the design of Linz and Stepan). Political controversies as over civil society ensued inhibiting NGO development with some of the political elite reluctant to relax a stultifying control over these arenas³⁹. This highlighted what is perhaps the most obvious deficiency so far as the Czech Republic was concerned in moving towards democratic consolidation which lies in the bottom-up dimension of this process.

It was with these problems in mind that the author's interview respondents in early 2003 (more than a year before EU entry) tended to hesitate over answering the final question about Czech democratic consolidation (at the end of one-hour long discussions about EU political conditionality). The deputy head of the EU delegation in Prague after some thought said he found the question 'difficult to answer' but commented laconically that the Czech Republic was 'better in the EU than out'⁴⁰. The head of the Ebert Foundation office (whose work was currently with different social groups and trade unions) was slightly hesitant about consolidation's achievement and commented there were 'transformation losers' and worried about Euroscepticism and possible nationalism⁴¹. The head of the Adenauer Foundation admitted some pessimism about letting the Czech Republic into the EU, referred to some instabilities in the party system and said the consolidation question was a 'difficult one' in reference to institutions and civil society⁴².

These different outside participants in the Czech democratic process, all working for the success of the grand project, took therefore a sceptical view of progress with one of them arguing with respect to the end of consolidation (apparently not evasively) that 'democracy is a permanent challenge'. Even taking account of the consolidation question being itself conceptually challenging for interview respondents who were mainly concerned with the practicalities of accession and democratisation, it was apparent they differed from the bureaucratic gloss placed on the matter by the European Commission. Its regular report on the Czech Republic published a few months before in the autumn 2002, had concluded that the Czech Republic had 'made considerable progress in further consolidating and deepening the stability of its institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities'⁴³.

Very recently, *The Economist's* recent Political Instability Index published early 2009 lauded the Czech Republic as among the most internationally stable political systems, for it was not only small and ethnically homogeneous but also a successfully reforming state with a strong social safety net and good economic fundamentals⁴⁴. Stability is not strictly the same as democratic consolidation although the two are of course closely linked. Time has of course passed with more than a half-decade since EU entry; but such box-ticking methodologies tend rarely to accommodate the vital qualitative indicators that are crucial for measuring and exploring the actual degree of regime consolidation.

This is best pursued by applying the "partial regimes" approach to democratic consolidation. The discussion continues by taking three basic areas: institutions and actors; parties and interests; and then civil society and NGOs, mass/elite linkages and the public. It will highlight a few relevant points in each case without resorting to much detail.

³⁹ P. Kopecky and C. Mudde, 'Explaining different paths of democratisation: the Czech and Slovak Republics' in *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, September 2000, pp. 64-65 and 68.

⁴⁰ Author interview with Christian Bourgin, EU Delegation, in Prague, February 2003.

⁴¹ Author interview with Heidulf Schmidt, Ebert Foundation, in Prague, February 2003.

⁴² Author interview with Frank Spengler, Adenauer Foundation, in Prague, March 2003.

⁴³ European Commission, *2002 Regular Report*, p. 133.

⁴⁴ Quoted in S. Hanley, 'Caught in crisis', *The World Today*, May 2009, p. 16.

Firstly, the Constitution has been the object of strong consensus as shown by the absence of serious constitutional issues except possibly the reluctance of the government at the time to devolve functions to regional authorities due to a reluctance to cede central power. Eventually, this change occurred with the EU applying a pressure, as it did with other candidate countries, for the sake of administering structural funds once they became member states. But there was no contest over the separation of powers, as for instance occurred in Poland in the early 1990s and more controversially in Slovakia in the later 1990s. It helped that the old Czechoslovak constitution was with modifications adopted; while the Czech Republic obviously benefited from Prague being the historical seat of national institutions (unlike in new states like Slovakia) although under the Communist regime the functioning of the state had suffered somewhat through misuse and penetration by one-party rule with a decline in the quality of bureaucratic staff.

