

Country case Czech Republic
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At the start of the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, the president of the International Olympic Committee Jacques Rogge said that the world needs peace, tolerance and brotherhood. What does the radical left have to say about what the world needs? Peace, equality, liberty, brotherhood. They differ only in terms of equality and liberty, as opposed to tolerance. With just a little exaggeration, one could say that this is essentially the difference between how the world is viewed by the radical left and the dominant liberal capitalist standpoint. Who is right?

It is possible to conduct an extensive discussion on an analysis of the contemporary left as well as on the definition of this concept, its transformation in time and scope, and how it is perceived by citizens and voters. There are even more differences in understanding the issue in relation to the left and the current crisis.

In writing about the situation at the start of the previous century, Eric Hobsbawm writes that the old society, old economy and old political systems had “lost the mandate of heaven”. Humanity was waiting for an alternative. One such alternative was well known in 1914. Propped up by the support of the burgeoning working classes in their country and imbued with a faith in the historical inevitability of their triumph, the socialist parties represented this alternative.

The first half of this idea is still completely applicable to the start of this century.

Unfortunately, almost nothing applies from the second part of this concept. Humanity is probably waiting for an alternative. In all likelihood, for humanity, there is no support from a dominant social class, not even for those on the left, and there is no feeling of historical inevitability. In our Euro-Atlantic civilisation, there is more of an uncertain feeling of historical failure or of travelling down a blind alley. Naturally, this thesis does not apply in absolute terms, but it describes the current situation for the Czech Republic and I believe it does the same for other post-communist countries as well.

The political representation of the radical left in a post-communist society has to take great care not to come up against the administrative restriction of its activities, which is justified by the idea of “coming to terms with the communist past”. The right has the feeling that the radical left, particularly that which is represented by the political party that declares itself to be communist, has no place in contemporary liberal-capitalist society. The public is systematically convinced of this fact by political marketing and various media campaigns, influenced by education in schools, etc. All of this is reflected in practical policy and in the effort to use legislative and administrative instruments to adjust the rules of political competition at the expense of the radical left. If so-called real socialism was rightfully reproached for influencing and manipulating the opinions of citizens, then this practice has been “refined” even further in post-communist societies. The use of all technological, psychological and sociological tools has an unprecedented importance in this regard. The content of political rivalry has been successfully pushed into the background. Its manifest forms have been emphasised and the purpose of politics has been derived from these.

There are also divisions within the “left”. Social Democratic policy does not reject the socio-political order of 21st-century capitalism. The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia and a number of radically leftwing entities accept the current situation as a fact, but essentially do not agree with it and envisage a prospective future whereby “another world is possible”. In the Czech Republic at the moment, the left-right divide is currently almost 50-50 and this is stable in the long term. Within the left, however, the proportion of pro-system and anti-system factions is variable. The internal structure of the left changes a lot more dynamically in favour

of one trend or the other. There are a number of objective as well as very subjective factors that have an influence on this.

The current situation is documented by up-to-date figures from sociological research on opinions regarding the crisis. The economic crisis is troubling the overwhelming majority of the population and concerns about it are growing. Currently, 85% of respondents are apprehensive about the crisis, and there has been an increase of 11% in this respect over the course of six months. At the same time, there has been an increase in the group that is “very” apprehensive. The crisis is keenly felt primarily by those who declare themselves to be leftwing (86%), older people (91%), women (90%), people in small villages and workers or the unemployed. Logically, those living in Prague are the least concerned, because this is the wealthiest region, which also has a leading position in the EU. These concerns are based on the real experience of respondents as well as on the fact that the Czech establishment has a high threshold of social sensitivity. Decisive rightwing political and economic forces prioritise reducing deficits and preventing indebtedness over stimulating growth or dealing with the problem of unemployment.

A question on opinions regarding the causes of the crisis shows us that society is divided into pro-system and anti-system factions. Around one quarter of respondents view the crisis as a systemic failure, two thirds see it as a (reparable) system error, and a small portion (approx. 5%) consider the crisis to be a “natural phenomenon” that does not depend on people. I think that in the 1930s, the crisis was viewed differently – the predominant opinion was that it concerned a systemic failure and that it was necessary to change the system, whether it be in the spirit of John Maynard Keynes, communism or fascism.

One’s view of the causes of the crisis also determines one’s opinions on possible solutions. To all intents and purposes, the crisis is perceived as a financial crisis, because the majority (90%) see the solution in reducing state expenditures (limiting foreign military missions, cutting state administration outlays). Most of the Czech population is also against resolving the crisis by freezing pensions and reducing education spending. It generally applies that the majority of the population is against dealing with the crisis to the detriment of the poorest segments of society.

