

**The Czech party system: a few observations on the properties and working logic of the
Czech party arrangement**

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This short article is devoted to the problem of evaluating the working logic of the current Czech party arrangement and, in that context, whether this arrangement can be categorized as a particular type of party system. The basic goal of this paper is to contribute to a greater understanding of two key points of this issue: a) the context and consequences of the semi-polarization of the Czech party system; b) the reasons for the persistent absence of a set of diversified, sufficiently legitimized, and effective coalition formulas.

Before I start my analysis I'd like to first make a brief observation concerning the relationship between the conception of the issue applied in this article and the general topic of "consolidation" ("institutionalization", or "stabilization") of party systems. Let me say clearly that I avoid the use here of "transitology" or a "consolidology" approaches or perspectives, as they would be irrelevant to the nature and direction of the following considerations.

Identification of the key points for evaluating the working logic and reproduction of the Czech party system is a not a new or surprising approach. In this regard my article is loosely based on observations that have been formed over the last seven years in discussing the characteristics of the Czech party system. Here I do not mean to minimize the importance of a period for hindsight which now allows us – among other things – to see in a sharper light the individual factors in the evolution of the Czech party system in the period before and especially after 1998. With the perspective of time the necessity has become clear for acknowledging the hybrid manner of functioning and reproduction of the Czech party system as a semi-polarized arrangement comprising the properties of various types of party system. This acknowledgement presents a suitable departure point for investigating the causes, contexts, and consequences of the "deficit of legitimacy" that underlies the long-term retardation of the set of plausible political formulas for assembling coalition governments. At the same time I am well aware that there are many issues – of more or less importance – related directly or indirectly to the problem of the nature of the Czech party system, while many of these issues, as well as their solutions, are in various ways linked and mutually interrelated. I must emphasize, however, that the selection of the above-mentioned key issues is not at all accidental from this perspective. I believe that the formulation of new hypotheses, or just mere inquiry into the possibility of formulating and applying such hypotheses in these two segments of research on the problem, might have a positive effect on the analysis of a

number of other aspects of the formation and consolidation of the Czech party arrangement.

The Czech party system in the period between the mid-1990s and the pre-election period in the spring of 2006 is, in terms of Sartori's typology, unclassifiable, as it contains elements of both moderate as well as polarized pluralism. With reference to Sartori's terminology (Sartori 1976) – not so much in its specifics but in its general sense – it would apparently be best to speak in this case of a specific incarnation of semi-polarized pluralism (semi-polarized multipartism). I believe that emphasis on the factor of semi-polarization is justifiable in the Czech case, as well as being “heuristically interesting”. The characterization of the Czech party landscape as a semi-polarized pluralism corresponds in principle to the usual concept of polarization, although this concept may interpret polarization in various ways, and may place differing importance on elements of ideological distance, and the direction of competition within the party systems and the related polities (political communities). Furthermore this description is not in conflict with empirical information on the way voters classify themselves and the ranking of the individual parties on the left-right scale in the Czech Republic during the time period being examined (CVVM 2002a; CVVM 2002b; CVVM 2002c; CVVM 2004; CVVM 2005; see also Vlachová 1997). No less importantly, the idea of a semi-polarized pluralism corresponds to a configuration of poles, including character of the minor pole embodied by the KSČM, and with polarity-related notion of party interactions, including the specific field of interaction between ČSSD and KSČM. Another promising perspective offers itself when we look at the systemic effects of semi-polarization and its impact on the mechanics of the party system in creating and steering the formulas for government coalitions and alternation of parties in government. From this perspective as well, it seems the better variant to describe the entire Czech political party arrangement as a semi-polarized pluralism, rather than try to fit it into the category of “unsuccessful” or “imperfect” moderate or polarized pluralism – or to be satisfied with saying “it's somewhere in between”.