But while in the transition the Czech Republic was noted for its stable governments this ceased to be the case over much of the past decade. The CSSD government from 1998 depended, for instance, on an agreement with the main opposition party which caused some concern about the operation of parliamentary and democratic life. In 2002, a country profile under a sub-heading of “weak governments, strong democracy” argued that despite doubts about government stability there was ‘little threat of more serious systemic crises’ for ‘since the start of the transition the Czech Republic has successfully established relatively sound institutions based on a separation of powers’⁴⁵. Since then, there has been no improvement in this new pattern with some governments being short-lived. That has meant that government stability and performance as a key factor in reinforcing support for Czech democracy has been largely missing.

In fact, the credibility of the political institutions has been relatively low. This is also true of other CEE new democracies (as witnessed by Eurobarometer surveys up to the present time), thus suggesting the Czech Republic as not unusual but also as not a democratisation leader at this level. The reasons are partly a legacy from the Communist period of mistrust toward the state, seen as essentially repressive, but also the hardships of regime change coloured by the negative reputation of the political class. Already in the mid-1990s, the greatest trust was placed in the President and least in the Parliament, reasons given in surveys including the poor preparation of deputies, the enactment of “bad laws” and the personal misuse of office⁴⁶. Recent Eurobarometer surveys have documented this continuing problem: only a quarter of the public trusted in their national government and just one-fifth in the Parliament (autumn 2006), declining to respectively one-fifth and one-sixth or 16% in the following two years (autumn 2007 and autumn 2008)⁴⁷. It may be concluded that the Czech Republic’s institutions were well-established and the object of consensus among the political elites but that they lacked a certain credibility at the public level. Strictly speaking, this raised some question about their consolidation.

Secondly, the Czech Republic is commonly quoted along with Hungary as having a structurally stable party system with a limited number of actors and a viable government/opposition divide (one however compromised during the 1998 Parliament) that allows for ready alternation in power according to the will of the electorate. In this sense, the Czech Republic is indeed a leader in democratic consolidation for party system instability if not fragmentation is more typical of other CEE democracies. But there is a major qualification of the state of the party system for the parties have encountered persistent mistrust if not hostility. This was not so evident at first for by the end of the transition in the mid-1990s their rating as a guarantor of democracy (at a time when still this was not yet taken for granted) was affirmative on the part of just over half those surveyed (averaging at 55% for the years 1993-95) although those disagreeing was substantial averaging at 45.25 for the same period⁴⁸.

Thus, there was already a problem with accepting the role of parties which essentially came from a reaction to the monopolistic Communist experience even though, paradoxically, they now performed a very different role from then. At this same time, a party interview respondent complained about the

⁴⁵ The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Profile 2002: Czech Republic* (London, 2002), p. 8.

⁴⁶ Olson, ‘Democratization and political participation’, pp. 169-71.

⁴⁷ European Commission, *Eurobarometer 66: National Report, Executive Summary: Czech Republic* (Brussels, autumn 2006), p. 2; European Commission, *Eurobarometer 68: National Report, Executive Summary: Czech Republic* (Brussels, autumn 2007), p. 3; European Commission, *Eurobarometer 70: National Report, Executive Summary: Czech Republic* (Brussels, autumn 2008), p. 5.

⁴⁸ Based on figures quoted in Olson, ‘Democratization and political participation’, pp. 168-69.

problems of conducting party organisation work because of the need to overcome 'an aversion to "party", a mentality after Communist rule'⁴⁹.

It seems that further developments such as the governmental and economic problems after 1996 damaged the standing of the parties considerably, with corruption being a major factor. The public distance from parties was evident in their low and declining membership, explained in terms of the parties' concentration on electoral strategies rather than organisation building – a phenomenon familiar in advanced Western democracies – but in fact due also to public hostility to party engagement. While the public might respect the parties' representative function they deplore their actual behaviour in fulfilling their role in Czech democracy⁵⁰. In the past few years, the deplorable state of the parties' credibility has been regularly documented by Eurobarometer surveys. Trust in political parties has ranged from a low of 10% in summer 2004 (which had 'not changed much since 2001') to 14% in autumn 2006 and 20% in autumn 2008⁵¹. The only extenuating circumstance that may be cited is the comparative one that this low rating for political parties is common throughout post-Communist Europe⁵². It must nevertheless be raised as a qualifying point about the full achievement of democratic consolidation.

