

Editorial: Czech Democracy 1989–2016. Its development and challenges

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The Czech Republic was among the most stable Central and Eastern European countries in the 1990s in terms of both political and economic performance. Some prominent Czech politicians, like e.g. Václav Klaus (1996), were proud of the country's achievements and even claimed that the Czech Republic had become a model for the region's other post-communist countries. However, such optimism on the politicians' part was not widely shared, especially by political scientists, who, in contrast, had predicted serious trouble ahead for the Czech democracy (Novák 1996). Those dire predictions proved to be absolutely correct, and the country has been facing systemic troubles ever since.

The picture of contemporary Czech politics is ambivalent. On the one hand, the Czech Republic is a democratic country with free and fair elections, a competitive party system, an independent media, etc. The Czech democracy is "consolidated" and "standard", whatever that means. Still, a consolidated or standard democracy can achieve different levels of success. Just over a decade ago, leading Czech political scientist Miroslav Novák (2005: 33) rightly noted that "the Czech Republic has had a consolidated democracy, albeit of a low quality." Since 2005, the quality has not improved, in fact quite the contrary: many additional problems have arisen to compound the situation.

The aim of this special issue of the *Acta Politologica* journal, published by the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, is to present an overview of contemporary Czech politics and identify the most serious problems facing Czech democracy. For this purpose, we have collected seven papers prepared by selected Czech scholars – political scientists, constitutional lawyers and sociologists of politics. They represent different views, scientific approaches and methodological backgrounds (both qualitative and quantitative). Following this, it is important to mention that this collection of papers not only analyses the main political problems the country faces but also mirrors a "state of discipline" showing some of the key and traditional themes of Czech political science research. The collection also demonstrates how contemporary Czech political scientists and constitutional lawyers approach the analysis of Czech politics.

The special issue opens with a paper by Miloš Brunclík and Michal Kubát, *Czech Parliamentary Regime After 1989 – Origins, Development and Challenges*, which discusses the major trajectories of the developments of the Czech democratic polity after that seminal year and analyses the major problems which the Czech parliamentary regime still faces.

It is followed by a paper by Andrews Roberts, *What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know about the Quality of Democracy in the Czech Republic?* which draws on both extant literature and simple analytical data to paint a picture of the current state of Czech democracy as well as trends over the past quarter-century.

The next paper, by Lukáš Linek, *Legitimacy, Political Disaffection and Discontent with (Democratic) Politics in the Czech Republic*, analyses changes in the public's attitudes towards political actors and politics in general, following the four categories of attitudes: democratic legitimacy, institutional disaffection, individual disaffection and political discontent.

Thereafter, leading Czech expert on electoral systems Tomáš Lebeda, in his paper *Voting under different Rules. The Politics of Electoral Reforms in the Czech Republic*, maps developments of Czech electoral systems and electoral engineering after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992 and their impact on Czech party politics and governance.

Lebeda's paper is followed by analyses by Stanislav Balík and Vít Hloušek in their paper *The Development and Transformation of the Czech Party System after 1989*. It reflects the main dimensions of the Czech party system, examines its breaking points and divides its development into three major phases from 1992 until the present.

The next paper, a pure quantitative analysis by Vlastimil Havlík and Petr Voda entitled *Lost Stability? Re-Alignment of Party Politics and the Rise of New Political Parties in the Czech Republic*, examines the transformation of Czech party politics. It indicates the explanatory power of the left-right dimension, which has decreased steadily and led to the rise of new parties.

Finally, last but not least, constitutional lawyers Jan Wintr, Marek Antoř and Jan Kysela in their paper *Direct Elections of the President and its Constitutional and Political Consequences* analyse the constitutional role and powers of the president in the Czech parliamentary regime and how these have changed since the introduction of direct presidential and general elections in 2012.

All of the papers in this collection share an important feature: they are rather sceptical, for a host of reasons, that the quality of the Czech democracy shall improve in the near term, and all show the dysfunctional nature of Czech politics. Arguably the most serious problem is the crisis of political partisanship, in terms of the chronic weakness and instability of political parties and the party system itself, as well as in terms of public distrust of political parties as cornerstones of democracy. The crisis of political partisanship, together with the defective constitutional framework, are the underlying causes of the weakness and ineffectiveness of the parliamentary regime. The ineffectiveness of the parliamentary system is one of the causes of citizens' dissatisfaction with politics. As the collection reveals, the Czech Republic finds itself in a vicious cycle.

However, clearly the situation is not completely hopeless. As the authors believe, the aforementioned problems of Czech politics can be mitigated by

appropriate constitutional engineering, as some Czech political scientists have repeatedly pointed out, proposing concrete solutions to these problems (see the first paper in this issue). A well-functioning democratic regime could forestall some pathological phenomena (e.g. political corruption) and in turn increase public confidence in democratic politics. Unfortunately, the Czech experience has shown that politicians often prefer populist solutions, which exacerbates the situation. The best example is the completely inappropriate introduction of direct presidential elections to the Czech parliamentary regime in 2012 (see the final paper in this issue). Instead of improving the regime, the amendment has nearly destroyed it. It is not simply that there are some defects of the regime – all democracies around the world are imperfect. However, the crucial problem of Czech politics is different: it is the inability and unwillingness of politicians to overcome their short-term and particular political interests for the greater good and to solve – at least partially – the most pressing issues.

References

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