As indicated, the factor of semi-polarization is closely related to the “deficit of legitimacy” underlying the continuing limitations on the coalition formulas. This has a negative effect on the issue of alternation in government (government coalitions) among the parties, and – directly or indirectly – diminishes the potential for democratic governability in the Czech environment (Strmiska 2001: 29–31). This is not a new problem in Czech political science: the problem of the coalition formulas came urgently to the fore as early as 1997-1998, and

again later in the context of the “opposition agreement” (see Novák 1999; Klíma 1999).¹ Especially interesting – given the perspective taken for this article – are two sets of questions. First: are the limitations on coalition formulas completely explainable from “inside” the party system? Is it, then, an autonomous – intentional or not – product of the strategies adopted and followed by the relevant parties? Can it be that the absence of sufficiently diversified and legitimized coalition formulas is the necessary product of the structure of party competition? Second: can we in the given context clearly identify the potential “path-breaking options”? What is the relationship between these options and the mechanics, or the mechanical predispositions, of the Czech party arrangement (including semi-polarization)?

In the case of the first set of questions, quick and clear conclusions can obviously not be expected given the current state of understanding of this problem. I believe that a) the underdevelopment of coalition formulas cannot be satisfactorily explained solely “from within” the party system, and b) it may be an understandable result of the strategies adopted by the political parties, and – at the same time – not an autonomous factor. In this context there are doubts whether the evolution of the coalition-making patterns (or – in the broader sense – the equation for cooperation between the relevant parties) was or is related exclusively to the structure of party competition.

In this context it may be useful to devote some attention to the conclusions reached by Peter Mair (Mair 1997: 206-223) on the relationship between coalition formulas and the structure of party competition. In examining the alternations between government parties Mair placed special emphasis on evaluating three basic factors or dimensions of alternation in participation in government: a) the prevailing pattern model of alternation in government and the extent of these alternations (wholesale, partial, none); b) the stability or consistency of the governing

¹ Seven years ago, in an article entitled “The Formation of the Czech Multi-party System: a continuing story”, during a discussion on the Czech party system centered around the character and future of the “opposition agreement”, I wrote that “the main, crucial factor in the process of the defining and “maturing” of this arrangement will not be dependent so much on the structure and character of competition between the relevant political parties, but on the structure or formulas of their cooperation; in other words, what are the consequences of the absence of formulas for cooperation regarded as legitimate and functional by the party elites as well as by the majority of the voters. Without such formulas there can be no question of establishing any kind of “standard” moderate multi-party mechanics. Various fruitful considerations may be developed from this point: on mutual interdependence and the links between structures of competition and cooperation among political parties (with consideration to whether changes in these structures are of fundamental or secondary importance; or, on the advantages, disadvantages, and vulnerabilities of the various mechanisms for competitive party arrangements viable in the Czech context” (Strmiska 1999: 166).

alternatives, and in that context the degree to which – if at all – innovative formulas are applied; c) which parties end up being the governing parties; or the extent to which access to government is either open to all parties, or reserved for a few.

An eye to these dimensions played an important role in distinguishing between closed and open structures in party competition. According to Mair, closed and therefore highly predictable structure of party competition is typified by small or negligible changes in the range of governing alternatives or in the pattern of alternation, with new parties having no chance to break into the set of possible government parties. A relatively open structure of party competition is characterized by a diverse set of patterns of alternation with varying profiles of alternative coalitions, along with relatively easy access by new parties to the government. While a closed structure of party competition is characterized by little or no alternation and unchanging coalition formulas, an open structure is usually characterized by partial alternation between governing parties, or combinations of partial and wholesale alternation; along with the application of innovative government/coalition formulas, and open possibilities for (nearly) all parties to participate in governing coalitions (Mair 1997: 211, 212). Because the “closing” of party competition requires the development of stable norms and conventions in the patterns of party competition and in the processes of government formation, according to Mair such closed competition does not tend to be characteristic of newly emerging party “systems” (Mair 1997: 213).