This did not have to present a real threat to Czech democracy so long as radical populist or even anti-system forces were not present to exploit this widespread disaffection. That did not happen during the vulnerable transition years while the racism evident in more recent years focussing on the Roma has not been mobilised in any anti-systemic way, since this involved an already marginalized group and occasioned more silence than aggression among the parties, not to mention that before 2004 any populist attempt might have endangered EU membership. That leaves the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM), which formally is anti-system being an unreconstructed party out of line with the tendency elsewhere in CEE for former Communist parties to socialdemocratise themselves. In the transition period, the KSCM conducted a referendum among party members about changing the party name and in contrast with the Slovak party opted decisively against this: 75% of the members favoured keeping the traditional name while 83% supported keeping the party's (neo-) Communist character⁵³.

Anti-system parties do not represent a serious threat to the consolidation of new democracies if they adapt themselves and not just tactically to the democratic rules out of a pragmatic recognition that democratisation has a compelling dynamic or, that failing, if they remain isolated and do not achieve an electoral momentum that carries them beyond their committed supporters on the basis of a radical message. By this criterion, the KSCM more or less conforms to a non-threatening force in practice. It has represented an abstract challenge to democratic principles although it has come to embrace some innovative democratising arguments⁵⁴. For a long time, the party remained ostracised by other parties as a coalition partner but the KSCM has recently sought to break out of this stranglehold on its room for manoeuvre by a change of leader in 2005 and through an opening for de facto cooperation by the CSSD under Paroubek following a more flexible approach towards the KSCM by President Klaus compared with his predecessor Havel⁵⁵. The party has for long enjoyed a stable electorate of between

⁴⁹ Author interview with Jirina Melenova, national organiser of the Free Democrats, in Prague, November 1995.

⁵⁰ L. Linek and S. Pechacek, 'Low membership in the Czech political parties: party strategy or structural determinants?' in *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, June 2007, pp. 259, 271.

⁵¹ European Commission, *Eurobarometer 2004.1: National Report, Executive Summary: Czech Republic* (Brussels, July 2004), p. 3; European Commission, *Eurobarometer 66: National Report, Executive Summary: Czech Republic* (Brussels, autumn 2006), p. 2; European Commission, *Eurobarometer 70: National Report, Executive Summary: Czech Republic* (Brussels, autumn 2008), p. 5.

⁵² This aversion to parties was for the same post-authoritarian reason present too early on in the historical cases of democratisation reviewed above.

⁵³ Author interview with Miroslav Ransdorf, KSCM vice-chairman from 1993, in Prague, November 1995.

⁵⁴ S. Hanley, 'Towards breakthrough or breakdown?: the consolidation of KSCM as a neo-Communist successor party in the Czech Republic' in *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, September 2001, p. 96.

⁵⁵ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 4 October 2005 and 21 May 2008.

10-13%, a respectable vote in a multi-party system and hardly one of fringe status. In 2002, this rose dramatically to 18% in protest against the CSSD government but this proved a passing event. The party has problems of conflict between any electoralism and its core support from a sub-cultural constituency⁵⁶. Altogether, the KSCM has over the past twenty years conformed with Czech democracy out of necessity and to some degree reluctantly (and this is also true of its position on EU membership); but there have also been some signs of its seeking to move beyond its political ghetto and adapt to changing circumstances. Looking ahead, the coming of the current recession is likely to offer it an unexpected opportunity given the KSCM's record of economic populism that might prove advantageous in the new situation.

Somewhat differently from political parties, interest groups have as a whole developed in steady progression towards a system of stable mechanisms. A fluidity has been apparent in actual interest representation although trade unions were the exception with their organisational background relating back to the Communist period. There has been much diversity in methods and approaches including over policy influence in some sectors; but the process of economic transformation saw a tendency for interests to be disregarded by the government not to mention the disruptive effect of this process on many interests themselves⁵⁷. EU accession business similarly saw little opening for interests to be involved in negotiations. This included the CSSD government led by Zeman except where interests represented sectors where FDI was in prospect. The European Commission did offer an escape from government indifference because of its reliance on interests for information as an alternative to national government sources. However, the Euro-Czech Forum set up for this purpose found itself accused of being "national traitors" for doing so and it suffered from a common aversion in the Czech Republic towards lobbying as 'something dirty, that you bring an envelope with money in it'⁵⁸. Thus, the reputation of corruption in Czech public life acted as a constraint on the development of normal associational life. As of the past few years, interest representation has continued to develop albeit rather slowly.