For the right, it is difficult to marry the real need to guarantee possibilities for economic growth and a stable increase in affluence with the prominent opinion among the population that it is somewhat immoral for the costs of the crisis to be paid for by those who have no real chance of influencing social processes on the one hand, while on the other hand a certain profit has been guaranteed for those who are primarily responsible for the critical situation. The Czech left is striving to reduce the negative impacts on people who work for their livelihood, pensioners and the disadvantaged. As a party of the system, however, the Social Democrats must pay a lot of heed to crucial economic forces whose interests are different. Consequently, they are seeking an acceptable compromise between that which voters are willing to accept and what the limits of the system allow them to do. The radical left (the Communist Party) must be a lot more radical in its demands, because it need not run the gauntlet of social forces, as it has no executive responsibility. It is in another situation at the regional level, where it is part of the governing coalition in some regions. It is not clear how this will manifest itself in election results. At the same time, the radical left has to systematically fight for its right to a political existence, which drains part of its strength and resources on the one hand, and prevents it from always getting involved in solutions to society-wide problems on the other. It is often not invited to do this by other powers.

Although radical rhetoric outwardly prevails in its policies, it must also implement very pragmatic practices. The other radical (communist and non-communist) leftwing entities are a fringe element of the Czech political spectrum with minimal social impact. The same also

holds true for the activities of NGOs such as the Social Forum (Sociální forum). The only activity that was also substantially reflected in society as a whole was the anti-radar endeavour.

If we return to the task of our meeting, then the experience of the Czech Republic shows that the crisis did not have, and so far has not had, any influence on the right-left political polarisation of society. The share of both “camps” has not changed for a long time.

Nevertheless, a question does hang over what will happen in the future, because so far the tangible manifestations of the crisis have primarily only struck the more affluent social classes (a mortgage crisis, a decline in the value of shares, the financial crisis). Now, however, a wave of unemployment has arrived along with the people’s concomitant concerns about the future. At the same time, having said that, there is no sign of any leftwing radicalisation of society. In the Czech Republic, the radical right has also not come up with any coherent proposed solution so far, apart from attacks against “maladjusted groups in the population” (which is understood to mean Roma, foreigners, etc.).

The question has been posed as to whether there is any objective socio-political phenomenon that would be of general and unequivocal benefit to the left? It transpires that during times of plenty, the left does not fare demonstrably better, while it also does not outstrip the right in the political battle or score political points in bad times either. It seems that people’s conception of the left is something more general than any link to greater or less affluence. I am convinced that it is the guarantee of distributing wealth among the people. It is the idea that was characterised in the motto of the French Revolution as liberty and equality. Why else has the kingdom of heaven been cited for centuries in our cultural sphere as human harmony, including cultural and material living conditions? Why did the architects of Utopian socialism exhort the concept of Utopia? Why did communism, which became a driving force in the history of the 20th century, receive such a response? Today, it is as though we are in the same situation as we were at the start of the past century. For the radical left, it now also holds true that “regardless of whether they were Marxists or otherwise, the socialists were too involved in opposing capitalism to seriously consider the character of the economy (and I would also add society as a whole) that should replace it”.

In general terms, and in post-communist countries in particular, the left is in a situation where it is not offering a vision that is acceptable to most of the human community. Consequently, that is also why it is reacting to the crisis precisely in the way it has. In the Czech Republic, ordinary citizens understood more quickly than politicians that the old “revolutionary” tools such as strikes, demonstrations, etc, have lost their efficacy. But the politicians have not offered them any other instruments. For a long time, the left’s political adversaries have succeeded in atomising society and obliterating relationships based on solidarity and cooperation between social classes and groups. Therefore, instead of leading to positive outcomes for protesters, traditional actions result in an escalation of social tensions. And the number of citizens willing to get actively involved in civic engagement is declining.

Naturally, this is held up as proof of the low level of social support for protests.

What should one say in conclusion? Regardless of whether or not there is a depression, the left, particularly the left in post-communist countries, is in a long-term crisis. This crisis started in the year the Berlin Wall fell, when left-wing ideals also began to flounder and were frequently replaced by an empty void. Since that time, the radical left has had to find its identity, its place in society and its natural partners, whilst also defining its political adversaries. Post-communist societies as a whole are also living in permanent crisis. In the Czech Republic alone, we have had several economic slumps. The difference with this crisis probably lies in the fact that a significant portion of Czech society feels that it has reached a dead-end. Our prosperous future shines a lot less brightly and no longer dazzles even those

who staunchly believed in it a little while ago. Perhaps the only good news for the left is that the right has also lost its vision and does not know what to replace it with.

Let us believe that there is no truth in the *bon mot* that socialism is the road to hell, which we followed all the way to capitalism.

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