With certain reservations, the structure of party competition in the Czech Republic during the time period studied (1998-2006) can be classified as relatively open – but with the important caveat that it represents a very imperfect, deformed variant of open party competition and contains heterogeneous elements. In the Czech case an undoubtedly very interesting factor is the combination of an absence of variation in coalition formulas, and chronic unpredictability and uncertainty throughout practically the entire workings of the party system directly involved in shaping coalition alternatives. A truly stabilized, consolidated system should be the opposite: the fewer available coalition alternatives, the more predictable the potential governments, and the fewer elements of uncertainty. That this equation did not apply to the Czech environment during the years 1998-2006 and still does not today is no inexplicable anomaly, however. One of the possible approaches to understanding the reasons for this state of affairs begins with noting the difference between party arrangements in which innovative coalition forming takes place, with relatively easy legitimization at relatively little costs

covered by the participating actors; and a system in which new coalition formulas seem too risky: either too difficult to justify, or for other reasons, but not because they would be technically or arithmetically impossible. In the Czech case one can only point to the previously-mentioned “deficit of legitimacy” which is a decisive factor in the continuing stagnation of coalition/government formulas. This phenomenon takes shape not only in the agreement to ostracize the KSČM and partly institutionalized anti-Communism, but the causes, contexts, and consequences of the exhaustion and the, possibly temporary, delegitimization of the idea of a center-right coalition in the late 1990s.

At this point, at the conclusion of the article, I would like to briefly comment on a second set of problems with potential “path-breaking options” and their dependence on the working logic of the party system. With the advantage of hindsight we can say that, notwithstanding the “opposition agreement”, the establishment of a minority government by the ČSSD in 1998 brought no fundamental, permanent change in the character of the Czech party system and its mechanical predispositions. The systemic impact of the growth of voter preference for the KSČM in the 1999, to a great extent resulting from specific shifts in the field of interaction between the (now-governmental) ČSSD and the KSČM, was limited. (That is to say, the semi-polarization of the Czech party-political arrangement remained a mere semi-polarization and no more). The attempt by the Quad-Coalition to embody a new alternative main pole failed, as did the experiments with new parties. Nor did the establishment of a coalition government of the ČSSD, KDU-ČSL, and Freedom Union (or the Freedom Union-Democratic Union; US-DEU) after elections in 2002 become a “path-breaking option” in the sense of a radical overcoming of the existing limitations on the creation and viability of coalition alternatives². Had it been so, it would have been a very important event for the democratic governability of the country. In this regard, a much more interesting element of speculation was the possible cooperation between the ČSSD and KSČM in forming a minority Social Democratic government that would rule with the support of the KSČM. The appearance of such a coalition would most certainly represent a “path-breaking option”. It would in effect bring the KSČM in from the political wilderness, and possibly bring on an irreversible change in the Czech party arrangement, or at least its workings. However, it is a question whether in the end this eventuality would merely produce a Czech variant on the “bipolar quartet” (ODS plus KDU-ČSL versus ČSSD plus KSČM), assuming the continued irrelevance of the Freedom

² Indicative in this regard was the almost embarrassed manner in which the KDU-ČSL and the US (US-DEU) justified their participation in the government.

Party-Democratic Union and the improbable – as of spring 2006 – emergence of any other relevant party formation). It is also very doubtful whether government cooperation between the ČSSD and KSČM would automatically – as a sufficient condition – produce the quick, definitive elimination of all of the systemic consequences of the semi-polarization of the Czech party arrangement.

But the fact remains that, other than the above-mentioned variants of development, it is very difficult to identify any other “path-breaking option” in the realm of actual possibilities; that is, outside of a significant change in the electoral potential and performance of any of the major parties leading to the disintegration or implosion of one or both of the main poles; and excluding the possibility of a semi-consociational arrangement based on agreement between the ODS and ČSSD.

The recent (June 2-3, 2006) Parliamentary elections, in view of their results, and the failure of the ODS’s first attempt to form a durable minority government, have brought no major change to the party landscape, at least as yet. The visible strengthening of the electoral potential of the two main parties (ODS obtained 35.4% and the ČSSD 32.3% of valid votes) has had no immediate systemic consequences. The same can be said about the emergence of the Green Party (SZ) as one of the relevant operational units of the country’s party system. The establishment of the SZ as a relevant party may be understood as a confirmation of the “natural” tendency to preserve a five-party format. But this is all we can say in this context for now, for the properties of this new operational unit will become clear only after period of time has elapsed. This leaves plenty of room for open speculation on the direction and character of the Czech party system in the future.

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