Thirdly, civil society development showed similar problems as with interests because of unfavourable top-down elite attitudes and a certain public indifference. The very issue of civil society had gained high visibility in the transition during the mid-1990s but in a conflictual way personified by the antagonistic relationship between President Havel and Prime Minister Klaus, with the latter advocating the liberal economic approach as a basic alternative to Havel's moral notions of societal progress⁵⁹. But this polemical debate, divisive as it was, hardly gave a significant stimulus to the actual development of civil society. This proved slow and hesitant not least because the governments during the 1990s were reluctant to further the development of associations and open up to any relevant exchange of ideas and information, much in line with Klaus's hostile reaction in the civil society debate⁶⁰. During these years the actual number of NGOs irrespective of their size grew exponentially; but there remained little scope for them in access to policy-making⁶¹.

Altogether, this politically restricted growth of associational life owed something too to public wariness and indifference. This was emphasised in a Eurobarometer report in 2004 which recorded that Czechs were significantly more sceptical about various bodies including voluntary organisations and also charities and religious institutions compared with the EU average including the other new member states⁶². This contrasted with neighbouring Slovakia where a rather different political situation coming from reaction to Meciar's authoritarian leanings produced a determination by local NGO leaders to fight back through civil society made less indifferent by this threat; and in doing so were able to benefit from international assistance.

⁵⁶ Hanley, 'Towards breakthrough or breakdown?', p. 113.

⁵⁷ M. Myant, 'Employers' interest representation in the Czech Republic', *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, December 2000, pp. 1-20.

⁵⁸ Author interview with Petr Greger, head of the Euro-Czech Forum, in Prague, February 2003.

⁵⁹ M. Myant, 'Klaus, Havel and the debate over civil society in the Czech Republic' in *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, June 2005, pp. 248-67.

⁶⁰ A. Green and C.S.Leff, 'The quality of democracy: mass-elite linkages in the Czech Republic' in *Democratization*, winter 1997, pp.72-76.

⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 76-79.

⁶² European Commission, *Eurobarometer 2004.1: National Report, Executive Summary: Czech Republic* (Brussels, July 2004), p. 3.

In conclusion, this examination of principal “partial regimes” has shown that Czech democracy has evolved in familiar ways true to the model of a liberal democracy. However, there have remained or persisted constraints or restrictions on its evolution which all relate to the question of vertical linkages or relations between political institutions, political elites and parties with bottom-up organisations and the public in general. From a cautious optimism noted among Czechs in the transition years there has developed a disenchantment with the way democratic life has been run from above. At the same time, support for democracy and loyalty to the system have not disappeared. There has been no direct threat from nor is there any serious prospect for anti-system forces since the dynamics of democratisation have continued to be positive discouraging such tendencies. The worst scenario would be some atrophising of Czech democracy; but its outlook still depends on what happens in the near future suggesting it cannot yet be said that democratic consolidation has been fully achieved. In many ways, democracy in the Czech Republic has been a late developer.

(6) CONCLUSION: THE OVERALL DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL CHANGE

It is clear that if the Czech Republic was a model transition democracy in the earlier 1990s this position has been long since lost. Insofar as that reputation owed something to effective image making then there should be no great surprise. Some other CEE countries, notably Hungary, have also lost their superior reputation in the eyes of Western Europe whether – as in that case – due to less pleasant developments in domestic politics or economic mismanagement. Much therefore depends on the wisdom of government leadership after regime transition but also, more fundamentally, on how the complexities of democratic consolidation work out. While democratic transition may owe much to political figures and elites as it is often a largely top-down process, the subsequent or partly concurrent process of consolidation is much less under the control of the elites although influenced by their behaviour, being both a wider and deeper process than transition.

Clearly, it is wrong to expect perfection as an outcome of democratic consolidation if only because some long-established democracies in Western Europe (i.e. older EU member states) have their deficiencies. Some of the latter would surely fail the political conditionality test on one or other count if they were put through the monitoring mill that the CEE countries experienced less than a decade ago. What does matter is whether the dynamics of political change in new democracies is in any significant way negative or contains any self-destructive tendency, for this is a different question from that posed about established democracies. With Czech democracy, the main deficiency is quite recognisable in the absence of broad participation in the system for reasons that relate to both elite attitudes and behaviour and also public mentalities. The Czech Republic still shows some features of being a ‘lean and mean democracy’ noticed well over a decade ago⁶³. If one goes on to ask the question what is special about the Czech version of democracy then the much cited scepticism of Czechs comes to mind, as this characteristic seems to have fed into patterns of political attitude and behaviour up till now and not always in a positive way.

One factor should be brought into the discussion which is political and cultural legacies from the past. First and foremost, this must mean the Communist period which dominated much of the latter half of the last century. Czechoslovakia, particularly the Czech part of that country, suffered a notably repressive form of Communist rule especially after the re-imposition of Stalinism after 1968. It goes without saying that this experience with all its conditioning effects both negative and reactive would leave deep marks that would take time to disappear and therefore feed into the following regime change process. Vaclav Havel has gone on record as saying that it will take two generations to fully overcome the legacy of Communism⁶⁴. His views have not always been shared by his countrymen but this paper’s discussion of the problems of democratic consolidation suggest there is some mileage in his argument.

One new development has arisen which raises some concern about the near future; and that is the worldwide recession that has begun to impact on CEE rather painfully. In February 2009, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) warned that ‘the severity of the economic crisis in Eastern Europe is threatening to throw nearly two decades of economic reform into

⁶³ Nagle, ‘Ethnos, demos and democratization’, p. 53.

⁶⁴ Quoted in *The Lost World of Communism: The Kingdom of Forgetting*, BBC 2 television, 21 March 2009.

reverse'. The Czech Republic has so far not been as vulnerable as some other economies, like those of Ukraine, Romania and Latvia which have been forced to apply for IMF assistance, although it has been hit by an export slowdown. However, it is in this new context that the gulf between elites and public becomes more worrying given the latter holds such a low opinion of the political class and rate government performance without enthusiasm. Eurobarometer surveys have in the past few years (before the recession began) recorded fairly strong negative feelings about the course of the Czech economy. In autumn 2007, only 29% of Czech citizens believed that the country was going in the right direction and that in spite of then massive growth the public viewed the economic situation rather critically: negative opinions dominated with 56% compared to 42% positive opinions⁶⁵. A year later, the Czech public revealed it was most afraid of a worsening in the national economy for 46% were convinced the economy would get worse in the coming year while only one-tenth thought the opposite. Nevertheless, on a political-historical level, the same survey showed that Czechs were overwhelmingly positive about the fall of the Iron Curtain (the most out of the whole EU): 83% described it as having been beneficial for the Czech Republic while 71% saw it as beneficial for people personally⁶⁶.

Much depends ultimately on how far democratic values are rooted for surely Czech democracy is heading for a new and difficult period ahead. One wonders, therefore, what Czech democracy – for it is highly likely to remain – will look like in another decade. Differences of viewpoint have surfaced in some of the literature on the subject. Pessimistically, there is the argument that the failure to nurture channels of input for popular concerns had a stunting effect on the political process and that this weakly institutionalised societal influence on the policy process might even affect the stability of the political system⁶⁷. Optimistically, others have seen the Czech democratic system as possessing internal incentives and structural underpinnings (meaning the inter-institutional mechanisms of accountability and the structure of political competition) which guaranteed that its deficiencies might be corrected over time by means of peaceful evolution⁶⁸. In short, these judgements made a decade or less ago identified both the main weakness and the main strength of the Czech Republic. Time since has served to mitigate somewhat the first and to confirm the second; and it remains to be seen how these two dimensions of Czech politics work out and perhaps overcome the problems encountered by the country during its process of democratic consolidation.

⁶⁵ European Commission, *Eurobarometer 68: National Report, Executive Summary: Czech Republic* (Brussels, autumn 2007), p.2.

⁶⁶ European Commission, *Eurobarometer 70: National Report, Executive Summary: Czech Republic* (Brussels, autumn 2008), pp. 3, 7.

⁶⁷ Green and Leff, 'The quality of democracy', pp. 83-84.

⁶⁸ Kopecky and Mudde, 'Explaining different paths of democratisation', p. 69.